

# The past and the future

By Janet Walker  
Photography by Jess Huegel

Job grew up in a village on the island of Ambrym, one of the central islands of Vanuatu. Ambrym has the dubious reputation as the nation's hotbed of sorcery and witchcraft — a problem that pervades the islands of Vanuatu and brings fear to the hearts of many. Black magic is often taught to children at an early age and handed down from generation to generation.

When Job was a teenager, he and his mother moved to Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital, where he attended high school. Job heard the gospel, and both he and his mother committed their lives to Christ. When they returned to Ambrym, they tried to share the good news with their family, friends and neighbors, but no one was interested. They experienced rejection, suffered persecution and eventually were forced to leave their village.

Today, Job is one of 26 students enrolled at Joy Bible Institute in Port Vila. In his second year of study, he already knows he wants to return to Ambrym and plant a church in his village.

Situated atop a grassy hillside dotted with swaying palm trees, the campus of Joy Bible Institute overlooks Port Vila. Since it opened in 1981, several hundred students from the South Pacific have received training at the three-year school, and more than 100 now serve as Assemblies of God pastors in Vanuatu.

“Job's testimony is similar to that of many of our students at the school who have come from such darkness and yet have found the light of Jesus Christ,” says J. Gary Ellison, missionary to Vanuatu. “After completing their Bible school training, they go back to their tribes and islands to share the gospel and make a difference.”

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Gary, his wife, Lori, and their two children came to Vanuatu in August 2007 to help lead Joy Bible Institute and expand outreach ministries among the islands. Gary serves as academic dean, and both he and Lori teach. The Ellisons are veteran missionaries, having spent 25 years serving in the French-speaking countries of Ivory Coast and Togo, as well as Belgium and French Polynesia.

For Lori, being in Vanuatu is a homecoming. Her missionary parents, Ron and Joy Killingbeck, helped establish the Assemblies of God work in Vanuatu in the early 1970s when she was a young girl.

“There were times through the years when I dreamed of coming back to Vanuatu,” says Lori, “because this is where I grew up. But I really never thought it would happen.”

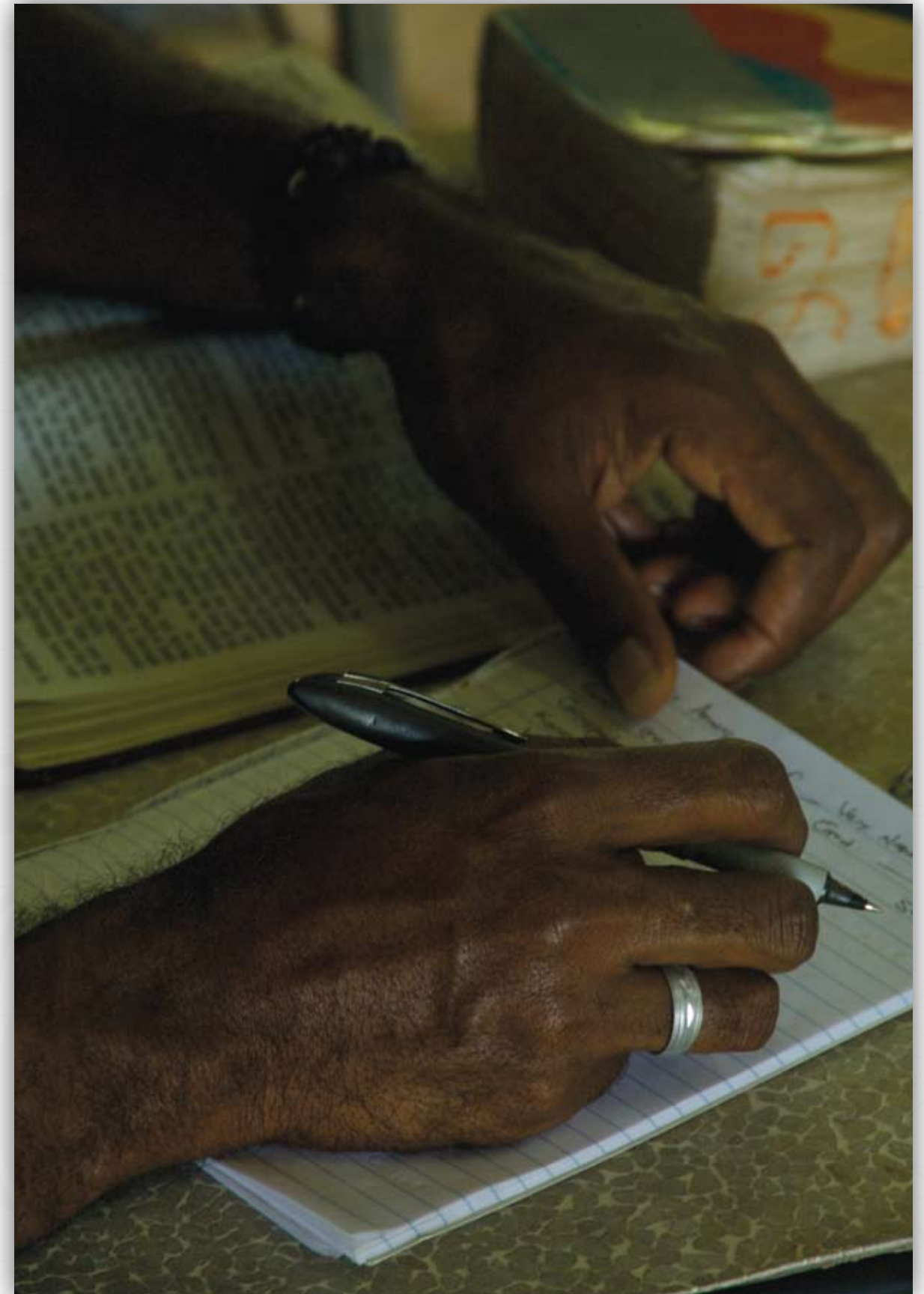
The Killingbecks’ first contact with the Ni-Vanuatu (people of Vanuatu) began in 1967 as they began their missionary work in New Caledonia, an island territory southwest of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. They had a Ni-Vanuatu church — the first AG church established among these people.

