

# MISSION TRIP TO SIERRA LEONE FEBRUARY 2002

From Bishop Kevin Kanouse

## Opening Lines

“He shall judge between many peoples,  
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;  
*they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;*  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more...”

*Micah 4:3*

***“If you have lost all your money, you have lost nothing.  
If you have lost some time, you have lost little.  
If you have lost your hope, you have lost everything.”***

*From Christian Gbappy, 19 year old college student and  
Youth Group Coordinator for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone*

## Mission Trip to Sierra Leone Challenges Our Expectations!

*We went expecting to see destruction...instead we saw rebuilding and new life;  
We went expecting to see hopelessness...instead we saw hope and people with a future;  
We went with hearts a little fearful for our safety...  
instead we saw peace, security, and a U. N. peacekeeping presence;  
We went expecting to experience a church demoralized...  
instead we saw a church in incredible mission;  
We went expecting to hear of a need for retribution...  
instead we heard that Sierra Leone's watchwords are reconciliation and forgiveness!*

***The February Mission Trip to Sierra Leone was, as promised, a life-changing trip, once  
again!***

## A Brief Background Review on Sierra Leone and the ELCSL

**Our Companion Synod relationship** with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone stretches back to before the formation of the ELCA. It began, in part, with the presence of *Pastor Jeri Sinnah-Yovonie* who is from Sierra Leone and now serves at St. John's Lutheran Church in Dallas. It began, in part, with an evangelist from the Lutheran Church in neighboring Nigeria visiting Sierra Leone to establish the church (the ELCSL is a fully indigenous church...we have not sent missionaries from the ELCA!). It began, in part, with *Pastor Rodney Maeker* going to Sierra Leone to train evangelists to preach the Word of God and invite people into a deeper walk with Jesus through the Lutheran Church. We continued to build the relationship through *Bishop Herbener's* leadership in visiting Sierra Leone in 1992, returning with a group from our synod in 1996 to participate in the ordination of the first five pastors for the church.

**Historically**, Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa between Guinea and Liberia, has been a British colony, receiving its independence in the 1960s. It was a place of slave export, hence the name of the capital city, Freetown, after that practice was discontinued and freedom won. The country has experienced a level of wealth because of diamond mines in the northern provinces, far away from Freetown (Sierra Leone is about the size of South Carolina), but has experienced much civil war the past ten years. I have come to understand that the history of Sierra Leone is very complicated, but briefly, young teen age rebels took over the diamond mines in the late 1980s, sold diamonds on the black market for weapons, and began to wreak havoc on innocent men, women and children, driving them into Freetown. By 1996 the countryside was a shambles and we were only able to visit the capital city where we saw many refugee camps filled with the homeless from Liberia and the countryside of Sierra Leone. The Lutheran Church, including LWF, LWR, and the ELCSL was very actively involved in providing relief in 1996.

**In 1998 and 1999 the rebels moved on Freetown** where the population had swollen considerably as people had fled the provinces to the city for safety. Upon approaching Freetown, the rebels burned homes and businesses indiscriminately (we saw much evidence of this throughout most of the city), raped women and children, killed at least 300,000 people who are known to be dead, and caused incredible terror by amputating index fingers ("You will never be able to vote for freedom again") and then emboldened by the great fear it caused, went on to amputate arms, legs, ears, and other body parts. Finally, because of this great horror, the world began to notice and the U.N. sent in troops from Nigeria and many other European and Asian countries.

Two weeks prior to our trip, we were relieved to hear that **President Kabbah declared the war officially over** with a mandatory collection of all firearms and holding a couple of gigantic bonfires to burn the weapons...turning them from swords into plowshares in the image of Micah and Isaiah.

The ELCSL had about 30 congregations before the rebel movement and lost six through the war; but continues to have 24 very active and thriving congregations. There are up to 4,000 Lutherans (70 % are women) counted in these congregations, many living in Amputee Rehabilitation Camps.

