

Reflections

“Our Mission Trip to Sierra Leone”

[Acts 1:6-9](#)

Our church had talked about going on a mission trip to Sierra Leone for several years, and, this year, we finally fulfilled our dream. The purpose of the trip was twofold: to learn about Sierra Leone, the homeland of most of our African members and to explore future mission partnership opportunities. On February 6, Diana Bramble, Greg and Melinda Knepp, and I hopped on a plane to Chicago. After two more connecting flights, we finally arrived in Sierra Leone late afternoon on the following day and were greeted by pastor Daniel, who had gone there a few days ahead of us. [\(Show #39 - mission team in church t-shirts\)](#) A 40-minute boat ride took us to Freetown, where Sahr Moiwa, another church member was waiting for us. And so, we began our journey together in Sierra Leone.

I have already written twice about the trip in our weekly e-news, Midweek Message. Today, I have invited members of the mission team to share their reflections on the trip. Diana will talk about our school visits, Greg, about AMDCF, Melinda, about culture and hospitality. And, I will talk about church and evangelism. Unfortunately, Greg and Melinda could not be with us this morning, so Diana and I will read their reflections.

Reflection by Diana Bramble

We visited two United Methodist Schools during our trip: Kayima School in Kono Province and Mongerei School in Bo district.

At Kayima [\(Show #40 - uniformed students\)](#), teachers assembled students outside the school building to welcome us. The students were well mannered and seemed to be excited to meet us. [\(Show #41 - uniformed students\)](#) They sang several songs, and one of them was “Tell Papa God Tenki, which we instantly recognized. After the assembly, most of the students were sent away for lunch, and we went inside to meet with middle school students, their teachers and principal, as well as several community leaders.

During the meeting, we asked them how best we could help the school. Among the needs they talked about were learning materials and food for the students. Many kids come to school hungry in the morning and leave the school hungry in the afternoon because their families are very poor, and the school does not have money to feed them. We listened to them attentively and told them that we would try to help them in whatever way we can. Lunch was prepared for us. [\(Show #42 - people in church t-shirts\)](#) Thanks to the generosity of our church members, we were able to surprise them with a cash gift of \$600 and also our Campbell UMC T-shirts for the teachers. After the meeting, we spent some time at the school, meeting some other students.

The UMC school in Mongerei in Bo District was much smaller than that in Kayima. We were told that new classrooms had been built since Pastor Daniel delivered shoes to the students and teachers 4 years ago. We were greeted by a group of women who came up to the church singing and dancing. We met with the teachers and principal of the school, the pastor of the church, and some of the townspeople. Some

chairs were brought in by the students for the meeting. (Show #43 - students carrying chairs) The school children sang songs, and the pastor led us in prayers. Most people in the room spoke only Mende, and so the pastor had to serve as the interpreter during the meeting.

We asked them how best we could help them, and they stated that they needed a lot of help and would appreciate whatever help we could render. We listened to them attentively and promised to get back to them. (Show #44 - people in church) Pastor Daniel asked people to stand if they were recipients of the shoes he had brought to the school 4 years ago or just remembered it. Quite a number of people stood up, and a couple of people spoke words of appreciation. Again, pastor Ouk-Yean presented to the pastor a cash gift of \$600, and he was so happy that he took out the money from the envelope and counted it before the congregation. After the meeting, we gave out our church t-shirts to some of the attendees.

Reflection by Greg Knepp

We had a wonderful trip to Sierra Leone and what follows is a quick update on just one aspect of that trip - our interactions with AMDCF. (Show #45 - AMDCF sign)

For those who have been with the church for a while, you will recall that AMDCF is the Abdul Miracle Disabled Children's Foundation. It was launched and is headed by Sahr Moiwa, who kindly stayed in Sierra Leone for extra 3 weeks at the end of a long trip, to work with Pastor Daniel in showing us around.

AMDCF was founded by Sahr after a tragic car accident that claimed the life of his wife and left Abdul's life hanging by a thread. Abdul made a truly miraculous recovery, and you can see the 12-year old scampering around with the other kids on Sundays here at our church. In thanks for his son being saved, Sahr formed AMDCF to help ensure children in Sierra Leone have a chance at a good education.

Sierra Leone has had a very tough time since its independence from the UK in 1961, particularly late in the last century. From 1991-2002 a brutal civil war displacing 2 million people and costing over 70,000 lives was started by warlord Charles Taylor from Liberia, who wanted access to Sierra Leone's diamond mines. After a tenuous recovery from the war began, Ebola killed over 5000 people from spring of 2014 to the end of 2015. On a ranked list of per capita income, Sierra Leone sits at number 217 of 229 countries, with a per capita income of just \$1600 per year or \$4.38 per day for its people to live on.

