

‘We Are All Part of ONE BODY’



An organ transplant brings two Covenanters and their church closer together.

From left: Mark Powers, Vicki Hilton with Lisa Jo and Kevin Moher

CRAIG PINLEY

In 1994, Mark Powers, a member of Bethany Covenant Church in Bedford, New Hampshire, was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC), a rare liver condition. His bile ducts were becoming blocked and scarred, causing his liver to slowly be destroyed from within.

“Once an accurate diagnosis was made in 1994, I was told this was incurable,” said Powers, a clinical social worker. “The only remedy was a transplant.”

Because the disease took a long time to progress, Powers remained healthy for about eight years after his diagnosis. “Up until about two years ago, I had as much energy and vigor as anyone on the block,” he says. But then he developed jaundice, with his skin taking on a greenish-yellow tone. He also had pruritis, a severe itching all over his body, and became exhausted while doing normal tasks.

But this past December, Powers received a gift that changed his life—part of a new liver, donated by another member of Bethany Covenant, Kevin Moher.

Moher heard about Powers’s plight

during a March worship service and a few weeks later decided to become a living donor. The transplant took place December 2 at New England Medical Center in Boston. Moher gave more than half of his liver to Powers.

For Bob Bergquist, pastor of Bethany Covenant, the story of Powers and Moher illustrates the best of what Christian community is all about.

“We have known in theory that we are all part of one body,” Bergquist says, “but this had a special way of making that truth very applicable and real.”

Powers was told at first that it would be nearly impossible for him to receive a transplant from a living donor. Last

February, Powers began sharing news of his condition with work colleagues and his church because he was so sick he knew he could die. For many, the news was the first they had heard of the disease.

However, in late March 2003, Powers began a brief period where his body seemed to be healing itself. The jaundice lessened and Powers got some of his energy back. His physical improvement allowed doctors to reconsider the option of receiving a liver from a living donor. Powers calls that period in his life a miracle, a time when God intervened.

A few weeks before he started feeling better, Powers gave his testimony during a service at Bethany Covenant. One of those people in church that day was Moher, a forty-five-year-old truck driver and father of two boys. Moher

had been a lifelong blood donor and had considered organ donation.

He knew something was wrong with Powers, but didn't know all the details. "When Mark gave his speech," he says, "I nudged my wife in the pew

"If you saw someone drowning in a river, you'd dive in and save them—it's that important."

and shrugged my shoulders as if to say, 'Why don't we go for this?' She didn't know what I meant at the time, but when we got home and I told her, she seemed all for this. She said, 'Whatever you want to do, I'll support you.' "

Moher called Powers a few hours after church was over and left a message on the answering machine, say-

ing that he was interested in being a donor. One of Powers's two daughters, Erin, heard Moher's message. She immediately called her father, who had gone to work. A day later, the two men talked.

The first step was setting up an interview with the New England Medical Center. The hospital evaluated Powers over a three-month period last summer. Moher works four days a week for an automotive oil distribution service, and he was able to schedule doctor appointments on Tuesdays, his day off.

Besides a series of medical tests, the doctors wanted to know why Moher would want to donate to someone he didn't know very well. The two men

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A Sister's Love MARIT AND ANDY JOHNSON'S STORY

When they were growing up, Marit Johnson of Libertyville (Illinois) Covenant Church and her brother fought just like any other siblings. But when her brother needed a liver transplant, she was quick to volunteer. On January 7, Marit donated 60 percent of her liver to her brother, Carl "Andy" Johnson, at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Andy had been on a liver donor transplant list for months. He had suffered a serious illness during the summer of 2002 while serving at a Covenant summer camp in Unalakleet, Alaska. Both of Andy's parents (Maggie and Carl "Vern") were compatible blood donors but weren't deemed suitable candidates as liver donors.

The recovery for both Andy and Marit has gone well. Doctors told Andy that within two months of the surgery his new liver will have grown to 98 percent of its normal size. Marit—who works in a Chicago advertising agency—is already back to work.

"It was an easy decision for me," she said about donating part of her liver to her brother. "We're definitely glad it's

behind us, but I'd like to think that anyone would've done this. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if he had died and I knew I could have helped. Nothing else mattered compared to that."

In eighth grade, Andy was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, and doctors had told him during high school that he might need a liver transplant in the future. His physical problems didn't slow him down too much—he played soccer in high school and at North Park University before graduating with a biology degree in 2000.

Marit is also a graduate of North Park—class of 2003—and also played soccer at the school. She was an All-Conference player for the Vikings, was an All-Conference Academic selection, and won the team's Leadership Award during her senior year.

For Andy, the experience has been another reminder of the gift God has given him in a solid family. Both Andy and Marit are staying with their par-



ents in Grayslake, a north Chicago suburb, and the time together has been significant for both donor and recipient. Their parents report that the two are "back on each other's nerves," a good sign that life is returning to normal.

"We've always been close as a family, though we may not be the most expressive about it," says Andy. "We've always taken care of each other no matter what. And I think that it's brought us even closer together." □

“One of the most remarkable things is the humility of Kevin and Lisa Jo,” Powers says. “The only thing they get out of it is risk—you’re introducing so many things that could go wrong.”

have been in the same church for a number of years, but had not had much contact.

“Frankly, they were estimating whether Kevin had his head screwed

on right,” said Powers. “They wanted to make sure he didn’t do this for unsound medical reasons.”