We heard stories throughout our trip from those outside the church that, while many churches talk about helping, Lutherans are known as the ones who are there to really help. We witnessed the presence of LWF and LWR throughout the country, visited an Amputee camp that once held over 10,000 amputee victims (now down to about 1,000 as many have been rehabili-

tated and returned to their homes with new skills training) run jointly by the LWF and the ELCSL and saw other programs the church is leading in a mighty way.

## **Out and About in the ELCSL**

What was most energizing about this mission trip was the visits we made to the congregations of the ELCSL. We were able to travel about 150 miles inland to Bo (the second largest city in Sierra Leone) and Kenema. Along the way we stopped at congregations and in every place found building, rebuilding, and a sense of the future! “You have to remember that most of the Lutherans in Sierra Leone are not born that way” commented ELCSL President Rev. Tom Barnett. “They have come to the Lutheran Church through confession of faith.” Indeed at **Thomas Memorial Lutheran Church in Newton** we heard that 45 adults are being prepared for Holy Baptism on Easter! Here are some of the other stories of what we saw in the congregations of Sierra Leone.

**Resurrection Lutheran Church** in Bo is one of the congregations that has been around since the beginning of the ELCSL. *Pastor Samuel Yovonie* (a cousin of Jere Yovonie) has served the congregation as they have met in a dusty neighborhood of the “downtown” area of Bo. Meeting in a schoolhouse, they greeted us (after waiting about 4 hours for us—we were late at every stop!) with a brief service of prayers and welcome, and then asked if we would like to visit the site of their new building. I thought we would go a couple of blocks down the street, but as it turned out we went through the market place, through a “residential” area of town (mostly mud brick homes, many in disrepair), up a dusty road to the edge of town. There were only a few homes to be seen...we had driven perhaps 3 or 4 miles.

I marveled: “You mean your members will walk (they don’t have cars) this far to church? Even so, why are you building your church so far away from town, in the middle of nowhere?”

“Well, our people are dedicated and those who are members will walk this far to church; but we moved out here for a reason. Do you see that grove of trees over there?” I looked across their land, about 6 or 8 acres, and noted the grove of trees. “There are new homes over there and there is no Christian Church around here anywhere. The same is true behind that grove of trees,” Pr. Yovonie said, pointing in the opposite direction, “We are building here because there are a lot of people who need to know Jesus. It is for these people that we are building this new church.” He pointed to the building, half finished in front of us...foundation in place, walls made of great mud bricks put into place by the “youths” of the church. “The walls will be ready for the roof in about a month,” we were told!

We heard similar stories in many other congregations where construction was taking place and the church was in the middle of the villages as a telling witness of Christ. In most of these congregational building programs, the local members make the bricks and do the construction of their church while the ELCSL provides the money for the zinc roofs that provide protection from the rains. It costs about \$ 1,500 for each congregation to receive a roof. This partnership has served the church well!

There are three primary Lutheran schools and one pre-school, including **Advent Lutheran Church** in Bo (*Pr. Momoh Foh*). We visited while school was in session and heard many of the very young children recite stories and poetry they had written or memorized. It was as

Advent Lutheran Church that I was surprised by the Church Council's decision to name me "Honourary Bishop" of the ELCSL, a title held previously by Bishop Herbener. There was a festive worship service to recognize me in the role. It was to begin at about 6 PM but didn't get started until, perhaps, 9 PM (!)... Ending late in the night. The youth choir rocked the church!

## More from Our Trip

**King of Glory Lutheran Church** is located in Njala, formerly a great agricultural city noted for its Agricultural Training Institute, but destroyed by the rebels (the entire town). **Pr. Edward Lavaley** serves King of Glory, which is building a new church on (get this!) a site donated by a Muslim leader of the community. "I will not sleep peacefully in my grave until a Christian church is built on my land," he said...prior to his death.