“The new converts and my dad traveled to Vanuatu for evangelism and church planting,” says Lori. Approximately 6,500 Ni-Vanuatu workers were in New Caledonia at that time.

“From these converts, the first Bible school students went to Fiji for training and others went home to Vanuatu and took the gospel with them,” Lori says. In the early ’70s, the Killingbecks moved to Vanuatu to help these new believers spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

At that time, the nearest Bible training institution for believers was South Pacific Bible College in Suva, Fiji. Realizing Vanuatu’s need for a local Bible school, the Killingbecks and Vanuatu church leaders began plans to open one.

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Lori tells of miracles along the way. The 4.5-acre property in Port Vila that became the school's campus was once part of a coconut plantation owned by a family who had no intention of selling it. But when they learned it was needed for a Bible school, they agreed to sell.

Then in 1977, the Killingbecks went to the United States on furlough to raise funds to build the school. They visited an Assemblies of God church in Sherman, Texas, pastored by Clyde Causey. The church was hosting a special missions event called Miracle Sunday. When the Killingbecks presented the need for the Bible school, more than \$55,000 was given — enough to construct the needed buildings.

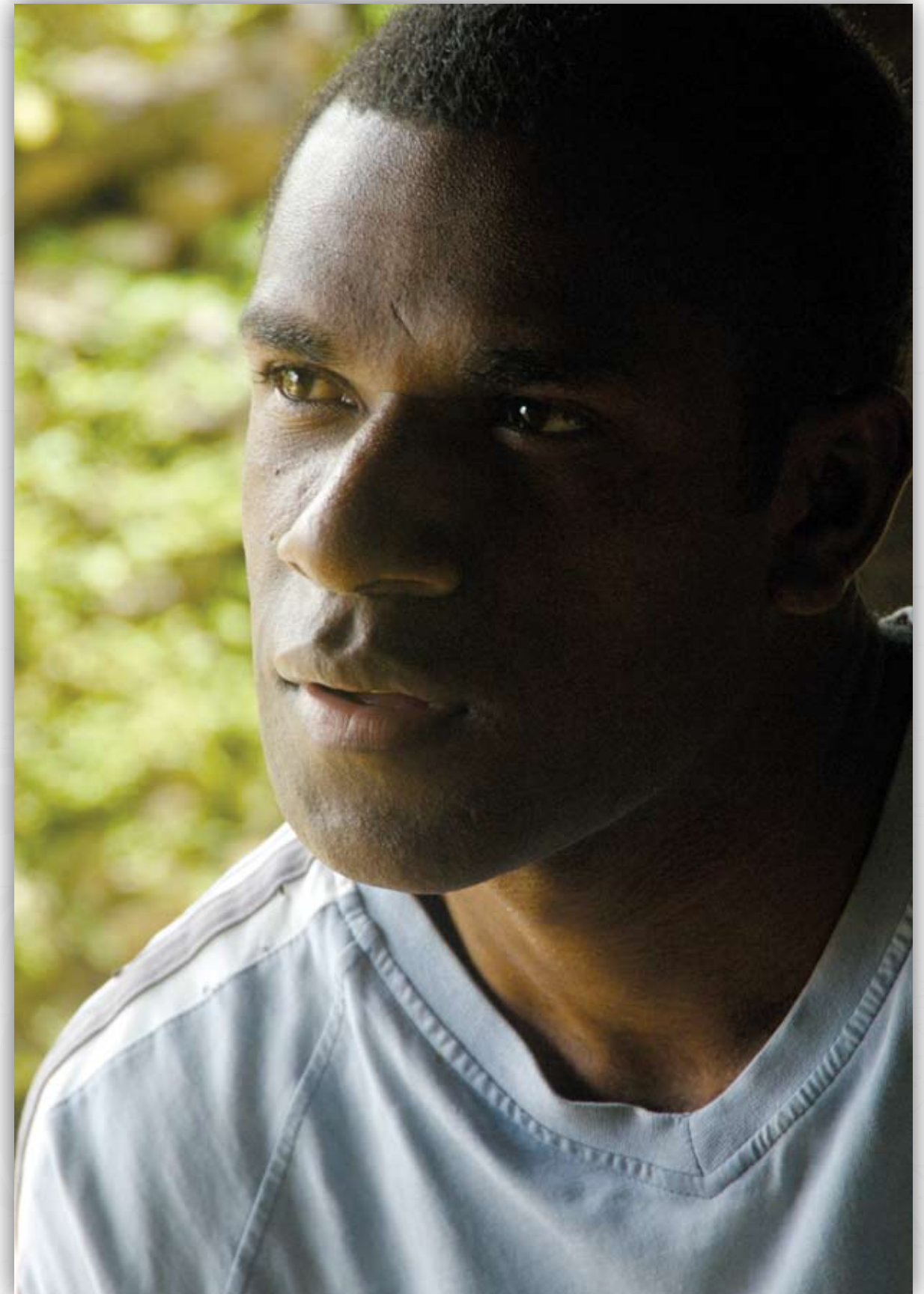
In January 1979, Lori left for college, and Ron and Joy returned to Vanuatu to start the construction. Joy had been fighting cancer for five years. Her health was deteriorating, but she was determined that work on the campus move forward. She died two months after their return.

That summer Lori came to Vanuatu and helped her father complete the first building, the Bible school chapel. About this time the executive committee of the Vanuatu Assemblies of God announced the school would be named Joy Bible Institute in honor of Joy Killingbeck.

