

From the 'College of Theology and Management and Church Training Centre'....

When first I went to work as a Methodist Mission Partner to the Methodist Church Sierra Leone in May 2012 it was to an appointment to teach at the Sierra Leone Theological College, however, within a few months of my arrival the College had changed its name. Why the change? It was argued that any College that bore the name of the country in its title was presumed to be a government institution (which our ecumenical Christian College, situated in a predominantly Muslim country, clearly was not). Perhaps more significantly, the change of nomenclature reflects the reality of a College that must place its financial dependence upon the attraction of fee-paying students, the majority of whom come to study not the theological courses in which the College originally specialised but the newer courses in business studies or community development.

It would be easy to reminisce about how, in days of yore, the College thrived as a purely theological institution, (in some period in the mythic past). However, as in Britain, it is probably true that the College has always struggled to remain financially viable and has survived largely owing to the commitment of a dedicated staff, who toil for long hours on minimal pay. Today there is an insufficient supply of fee-paying theological students to pay the College's overheads. One could argue that it is sad that the College cannot maintain itself solely from the payments made by sponsoring churches and/or individual students who come to study for tertiary level (post Secondary School) qualifications in Theology and Christian Education. Realistically, in a country the size of Wales, with a population smaller than that of London, only 10% of whom are Christian, just how many theological students could you expect to need to train in any given year?

I suspect that our Principal, Revd Dr Olivia Wesley, would prefer to stress the missionary nature of the changes. From its beginnings as a Theological College of excellent repute, the College is now endeavouring to branch out into other fields of teaching and learning offering courses validated by a variety of awarding bodies. Within the College's walls one is aware of the diversity of the student body, that it is not an enclosed community and not all students are necessarily committed Christians, the change in the culture of the College can pose a challenge to staff and students alike.



Last semester was my first one teaching at the College. Before I arrived in Sierra Leone the Principal emailed me to state that I would teach 'from my own resources' which was a daunting prospect when, initially, I was being asked to teach in areas about which I knew nothing.

Fortunately, I was able to negotiate with the staff and was then allocated teaching responsibilities in two subject areas in which I had some knowledge (and about which I owned a few precious books).

I taught Introduction to the Old Testament to both the 'daytime' and 'evening' classes. Cyril, Albert and John (above) were full-time 1st Year students two of whom are registered for a 4-

year Bachelor of Divinity (BD) course, the third is a 3-year Diploma student.

I'd just handed my students a print-out of Stephen Dawes' 'Why Bible believing Methodists shouldn't eat Black Pudding.' (Free to download from www.stephendawes.com if you have yet to read it). Their task was to read it, précis it and decide what questions they would like to ask of its author. I had to commence by explaining what Black Pudding is(!). Since, in part the 'book' is about how all reading of the Bible is both filtered through culturally determined perceptions and applied to contexts of which its original authors would have been ignorant, the question remains, what do we mean when we say, "The Bible says..." As the semester drew to a close, I think the students were beginning to grasp the point that there may be a variety of ways of faithfully interpreting the Bible. How should the Bible be read, interpreted and understood in 21st century Sierra Leone?

I also taught 'Principles of Worship.' My afternoon class had just one highly motivated student: a very senior schoolteacher who is a non-stipendiary Anglican deacon (soon to be priested). He was fascinated by the range of Anglican resources I have and by the fact that I had previously taught Anglican ordinands. We ended the semester comparing one of the liturgies in Common Worship (the current liturgy of the Church of England, yet to be introduced in Sierra Leone) with ASB (which is still in use here). As with my Old Testament students, I found myself instigating discussion about inculturation and indigenization.

One of the primary problems is a lack of resources. The College's library is full of books that were familiar to me when I was a student in the late 1970s. Even if the College had the financial resources, effectively there are no theological bookshops in Sierra Leone. In fact there are very few bookshops so, apart from limited access to school textbooks, students have had little exposure to a reading culture. No doubt as a consequence, many Sierra Leoneans are auditory learners with amazing recall of the things they have heard.

I was very much looking forward to the challenges of the next semester and wondering what I might be called upon to teach next.. Unfortunately, for me, those challenges are not to be.

Please remember the students and staff of the College of Theology and Management and Church Training Centre, Freetown, Sierra Leone in your prayers.

- Keep them faithful to the gospel.
- Make them diligent in their studies.
- Enable them to be the leadership that the churches need.