



# When God Calls



## “May I Tell You a Story?”

BY DICK DUERKSEN

*although he is scheduled to return as a missionary in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, I need him to stay here and serve as the director of health for the state of California. Might that be possible, sir?”*

Dr. Saleem Farag’s parents were the first people baptized as Seventh-day Adventists in Cairo, Egypt. His father, a prominent executive with the Egyptian railway, lost his position over Sabbath observance and then struggled to provide for his wife and eight children. The experiences from those years in Egypt helped form Dr. Farag’s strong commitment to listen for God’s call, and then follow wherever He might lead.

One of those calls was for Dr. Farag, along with his wife, Grace, and their three small daughters, to move to Papua New Guinea, where he was to serve as health director for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While Grace cared for the girls, Dr. Farag went on “walkabouts” to hundreds of

*“Yes, hello. I am calling from the office of Ronald Reagan, the governor of California. Thank you for taking my call. The governor would like to speak with the president of your church, a Reverend Robert Pierson, I believe? Yes, I will hold. Thank you.”*

The call was, as they say, “out of the blue,” and would cause ripples around the world.

*“Hello there. Pastor Pierson? This is Ronald Reagan, and I have a personnel problem I believe you might be able to solve for me. His name is Dr. Saleem Farag, and*

tiny villages scattered throughout the island’s steep hills. Everywhere he taught and demonstrated the essentials of good health he had learned as a student and teacher at Loma Linda University’s School of Public Health: clean water, simple food, and exercise.

The “exercise” part was easy, but his focus on cleanliness, diet, and water were new ideas for the locals.

When they arrived in PNG, infant mortality was running around 50 percent. That means that more than half of the babies died before they were 2 years old, and Dr. Farag was on a mission to change that. “Let’s clean up your water sources, move the animals out of the house, and make sure your babies are vaccinated,” he taught everyone who would listen.

After three years of walking, talking, and demonstrating better ways of living, he had started a school of nursing and a school of public health, and opened 60 rural clinics. Best of all, the infant mortality rate had dropped to 2 percent in the highlands.

Three years in, when the church offered the family a well-earned furlough/vacation at home in America, they were exhausted and eager!

### HEALTH REFORM FOR CALIFORNIA

But Dr. Farag wanted to do more than visit relatives and sit on a back porch. He wanted to learn more about public health, to discover better ways to purify water, and more. One day he saw that California’s new governor, Ronald Reagan, was inviting health-care professionals to apply for the job of writing a position paper on health reform for his administration. Dr. Farag smiled and began writing.

His application joined dozens of others on the governor’s desk—and quickly rose to the top. Though he was “a missionary on furlough from PNG,” he was now also working for Ronald Reagan, writing a proposal that would transform health care in the state of California, that would make it more practical, more focused on children and on caring for the “whole person” rather than hospital care.

## Publisher

The *Adventist World*, an international periodical of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The General Conference, Northern Asia-Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, is the publisher.

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## Art Direction and Design

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*Adventist World* is published monthly and printed simultaneously in Korea, Brazil, Indonesia, Australia, Germany, Austria, Argentina, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States.

Vol. 19, No. 5



Seventh-day  
Adventist Church

When the governor read Dr. Farag's proposal, the family was already packed and on a ship heading back to Papua New Guinea! When their ship docked in Honolulu, a message was waiting for them from Governor Reagan. "Come back," it read. "I want you to serve as director of health for the state of California!"

"I am pleased, and sorry," Dr. Farag responded. "Pleased you approve the proposal, and sorry I cannot accept your offer. I have made a commitment to go where God calls me and must return to Papua New Guinea to help improve the health of the people who live in the highlands."

Governor Reagan listened to Dr. Farag's response and immediately told his office to call the president of the Adventists!

## A HIGHER CALLING

Never before had a state governor asked the church to cancel a missionary's call and bring the family home. When President Pierson hung up the phone, he called several of the vice presidents, and then the president of Loma Linda University, to ask what he should do. The Farags got the answer when the ship arrived in Sydney, Australia.

"Brother Farag," the note began. First there was a nice paragraph commending Saleem for the good work he had already done in PNG, and the next paragraph told the Farags to get on the next ship and return quickly to California. "We believe," the president said, "that you have been given a higher calling."

The next eight years were a whirl of committees, hearings, planning sessions, and positive community change in California. Then, as often happens in politics, Governor Reagan, a conservative Republican, moved on when the people elected Jerry Brown, a liberal Democrat, as governor. Dr. Farag began packing his bags.

"I was not at all sure where we would go," Dr. Farag remembers, "but I knew I would no longer be serving with the governor of California."

Then the governor called. The "new" governor.

"I'd like for you to continue to serve as

the director of health for the state of California," Governor Brown said. "I've learned that you are not a political person, but that you serve evenly, honestly, and fairly. Kind of like Daniel! I appreciate your work and would like to have you on my team."

The Farags unpacked their bags and settled in for a new ministry adventure.

"There's one other thing," Dr. Farag told the governor. "I am a Seventh-day Adventist and so will not be available for work from sundown Friday until after sundown Saturday. I hope that is OK."

"No problem," answered the governor.

## SABBATH OVER POLITICS

The phone rang one Sabbath morning, just as the family was leaving for church. It was Governor Jerry Brown.

"We're having an urgent cabinet meeting in about an hour," the governor said, "and I think you have some information that would be important to the discussion."

For a moment Dr. Farag's mind went back to a day when his father had taken him to see the mummy of the pharaoh who had taken Moses' place. "The pharaoh is here," his father had said, "but Moses is in heaven."

God's call was clear.

"I said I was sorry I could not come, and gave a careful explanation," Saleem remembers. "Then I went to church with my family, knowing I had probably just lost my job."

Monday morning the governor called another meeting of his close advisers, including Dr. Farag.

"My husband went to the meeting expecting to be fired for missing the Saturday council," remembers Grace. "Then, when the governor came in and sat in his chair, he turned to his secretary and said, 'Please make a note that Dr. Farag is never to be called on Saturday. That is his Sabbath.'" ©

*To be continued in the June issue of Adventist World.*

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