

# Reflections on the 2007 Mission Trip to Sierra Leone

## Bishop Kevin S. Kanouse

### A Long Way Gone...Child Soldiers and Sierra Leone

The world is hearing some of the stories of Sierra Leone through mass media outlets and I am grateful. If you have not seen *Blood Diamond*, rent it now. In addition you can order and view a History Channel production called *Blood Diamonds*, a revealing look at this use of diamonds for political gain. Even more to the heart is a new book being marketed through Starbucks called A Long Way Gone by *Ishmael Beah* (I think you may also be able to order it online). I have never read a book that has moved me this powerfully. It is the author's own story of being a young boy, living in the bush of Sierra Leone, and being conscripted into the Sierra Leone military after rebels kill his family. He is given guns and massive amounts of drugs and turns into a killing machine. After years, he was picked up by UNICEF and rehabilitated in a Children's Home in Freetown and recovers enough that he is able to begin to tell his story. He spoke before the United Nations in the late 1990s before returning to Freetown, but when the rebels invaded Freetown, he had to flee or enter back into the military (or lose his life).

He came back to the United States and went to college where he learned to write well; so well that he has published his story in this book that is both terrible and revealing of the tragedy in Sierra Leone. As we have come to know and love our brothers and sisters in Sierra Leone so closely and deeply, this book comes very close to home.

The book uncovers the tragedy of child soldiering around the world. Most nations use very young children to fight their wars. Perhaps we are more civilized...we wait until our children are 17 before we give them guns and train them to kill others. It was not fighting that brought about peace in Sierra Leone; it was negotiation and a peace treaty. But why did so many children and women and men have to lose their lives, their arms, their legs, their sight, and/or their ears before the world finally noticed and sent in enough support to suppress the war and bring about peace?

We give thanks that this fragile democracy can continue to move forward. With another election cycle taking place this year, a new president will be elected and the country can take more steps forward. Our presence in Sierra Leone is strongly felt. We met with the Speaker of the Parliament while in Sierra Leone this year and he was grateful for the work of the ELCSL and of our support for their ministry and outreach. The Jubilee Centre is the single most visible place of proclamation and it is not yet completed. When finished this towering church and

community center positioned as it is on Parliament Hill in the center of the capital of Sierra Leone will be a beacon of light in the city and region.

## Final Reflections

I shared three emails from Sierra Leone to update you on the progress of our Companion Church. Here are a few final thoughts.

There has been so much progress in the economy and prosperity of Sierra Leone. By that, I don't mean to suggest that one can compare Freetown to the cosmopolitan centers of the United States, but there is evidence of individuals earning a living and restoring their lives. People are selling products and buying goods for their families, the church schools were full, few people were begging on the streets. To be sure, existence for most people consists of rising early in the morning and finding something to sell so that one can buy some food to feed the family for the day. In the rural village of Romankneh where we spent a day, one woman was cleaning five 6-inch catfish caught that morning by the men in her family at a nearby lake. They were going to be boiled in water with some cassava thrown in to give bulk...and this was going to be dinner for the extended family of 35 people who would be eating that evening. Yet the family members (all living in one house), as all in the village, were filled with joy and were optimistic for the future. This has been the common experience of every mission trip to Sierra Leone...even while they were in the midst of the war and now its recovery.

In Romankneh, there are about 250 people, 80% of which are Lutheran Christians because of the village church there. The rest are Muslim or animistic. Yet they live in great harmony and friendship, helping each other build and restore their homes and feeding each other.

Pr. Dalton Levi-John, pastor of King of Kings in Freetown where the Jubilee Centre is being built likes to boast that the presence of the construction of the Centre has already brought about a large number of conversions to Christianity. People see the new facility and are so excited about it that they come to ask what is going on and stay to be part of the fellowship. He sees the Centre as a "Muslim Magnet" as he likes to say with a smile.

While we were reviewing the progress of the Jubilee Centre the builders (in bare feet, carrying concrete rocks in basins on their heads down the hill from the truck 100 yards above them) were pouring the floor of the chancel. We joined our brothers and sisters in the ELCSL for an impromptu prayer service and placed a bible in the foundation. A powerful moment of celebrating the Word that will be imbedded in the foundation of the church as long as it stands.

One of the large obstacles for the construction of the Centre has been the solid rock hillside into which the Centre has been built. Finally, giving up on dynamiting all of it away, the architect and Bishop Barnett agreed to leave one whole wall as natural rock such that there will be a portrayal of the Stations of the Cross, Calvary, and the tomb. This incredible architectural feature of the Centre will make it unique and inspiring.

The Centre originally started out to be about \$500,000; but due to inflation the Leone has lost 50% of its value in 5 years. Yes the cost will go higher. How high? We do not know. So far the NT-NL Synod has sent more than \$360,000 for the Centre and we will continue to support the construction. Now, each congregation in Sierra Leone has been asked to donate at least 1,000,000 Leones to the project...a big commitment of each congregation and a sign that they see this as their own church. I hope that you will continue to lift up the story of the Jubilee Centre and our companion relationship. **Bishop Tom** and **Pastor Marie Barnett** as well as **Doris Tucker** will be with us at the Synod Assembly and will show video of our trip during lunch on Saturday.