

Trusting & Giving

A Calvary Chapel Salt Lake City, UT, believer donates a kidney to a fellow congregant

For Consideration:

Does your life demonstrate that God is your ultimate caretaker—not you yourself?

Story by Debra Smith

“Why did you want to know your blood type?” Lydia Bradford’s husband, Kevin, asked her one evening after the two arrived home from work. Lydia had called Kevin earlier that day to ask if he remembered her blood type. But the couple, who are part of CC Salt Lake City (CCSLC), UT, hadn’t had time then to discuss her reason for asking.

“Mike from church needs a kidney transplant,” Lydia replied. “So I began the screening process today to see if I’d be an eligible donor.” Later, while being interviewed, she laughed, “I guess that’s a decision most people would need to discuss with their spouse first. But Kevin simply said, ‘Oh, cool.’ I never even considered that he might mind; he’s easygoing like that.” More than ten people, most from CCSLC, offered to be potential donors. But all along, Lydia remembered, “I had a sense that it would be me—and God gave me peace from the beginning.”

Humans are born with two kidneys, while only one is sufficient. But Mike Johnson, also of CCSLC, was born with a rare hereditary disorder that causes a person’s kidneys to fail. Two of his uncles passed away, before kidney dialysis or transplants existed, due to the same condition. A motorcycle accident at age 21 exacerbated Mike’s situation, traumatizing his kidneys and causing them to cease functioning prematurely. The kidney Mike then received from Lydia in October 2012 occasioned his third transplant—his father had donated one in 1984 and his sister in 2002. “Transplants don’t last forever,” Mike explained. “They are more susceptible to failure than original



Mike Johnson and Lydia Bradford traverse a hospital corridor the day after surgery. “It was a really cool moment, realizing what we had both been through,” Mike said.
Photo by Ruth Johnson

kidneys because of immunosuppressants and other factors.” But through the pain, expense, and uncertainty that his disorder has brought, Mike said he and his wife Ruth have learned to trust God more fully and know Him more deeply. “And though I certainly don’t always live it fully, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 has carried me through many trials,” Mike remarked:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Lydia, an administrative assistant at CCSLC, had come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior in 2006. “Before, I hadn’t given God much



Mike Johnson

thought,” Lydia remembered. “I believed we have an eternal spirit, but I never consciously believed in one God who is all-powerful.” One Sunday when their son was dating a Christian and she was out of town, Lydia and Kevin accompanied him to CCSLC.

Afterward they stopped by the church bookstore, where Kevin bought a few resources. He took the books, including *The Case for a Creator*, with him on a hunting trip a few days later. “When he came back, he was well on his way to becoming a believer,” Lydia remembered. “Within about three months, we were both Christians.” Their son later married the girlfriend who had led him to Christ, and the couple’s other son and his wife also now follow the Lord.



Lydia Bradford

Lydia sees the recent transplant as one of many evidences of the Lord’s transformation of her. “Before I knew God, I believe I would never have even considered something like that,” she commented. “I would’ve been too afraid. It’s only because of the work God has done in my heart that I would even think about it.” Another motivation for Lydia was Jesus’ command in Matthew 22:39 to love others as much as one’s own self—“And if I needed a kidney, I would want someone to give me one,” she remarked. The stringent qualification process involves both being fit and in good health overall, as well as being a blood type match with the recipient—or being matched, in a national database, with another recipient and donor so the organs can each be used by an appropriate match. After Lydia passed the phone screening, she underwent tests such as blood pressure checks. “Through the testing, I saw God at work continually,” she said. “The day they called and said we were a match, I was smiling the whole day. I was so happy; there’s such deep joy in obeying God.”

The transplant process requires such extreme suppression of the immune system, in order to keep the body from rejecting the donated kidney, that the recipient is highly susceptible to viruses and bacteria that would pose little threat to others. After catching such a virus in 2009, Mike spent three weeks in the hospital. Suffering from a fever of 105 Fahrenheit and triple pneumonia, “I came close to dying,” he stated.

“The medicines needed to treat the virus and the resulting stress on my body led to the destruction of that kidney.” Eventually, he began thrice-weekly dialysis, a medical procedure which mimics the blood-purifying function of kidneys. This cleansing is essential to life, but dialysis is not a satisfactory long-term solution for most people, Mike explained: “It can save your life, but it’s a very difficult life. You must avoid potassium, phosphorus, and sodium—which makes your diet extremely limited. Doctors also severely limit your fluid intake. Even if you stringently observe the regulations, it’s extremely hard on your body to go through major blood-level changes three times a week. Side effects are common, such as severe muscle cramps and pain at the connection site [either the arm or chest]. And on the practical side, it takes about as many hours as a part-time job and costs approximately \$18,000 per week.”

As Mike’s condition began to appear potentially fatal while he was on dialysis throughout 2012, CCSLC’s Pastor Terry Long was one of many who encouraged him to seek a transplant. Mike never asked anyone personally to consider donating a kidney, but people began telling each other of the need and the news spread. Mike, who has been the director of IT, web, and graphic design at CCSLC for many years, kept the screening center’s phone number by his computer and gave it to those who requested it. When the church administrator, Diana Cobb, called, Lydia overheard and decided to do so as well.

Terry remarked, “From the beginning of Lydia’s walk with the Lord, it has been apparent that she wants all glory to go to the Lord. There are some people I’d be concerned to see volunteer; I’d question their motives. But not Lydia. We invited her onto the staff after watching her serve in the coffee shop ministry, where her humble demeanor was obvious. So when she stepped forward to donate, I was not surprised. But I did warn her of the risks; I wanted her to be aware. There were many risks on both sides, and Mike and Lydia both needed to understand that.”

Only once, Lydia said, did she feel fear: “We were getting close to scheduling the surgery, and I was not thinking about it at all. Then suddenly, I felt panic. I was afraid to wake up from the anesthesia and afraid to feel the post-operative pain. It was

strange that it hit me so hard—and then it was instantly gone. I believe it was spiritual warfare. There were a few other times when I got a little nervous about whether it would affect the rest of my life. But then I always remembered that my life is in God’s hands. I love the phrase where Daniel contrasts powerless idols to the true God, ‘Who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways.’ (Daniel 5:23b). I realized, ‘He has put this opportunity before me; how could I not do it?’”

In September, Lydia was required to attend two full days of preparatory meetings with the doctors and medical staff. She was initially excited to learn that the dates fell during a week her husband was off work and could accompany her; but then the operation date changed, affecting the meeting dates as well. By the time Lydia received replacement dates, she was disappointed but resigned to going alone. She promptly accepted the new dates and then compared them to her husband’s rotating-day-off schedule—finding they were his exact days off. “Through so many things like that, I saw God was there walking me through the whole process,” Lydia declared. “It’s an awesome feeling to know He has been with me every step of the way.”

Mike commented, “I wonder what that must do to your soul, to demonstrate that kind of sacrificial love. Christ says to love and to give—and this is certainly one of the highest acts of loving and giving I know of. It reminds me of Christ’s description of His own sacrifice in John 15:13: ‘Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.’”

For Reflection:

How can you actively live out Christ in you by submitting to God and laying down your life for those around you?

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