In Newton, **Thomas Memorial Lutheran Church** has a piggery project. This project, sponsored by the church, will provide income security for members of the congregation and village. Instead of spending money on fixing up their church (badly in need of repair), they used it to build a pen in which to raise pigs. There is only one pig now, ready to give birth. Some of her babies will be sold to villagers, others raised for continued breeding and growth of the program.

**St. Mark Lutheran Church** in a Freetown suburb was the previous site of the first Lutheran Centre. It was burned out and destroyed by rebels (a shell was dropped about a hundred feet from the building while Pr. Barnett was inside before he fled) but has been re-built as a larger church and the home of the **Lutheran Women's Project**, a wonderful project to provide skills training and micro-loans for women. It was here we saw women learning skills in tie dying, sewing garments, agriculture production and gardening. It was here that the women of the church made me two tie dyed copes and chasubles, a purple set that I will wear at the Synod Assembly. This project is being supported by \$ 5,000 from the Women of the ELCA national assembly offering this summer. The money will be put to very good use!

There are now **7 ordained pastors and 15 evangelists** serving the ELCSL with several more preparing to enter seminary when the time is right. The energy and vitality of the congregations in the ELCSL was amazing, always with a missional focus. These congregations do not exist for the sake of self-preservation of ages worth of history and culture. They exist for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, hungering and thirsting for the Word of Life that the church has to preach and teach. **Christian Gbappy** helped us understand this gospel as you can see on the next page.

## How to Learn More About The Mission Trip and Sierra Leone

There were seven travelers on this trip, including **Pastors Kenneth Moerbe** of Waco and **Mark Vinciguerra** of Arlington. Layperson who went with us included **Clarie Streng** of Mesquite and **George Ahrens** of Waco. **Debra Loudin-McCann** went, but she is in seminary at LSTC now and **Joan Gerth** from Roseville, MN also went along. The first four names listed above are available to share their insights, pictures, and video. If you want to invite them, check the synodical directory or call the synod office.

We hope to prepare **a brief video that will be available** at the Synod Assembly to interested congregations to take home to use to tell the Sierra Leone story, as well.

We expect at least one, perhaps two, *representatives from the ELCSL* to be at our Synod Assembly and visiting this summer as well. If you would like to host Pastor Barnett in your congregation, details on how to do that will be forthcoming soon.

One more thing: *Check out the Display and Forum* at the Synod Assembly!

## **“If You Have Lost Hope, You Have Nothing”**

*Christian* is a college youth, the president of the ELCSL Youth organization. When the rebels attacked Freetown, Christian was at the Lutheran Centre where he hid from the rebels in the 40-foot container that we sent in 1998 (it’s still there, although all the contents were looted and destroyed!). There were many times during the three days of his hiding when he had given up hope with shooting all around him and he, himself, nicked in the leg by a bullet.

Christian recounted many stories of terror in those days: a woman with 6 year old daughter and 10 year old son fleeing up the hillside. The mother is shot first and the son picks up the daughter and continues to run. Soon the boy is shot and the same bullet hits his sister. They fall and he plays dead, but the shooter, a woman, picks up the little girl and runs. The child escapes the clutches of her would-be abductor by clawing at her eyes, whereupon the rebel throws the girl into a fire. An old man running for his own life picks her up from the fire and takes her, eventually, to the Women’s/Children’s Health Clinic where her mother has gone. The son finds his way there a day later and they are re-united.

This is a story with a happy ending; but most of the residents of Sierra Leone witnessed the death or amputation of a limb or limbs of a loved one. Now, the rebels are asking for forgiveness and re-entry back into society.

In a teaching session with the pastors and evangelists, we asked them to talk about forgiveness and how the people of Sierra Leone are responding. “We are a people with a short memory. We want to move forward. We are re-building our country. The words of the day are ‘reconciliation’ and ‘forgiveness.’” Rebels are being rehabilitated and released back into the villages and city. They were teenagers, conscripted into the rebel cause through acts of terror perpetrated upon them by other rebels. It is complicated; but there is a sense that the forgiveness is working. The spirit of renewal permeated Sierra Leone and there is a sense of future in the country.

