

# *The NT-NL Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone*

## The Story of Our Partnership

In the late 1980's Dr. Jeremiah Sinnah-Yovonie returned to his native Sierra Leone, having completed studies at the University of Iowa in Des Moines. He took with him the Lutheran faith that he had grown to love in the U.S., and he shared that faith with others, including Jacob & Sam Yovonie, Titus Ngebeh, and Tom Barnett. Together they determined to found the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone.

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, the NTNL synod was asked to be a "Companion Synod" with the Lutherans in Sierra Leone. In 1990 Pastor Rod Maeker, and in 1992 Bishop Mark Herbener, visited Sierra Leone, joining in the work of training lay evangelists to lead the Lutheran congregations that were springing up throughout Sierra Leone. Seven Sierra Leoneans entered Lutheran seminaries, including three who came to the U.S., studying at Wartburg Seminary and visiting our synod - Tom and Marie Barnett and Miatta Monrovia. Through the efforts of these native Sierra Leoneans the ELCSL was born as the first African Lutheran Church begun without the presence of missionaries from the West.

In the early 1990's Sierra Leone (which is considered to be the poorest nation in the world, despite the wealth of the diamond fields) became embroiled in a civil war waged by rebel terrorists, many of whom had fled from neighboring Liberia's civil war. The rebels destroyed villages and wreaked havoc on the country. Many of the churches were destroyed and much of the population was forced to flee to Freetown, the capital city, where the population swelled to over a million in a very short time. A great number of these people became homeless or survived in refugee camps.

### **1996 Missionary Trip to Ordain First Pastors**

By this time congregations were falling into disarray due to lack of ordained leadership. With seven candidates having completed seminary training, Bishop Herbener was asked to return to Sierra Leone to conduct their ordination. He joined Bishop Harris of the Lutheran Church in Liberia to officiate at the Service of Ordination. In early February 1996 several pastors and lay people from our synod joined Bishop and Mrs. Herbener and Pr. Dan Olson, the Director for Global Mission of the ELCA, spending a week in Sierra Leone. We visited congregations, baptized over 100 Christians in various congregations on a Sunday morning and participated in the glorious celebration of the ordination of pastoral leadership for the ELCSL. Just five were ordained as two were unable to travel from Nigeria to be present, but these five served a whole host of congregations in Freetown, Bo and villages in the provinces.

### **1997 Coup and Response**

Peace had come to Sierra Leone in early 1996 with the ousting of the rebels and election of a new president, but this peace was short-lived. In May 1997, after a year and a half of civilian-elected democratic leadership, there was a coup in Freetown. At that time there were seven ordained pastors in the ELCSL and congregations were growing. The coup, however, threw the country and the Church into disarray. In August 1997 Pastor Marie Barnett fled the country with her daughter Thelma and came to the U.S. We received her into our synod where she served at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Dallas as interim pastor. Pastor Tom Barnett remained in Sierra Leone as president of the ELCSL, and has been our

channel for emergency relief funds. The country was overrun with starvation, murder, rape, looting and burning of homes and businesses, and overall anarchy. The coup was put down in the spring of 1998 and Pastor Marie returned in July to serve her country and the Church.

The Companion Synod Committee arranged to send two emergency relief containers to Sierra Leone in 1998, but in perhaps the most serious uprising to date, these were destroyed along with St. Mark's Lutheran Centre (the church headquarters) in January 1999. During this time the rebels committed unthinkable atrocities, including dismembering, raping and murdering innocent women and children. While these atrocities were brought to an end by the summer of 1999, by that time most of Freetown had been destroyed by fire and vandalism. The war had perhaps finally ended, but hunger, disease and psychological trauma prevailed.

### **The ELCSL Begins to Build the Jubilee Centre and Elects Their First Bishop**

In January of 2002 the war was declared officially over. In a stunning example of Micah's prophecy some true bonfires were held in four areas of the country and guns were burned, melted down, and remade into farming implements. Thousands of amputees, victims of the rebel terrorism, who need training and rehabilitation, were being cared for by many centers throughout the country including some sponsored by the ELCSL and supported by the NT-NL Synod. Trauma counseling began in earnest, weekly meals were served and worship provided in the camps, in private homes or community facilities. At best, it was a "makeshift" situation, so the church recognized a need to establish a permanent and visible presence in Sierra Leone for the ELCSL. Thus the idea of the Jubilee Lutheran Centre was born.