“To have been a part of the early pioneer stage and now to return and be a part of training a new generation is amazing,” says Lori. “After more than 30 years, children I taught in Sunday School in the 1970s are now pastoring or are pastors’ wives. Church leaders and layworkers were childhood friends of mine. Renewing friendships and seeing their faithfulness to Christ over the years is very encouraging to me.”

Classes at the Bible school have been taught in English and Bislama, the national language. But with the help of the Ellisons, who have a wealth of experience teaching in French, the school plans to start a French section in the near future.

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All three languages are widely spoken in Vanuatu, and offering classes in French will draw students from other nearby island groups.

According to Edgell Iolopua, principal of Joy Bible Institute and general superintendent of the Vanuatu Assemblies of God, the buildings on campus are the original structures from the 1970s and need major renovation and changes.

The Bible school library is inadequate, with only a few shelves in a classroom. Hundreds of books are stacked in boxes awaiting larger facilities.

The school has only two classrooms — one of which is also the cafeteria. Campus accommodations for students are minimal, with only one men's dorm and no women's dorm. Female students currently live with families off campus.

Short-term construction teams are needed immediately to help build a library, classroom structure and a guesthouse. The cafeteria and mission house also need renovation.

“We have a love for the Ni-Vanuatu and want to see them grow in the Lord,” says Gary. “When I look back at what has happened since my wife's parents were here — the churches planted and the ministers trained — I see the tremendous work that was provided.

“Now we've got to prepare the next generation for Christ — ministers who will have the same vital relationship with Christ, be on fire for God and evangelize, build up the church, and make disciples of all nations. That's our goal.” **tpe**

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