In these harsh conditions, the disabled have nearly zero standing. They are forgotten people in an environment where even the able bodied can struggle to get by. AMDCF helps by paying all expenses to send disabled kids to good schools. The foundation is run by volunteers and a small paid staff of 3 in Sierra Leone.

I had the privilege of working with Sahr on some fundraising efforts here at church a couple of years back. Part of that effort was assembling biographies of the children for flyers to distribute here at church. From that work, I felt like I came to know some of the kids, or at least their stories. So imagine my delight at actually meeting several of them face to face in a meeting arranged by Sahr on Sunday afternoon. The meeting featured talks by parents, teachers and the kids themselves. It was a very moving afternoon.

Sahr Johnson (Show #46) is 16 years old, has been unable to walk from birth due to neurological issues. He is one of the most eloquent spokespeople whom you could care to meet. He wants to become "whoever God wants me to be."

Mariama Kamason (Show #47) who is blind, aspires to become “one of the great personalities in the world.”

Dorian Samu (Show #48) who wants to become a lawyer, also spoke very eloquently, reminding us that AMDCF kids aren’t “disabled,” but just “differently-abled.” Dorian is graduating from the school for the blind this year.

In addition to the presentation, we visited the AMDCF office and met the staff - Hoosman, Victor and Peter (Show #49). They joined us on some of our other events during our trip.

The trip overall was great, and I look forward to sharing more pictures and other experiences in a future presentation.

Reflection by Melinda Knepp

What an amazing trip! We saw firsthand the struggles and resilience of the people of Sierra Leone. There are so many stories, experiences, and observations that we can share with you. But today, I am going to talk about the culture and hospitality we experienced in Sierra Leone.

Let me start with Freetown. On our first day going downtown, I was overwhelmed with the sights, sound, smells and number of people we saw. (Show #50 - marketplace) Freetown is a large, busy city. Imagine a two-lane street filled with full-size cars, motorcycles, small three-wheel cars, dogs, people and horns constantly honking as drivers passed slower vehicles whenever there was a small opening. Open air markets lining the streets selling everything: clothing, produce, cleaning supplies, housewares, electronics, luggage. People living wherever they can. Multi-story buildings next to homes made from whatever supplies are available.

While we were visiting the AMDCF office, we came out to find someone washing one of our cars. People do what they can to make a living. When you turn off the main roads into neighborhoods the pavement ends and you are on unmaintained dirt roads. They are narrow and full of potholes. It doesn’t matter if you are in a poor, middle class or affluent neighborhood because they share the same streets.

Leaving Freetown, heading to Kono Province on the one main road that heads east, cars were replaced with people on foot, or motorcycles with three, four and once even five people on them. We passed through small villages that looked like they could have been in an issue of National Geographic - moms working outside and small children playing or strapped to their mothers’ back. (Show #51 - rural scenery) Along with dogs, there are goats wandering around. We also passed through cities with more hustle and bustle, but mostly it was countryside. It was similar heading south to Bo District.

The two schools we visited were off the main highway on dirt roads (Show #52 - dirt road) with potholes and rocks. A 20-mile drive took about 2 hours. We passed through small villages, farming communities in the south and diamond mining and farming in the east. We saw uniformed children walking to school, (Show #53 - students on the road) women walking to a neighboring village, carrying on their heads items that they would be selling at market. In some villages, we saw a community well, women washing clothes in a nearby creek, a cement slab for drying food, coffee and/or cacao beans for export.

All through our travels, we experienced wonderful hospitality. On our way to Kono and Bo, we stopped for lunch at the house of our church member, Sahr Moiwa’s mother-in-law. Kayima School teachers

prepared lunch for us. In Bo City, a local church member brought dinner to our hotel. While in Freetown, Sahr Moiwa's father-in-law had us to his house where we enjoyed a delicious dinner catered by his younger daughter. Our meals (Show #54) consisted mainly of rice, chicken, fish, goat, cassava leaf stew, cabbage & carrots, and fried plantains.

I hope this gives you an idea of what we experienced in Sierra Leone and I look forward to sharing more details and pictures in the near future.