On land donated by the government on the capitol hill in Freetown, a site was established for the construction of the Jubilee Centre, a permanent worship space for more than 1,000, a place for a school, a clinic, community outreach programs, and care for those in need. In February 2002, Bishop Kevin Kanouse led a delegation of NT-NL members for the ground-breaking service for the Jubilee Centre with a commitment from the NT-NL Synod to provide \$ 150,000 in funds for the Centre. Realizing the cost would be about a half million dollars in total, this was enough to get the Centre started.

With consent from the Lutheran World Federation, the ELCSL unanimously elected, by secret ecclesiastical ballot, Pr. Tom Barnett to serve as the first bishop of the ELCSL and Bishop Kanouse returned to Sierra Leone in November 2003 for Bishop Barnett's installation. Some unrest and a display of protest and violence marred the worship service & ceremony, giving testimony to the ongoing traumatized emotions of this people as they work to find the truth of who is truly working for justice in this post-war society. As a counterpoint to this, the group viewed the fruits of ongoing education, rehabilitation and relief ministries of the ELCSL. With excitement they saw the progress being made in the construction of the *Jubilee Lutheran Centre*.

### **New Ministries, New Mission**

In 2006 the NT-NL Synod welcomed the Jubilee Singers, a musical group that entertained at the Synod Assembly and toured the synod's territory for three weeks, visiting congregations and telling the Sierra Leone story. In 2007 a mission group traveled to Sierra Leone to give support and encouragement to the Jubilee Centre efforts and in 2008 Bishop Kanouse led a group of young adults, age 17-29 to Sierra Leone for a connection experience for the youth of the church. The trip spanned Holy Week so the NT-NL youth experienced the walk of Holy Week in the African style of our sister Sierra Leone congregations. From Palm Sunday to Easter we walked the way of Calvary.

In 2009 a Medical Mission trip was undertaken as 9 doctors, clergy and other lay leaders accompanied Bishop Kanouse to Sierra Leone for the opening of the long-dreamed-of Medical Clinic. It is anticipated that this effort to begin a medical mission in the ELCSL will meet a significant need for free or very low cost medical care in the villages of Sierra Leone. Starting in one location in Calaba Town, a suburb of Sierra Leone, it is hoped that a web of clinics may open around the country as a result of our efforts.

In 2009 the group observed the ongoing construction of the Jubilee Centre now nearly under roof. We brought with us Pastor Kate Warn who is being supported for two years as our Pastor-in-Residence in Sierra Leone. We reviewed efforts to support education for some youth from Sierra Leone in the United States and we began to dream of the dedication of the Jubilee Centre. We have helped build schools in Sierra Leone and we are currently helping with a project to provide wells in 10 communities where fresh water is desperately needed.

It is anticipated that the next trip to Sierra Leone will take place when the Jubilee Centre is ready for dedication.

### **What Can We Do to Help?**

1. ***Pray!*** Pray for continued peace in Sierra Leone. Pray for the growth of the Lutheran churches and their ministry. Pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone and their Church Council. Pray for their pastors: Bishop Tom Barnett and Reverends Marie Barnett, Momoh Foh, Samuel Yovonie, Dalton Levi-John, Yashim Turay, and Edward Lavally the original pastors plus many more who have since been ordained. Pray for the newly trained evangelists and seminarians. Pray for the people who hunger to hear the Gospel of hope in a land where homelessness, hunger, disease, and poverty abound
2. ***Help your congregation become aware of the work of our committee*** by utilizing the resources being made available for education. Consider becoming a member of this committee to help spread the word about Sierra Leone and the ELCSL. Invite a committee member to come speak at your church. Have your congregation become a partner with one of the sister churches in Sierra Leone - applications available by contacting the companion Synod Committee. Plan to go to Sierra Leone on one of the upcoming mission trips.
3. ***Make a (tax deductible) donation*** to the work of the ELCSL and the Companion Synod Committee by sending your check clearly marked for "Sierra Leone Fund" to the NTNL Synod Office, PO Box 56087, Dallas, TX, 75356. This includes personal contributions given to help defray travel expenses for the Barnetts. ***Donations specifically intended for the Jubilee Centre, Pastor Kate Warn, the Medical Clinic, or other ventures should be clearly marked as such.***
4. Thank you for your caring support and interest in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone, West Africa the Companion Synod to the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America!