The New England Medical Center gave approval for the donation in Octo-

ber and surgery was set for December 2. Although Lisa Jo Moher supported her husband’s decision, Kevin wanted to explain his decision to his sons, who were fourteen and twelve.

“They just needed to be reassured that I wasn’t going to leave them,” he says. “I told them I was very confident with the care I would get and I told about the benefits of this. I told them there was risk in everything, but for me it was a slam-dunk decision. I hoped

From Perfect Health to a Heart Transplant—in Two Months

MATT CALLISON’S STORY

Matt Callison of New Hope Covenant Church in Oakland, California, first knew something was wrong on this past October 3, the day he turned twenty-eight. Callison, an elementary school teacher, felt dizzy all day at school. Still, he didn’t feel the need to cancel a weekend camping and rock climbing trip with his fiancée, Joy Blackburn, and two friends. Once he got there, Callison felt so ill that he spent his birthday in his tent.

When he returned from Pinnacles National Monument, Callison went to see his doctor, but everything seemed fine. Then while moving boxes at his home during the Veterans Day weekend, he got sick again.

“I felt like a really old man,” he says. “I was having trouble with shortness of breath and I was feeling exhausted.”

This time, his doctor referred him to a heart specialist, where he was diagnosed with viral myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart caused by a virus. He was given medication but the medication didn’t help. Within a week, he learned he had dilated cardiomyopathy—his heart had en-

larged so much that it could no longer pump blood effectively.

He was admitted to Summit Hospital in Oakland on November 17 and was told he had congestive heart failure and might need a heart transplant. He was then transferred to the University of San Francisco Medical Center, which has a heart transplant center.

“At that point, they [doctors] knew there was a pretty good chance that I’d need a transplant,” Callison says. “And it became more and more clear during the next few weeks.”

The month of December included numerous physical tests and consultations as they more seriously considered



Matt visits with his mother, Ida Marie, in the hospital.

a heart transplant. Callison was deemed a level 1-B patient, which put him higher on a heart donor list. They told him that the average wait for a transplant was six months, though it could be much shorter.

Through the uncertainty of his situation, Callison says his faith in God became much stronger, he felt a measure of peace through it all.

“Two things came to mind,” Callison says. “I got the impression from God that he would be there with me through it and that it was going to be a long road.”

Callison saw God’s comfort in many ways. A friend’s family found a place for his parents to stay when they arrived from their home in Wenatchee, Washington. His fiancée, Joy, and church members visited him, prayed for him, and organized a Christmas party for him at the hospital.

“It is not something I would choose for myself, but I’ve experienced many blessings through this [illness],” says Callison. “For one, having Joy with me



Dr. Ted Wright heads into the operating room with the donated organ for Matt.

that they could see it for the good that it would do."

Moher said he never had any doubts that he would go through with the transplant, once the process started. "If you saw someone drowning in a river, you'd dive in and save them—it's that important," he says.

Once Bethany Covenant learned that Moher was donating part of his liver to Powers, they began to pray. And pray. And pray.

has been a great blessing and seeing the blessings of friendship and Christian community has been wonderful."

But the greatest act of generosity came from someone Callison never met. A young man died of a brain injury and his heart was a match for Callison. The man's lungs went to another patient, Carrie Shellhammer, on the same day. (Shellhammer and Callison became friends while at the hospital.) The young man's kidneys and pancreas were also donated.

Callison found out about the donor on the morning of December 29. "They came in my room at about 4:50 a.m. and asked me to sign some papers because they said they might have a heart for me," he said. "Then the surgeon came in at 8 a.m. and told me that the donor heart would work out and it would be a good match."

As the donor heart was being transported to the hospital, Callison was sent to surgery. Within hours, Callison's heart was removed and the donor heart was implanted. The total procedure took seven hours.

Callison isn't sure what the future will hold—doctors have told him that the first year is by far the most critical for heart transplant patients—but an April 3 marriage date was set in Anderson, Indiana, and he doesn't plan to miss it.

And he says that his sudden illness has made him rethink his priorities in life. "I was realizing that working seven days a week was taking away from other relationships and my faith," he says. "This is a time to explore for what else God may have for me." □

"When it finally became official, people were overwhelmed by Kevin and his family's generosity," says Bergquist. "When people would tell him what a hero he was, Kevin would get very uncomfortable. He simply said that this was something he could do, and felt called to do, just as others give of themselves in teaching, serving, music, and the like."

Powers and Moher both arrived at the hospital on December 1 and the two men were in separate rooms that night. They talked briefly about thirty minutes before going into surgery.

The transplant procedure was performed without a hitch. By the end of January, Moher was able to walk two miles on his treadmill during the recovery phase. Although he couldn't wrestle around with his kids yet, he said, "I feel pretty good."

Bethany Covenant has raised a substantial amount of money to help defray some of the medical costs not covered by insurance. The congregation has been grateful for Powers's improved health and for the joy that the Mohers have experienced in being part of his recovery.

Powers said that he has been overwhelmed by the generosity of the church and especially of the Mohers.

"One of the most remarkable things is the humility of Kevin and Lisa Jo," Powers says. "The only thing they get out of it is risk—you're introducing so many things that could go wrong. There's a small possibility of dying during the surgery, but there's the possibility of infection and you may have to stop working for a couple of months. . . . I'm awestruck by what God has done for me and so many other people."

Moher continues to see himself as a person just doing what he felt called to do at the time. And he's also glad for the chance to get to know Mark Powers better.

"Obviously, we're pretty good friends now," he says. □

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