Reflection by Rev. Ouk-Yean Kim Jueng

During our trip, we saw many church buildings and signs, especially Methodist church signs. (Show #55) But, according to 2010 estimates, only 21% are Christians. 77 to 78% of Sierra Leone's population are Muslims and the remaining 1 to 2% have traditional African beliefs. Sierra Leoneans are well known for their religious tolerance. It is common to find both Muslims and Christians in the same family, living together in peace without any problem. It is very rare to hear about any religious violence in the country. We are told that even during their civil war, people were never targeted because of their religious faith. Both Muslim and Christian holidays are observed as national holidays.

The large majority of Christians in Sierra Leone are Protestants. They are Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Pentecostals, non-denominational Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Latter-Day Saints. Can you guess who is the largest group among them? Yes, the Methodists! (Show #56)

There are two major Methodist denominations in Sierra Leone: The Methodist Church Sierra Leone (MCSL), which originated from British Methodism, and the United Methodist Church, which began through American missionaries. Between the two, the UMC is the larger denomination, though it started much later than the MCSL. (Show #57) During our trip, we worshipped at two different United Methodist churches in Freetown. The first was an established church with a long history, and the second was a relatively new church that was started by another established church. Obviously, Methodist churches are growing in Sierra Leone. About two years ago, the United Methodist University was established in Freetown, and all United Methodist churches in Sierra Leone are giving special offerings to support the school in addition to their giving to support denominational ministries. (Show #58)

The work of the MCSL began in Freetown and spread to the interior of the country. But, the UMC went the other way. It started in the interior and spread into the capital city. No wonder we saw many more United Methodist church buildings in the rural areas than Freetown, especially in the southern part of the country!

One thing that stood out to us about United Methodist churches in Sierra Leone was the fact that most of them had their own schools for children. Because they receive assistance from the government, the UMC schools are considered public schools; but, they are still allowed to do religious education. So, the students at UMC schools are required to learn hymns, Bible stories, and the Lord's Prayer, and even attend church. We were quite impressed with their joyous singing and earnest praying during our visits to the two UMC schools. Through their education, children naturally came to accept Christian faith and become United Methodists. Indeed, the education of children is the most effective evangelism tool for the UMC in Sierra Leone.

Currently, students have to pay tuition and admission fees for their education. Thankfully, in the fall of 2018, the Sierra Leone government started an initiative to give free education to all children. However, it will take a few more years for all the students to benefit from this initiative. As Diana mentioned earlier, at both schools we visited, we were told that some students are too poor to have lunch; yet, the school does not have money to feed them since the government assistance is barely enough to pay the teachers' salary and to purchase teaching materials. Some teachers do not even get paid due to lack of funding!

At Kayima UMC School, one of the community leaders said, "In the past, we had missionaries who came to help us. But, they are all gone. We have been forgotten. Please help us. We need your partnership with us." The District Superintendent who accompanied us said Kayima is the only circuit without a partnership. After our meeting, one of the teachers handed me a small piece of paper on which he wrote, "Please pastor, we really need help to change the future for our brothers and sisters and the next generation."

A day before flying back home, we met with Bishop John Yambasu. As if he already knew how we were feeling after traveling through the county and visiting the poorest areas of the nation, he told us a story of a man who was trying to save countless starfish that were washed up to the seashore by throwing them one by one back into the water. He said we need to do whatever we can to help the poor, saving one at a time. By the way, he was very pleased to receive our cash gift of \$1,129, the money we had collected for his cow project for poor farmers.

In closing, this was how we looked on the first day of our mission trip. (Show #59 - mission team) We were all smiling! I don't think you would want to see how we looked on our last day. Our trip coming back home seemed to take forever with some flight delays and tight airport security checks. By the time we arrived at San Francisco airport last Wednesday evening, we just wanted to go home, take a shower and go to sleep. So, we were so happy to see Bruce Hallinan who had dropped us off there to pick us up.

We, the mission team, are planning to have a full presentation with more pictures and videos from our trip after pastor Daniel comes back from Sierra Leone next month. We have many more stories to tell you. We want our church family to brainstorm together to find out how we can be witnesses of Jesus Christ in Sierra Leone, what we can do to help our brothers and sisters in this beautiful country in West Africa. So, stay tuned!

Jesus told his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." My friends, we have already received the mighty power of the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised. We have been given many gifts. God is now calling us to come together with the gifts and power we have received: "to plan and work together," "to touch the lives of others by God's surprising grace," "to witness in God's name" in our cities, in our state, in our nation, in Sierra Leone, and in every corner of the earth. "We all are one in mission; we all are one in call, our varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all." "Let us be a vessel for [Jesus Christ,] God's redeeming Word." (*The Faith We Sing*, #2243) Thanks be to God! Amen.