It was Christian who often spoke the mantra I quoted at the beginning:

***“If you have lost all your money, you have really lost nothing at all.  
If you have lost some time, you have lost little.  
If you have lost hope, you have lost everything.”***

## **Why Support the Jubilee Lutheran Centre in Sierra Leone?**

We broke ground for the new **Jubilee Lutheran Centre** to be located right next to the Parliament building in the center of Freetown. The government donated the land and the facility is sorely needed. There is no visible, permanent Lutheran Church presence in the country of Sierra

Leone. In a land where many churches are here today and gone tomorrow, the ELCSL needs a place of identity.

The Jubilee Lutheran Centre will be a place of worship for 500 worshipers. It will be weekday school and day care center, a health clinic, an amputee retraining center, a teaching/seminar center, church offices for the ELCSL and a witness to the community that the Lutheran Church is here to stay.

We have committed \$ 150,000 initially (with the total cost upwards to \$ 500,000), to this project and enjoyed the opportunity to turn the first spades of ground for the Centre. We took an initial gift of \$ 22,000 for this Centre.

I will admit that I was initially skeptical about this project. "After all," I reasoned, "there are people starving in your land and you want us to send money for a building project?" The war is over and food will soon be plentiful in the land (Sierra Leone is an exporter of rice when the agriculture gets going). While other denominations like the Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, and the Roman Catholic Church have been present a long time and have a visible presence in the country, the Lutherans are new and need the Centre as a visible sign of our church's commitment to ministry in Sierra Leone.

Please tell the story of the ELCSL and ask your folks to give generously at this year's Synod Assembly where the offerings from both services will be dedicated to the Centre.

### **Quotes from Mission Traveler Clarie Streng**

Thanks for reading all of this about our Mission trip. As you can tell, my life perspective has been changed yet again, by this trip. I hope you will consider going along next time, perhaps in as short a time as two years.

Finally, in her own words, **Clarie Streng** reflected on the trip "**Using the Five Senses.**" Here are a couple of excerpts in Clarie's own words:

#### **Hear**

"While visiting at the Amputee Camp in the Aberdeen section of Freetown, Pastor Vinciguerra was approached by a young man who said, "We need more of these." With those words he removed his ear lobe-prosthesis, showing only the bare hole of the ear tubes.

#### **See**

"Picture the town of College Station, Texas burned out and destroyed and all of the A&M University buildings just shells, torched and empty. That is what we saw in Njala. Just now refugees are returning with nothing, and having left with nothing. They are rebuilding with sun-dried mud bricks.

#### **Smell**

"The masses of people crowd the open markets. With the temperatures of this country (9 degrees north of the equator) every day in the mid 80's, under the hot sun and no breeze, plus the humidity of nearly 100 % every day, the smells of open and raw food items, the raw sewage, and

sweaty bodies permeates the air. Dusty, dirt paths, and open drainage flowing by the roadside add to the sense of smell.

### **Taste**

“Missing from the daily menu are desserts—no sweets! Our daily meals consisted of rice, pasta, a stew-*gray* of fish or beef, baked chicken, plantains (a banana-like fried staple), French fries, and fresh, sweet bananas, oranges, and pineapples.

### **Touch**

“...and the crowds surrounded Jesus and the disciples; a woman touched his robe...”  
“We, too, had that same experience. The children clustered around us and clung to our fingers (*Ed. note: where were those hands today and when were they washed last? It didn't really matter!*). Handshaking and hugs were the order of the day. At times we almost felt mobbed. But we were touched too, by the spirit of hope and the joy these people had welcoming visitors from America.

“Using the five senses this visit to Sierra Leone was a healing experience for me. These people feel blessed and they were a blessing to us!”

***Our brothers and sisters in Sierra Leone know the sorrow of Lent and the joy of Easter. May their witness of faith inspire you as it has inspired us! Blessed Easter to you!***