

Partnership visit to Methodist Church Sierra Leone 10th - 15th January 2018

Aims

- To meet with MCSL staff and leaders to discuss partnership issues
- To meet with the Principal of the Theological College –Dr Cooper. an ex-NMA grant recipient
- To visit mudslide victims and consider further assistance required
- To attend MCSL Organisational Assessment pilot scheme conducted by AWC
- To visit PLHIV project supported by Isle of Man Methodist Church

It was an early start and I arrived in Freetown late at night however the journeys were smooth. I got onto the Sea express ferry from Lungi to Aberdeen in Freetown and was glad to get in bed after midnight. As usual Africa does not give much solace to long journeys, by 8.00 am I had to be ready for breakfast and at a meeting by 10.00am.

Meeting with MCSL staff and leaders

It was exciting to see Bishop Arnold Temple after several years and to reacquaint with other MCSL staff at the Connexional office. We went straight into singing a lovely Methodist hymn, then prayers; followed by each one introducing himself or herself. We had a minute silence in remembrance of Bishop Beah, Prof Ogara's mum and my dad – all recently passed away.



It was good to hear each staff share his or her contributions and aspirations for the year. I asked what success looked like and how could it be achieved from their perspective? We shared probable challenges and opportunities to encounter this year as well as the significance of MCSL undergoing transformation.

Following the death of Bishop Albert in

October 2017, a special conference was convened early January 2018 and Rev Mark K Ngobeh was elected as the President designate of MCSL. He is currently the Superintendent of the Western District and was present at our meetings. He hopes to start his term of office in July 2018 when he take over from the interim President – Bishop Temple.

Summary of discussions

We discussed several partnership issues and all participants were grateful for the Organisational Assessment aimed at strengthening the structures and systems at MCSL and we prayed that it accomplishes its aims. Below is the summary of our discussions:-

- Support for three delegates to visit MC Nigeria in appreciation for the repatriation of Bishop Beah's corpse for burial plus help with the welfare of his widow
- Request to exchange experienced MCN ministers with younger inexperienced MCSL for exposure and development
- Assistance for specialised personnel from MCN (formerly prearranged prior to the Ebola crisis) to help with MCSL assessment, central fundraising and administration of certain assets
- MCB to help with outward facing youth policy to relate with contextualised issues such as increasing number of street kids, abuse of youths for political rallies, responding to youth unemployment etc
- MCB to assist in implementing an efficient communications strategy to enable the Secretary of Conference to pursue the business of the Conference and ensure that its decisions are implemented

- To have an updated ICT system to help disseminate information to stakeholders, network with local and global partners and have a regularly updated web-presence. The current office computers have obsolete systems

Meeting with Dr Cooper – Principal of the Theological College, Freetown



Rev Dr Cooper (an ex – NMA beneficiary), now a Principal in Freetown

Dr Cooper was the former Dean of Research at the United Theological University at Kitwe in Zambia before taking up this new post. It was a delight to see him and he was looking and doing very well despite having a stroke in 2016. His speech was very comprehensible and his left side still active though his right-side was less responsive. He and his colleagues shared how the number of distance learning applicants dropped during the Ebola crisis and the College is yet to attain previous numbers. There also appear to be increasing demand for laity training although the numbers of ministerial students is dropping too. Churches need to rethink how ministers are being trained with more considerations being given to non-stipendary or itinerant ministers. Dr Cooper offered opportunities for sabbaticals and volunteers from Britain to offer support and fresh insights. Nevertheless it was good to see Dr Cooper again even though we all agreed

there were lots of re-thinking needed for the future of the Church in Sierra Leone where the Christian population was estimated at 30%!

Visit to a Methodist Primary School, Buxton

The Methodist Church in Sierra Leone has 124 primary and secondary schools and has been a pioneer provider of quality education across the nation. The introduction of free education in past year, lack of investment in school infrastructure exacerbated by increasing number of children (population explosion) have placed enormous pressure on the education system in Sierra Leone. This resulted in schools administering morning and afternoon shifts for pupils. The Buxton Methodist Primary has 222 girls in school in the morning and the boys attend school in the afternoons. The average class size is 30 pupils, however the average pass rate is not so high because many children engage in street hawking to boost family income. Consequently, pupils attending schools in the afternoon are often tired and or hungry during lessons. I asked about practical ways of addressing these issues and was told of many challenges. The prominent one being the inability of the government to provide adequate infrastructure but demands schools (often mission schools) to enlarge their school facilities. Other suggestions by staff were establishing primary schools with extra funds (from corporate or private sources) to provide necessary resources for affordable education or have a fair scholarships system for the poor. MCSL has asked Buxton Primary School to twin with a primary school in the UK to share experiences and enlighten leaders on how best to improve its education delivery service in Sierra Leone.



Students and Principals of Junior and Senior Schools during my visit

Methodist Girls High School, Freetown

This was the first all-female school started by Mrs Godman on 1 January 1880, the wife of Rev Matthew Godman, Chairman and Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church in Sierra Leone. The first set of students was eight with five staff and Mrs Weymouth as the first Principal. The school is now government assisted with both junior and senior secondary schools on the same site. The junior students

attend school from 07.30 – 12.45 hours whilst the seniors attend from 12.45 – 5.45 hours. In 1993, the school adopted the 6-3-3-4 system of education and admission has been determined by performance in the National Primary Examination. Students do nine core subjects in the Junior school and by Senior school they are required to do five compulsory and four elective subjects. There are extra-curricular activities to promote wellbeing. It would be beneficial to promote school exchange visits across Methodist Conferences in and out of Africa.

Visit to People Living with HIV (PLHIV) Centre & Mudslide location – Sierra Leone

MCSL leaders and I travelled by road from Freetown to Wellington, in the Western District. Along the way we branched out to view the devastating mudslide scene that occurred in August 2017. Many of the residents had moved out although I understand some are returning due to lack of sufficient shelter and relief packages for the victims. During our visit, campaign rallies were going on therefore I was unable to engage with some of the residents. MCSL received a £10,000 solidarity grant at the onset of the disaster to support the victims and the fund

was administered by government officials on the ground. Discussions with MCSL leaders confirmed the increase in the number of orphans, vulnerable children and youths still requiring support. Bishop Arnold Temple also seized the opportunity to thank British Methodists and supports for their prayers, generosity and goodwill for Sierra Leoneans. The work of supporting the neglected, marginalised



Site of the mudslide incident that killed over 1000 Sierra Leoneans in August 2017

and the poor remains a priority of Methodist Church in Sierra Leone. I shall continue to liaise with MCSL for updates and testimonies on this incident.

Eight MCSL officials in two vehicles proceeded to Wellington by road to the PLHIV Centre to meet with MCSL volunteers and HIV patients. There were two nurses and a social worker present with eight clients including a child.



People Living with HIV, MCSL staff and leaders at its temporary counselling centre

The support group started in 2001 as a pilot study and by 2002, Christian Aid assisted the programme to reduce its death rate. By 2004, increasing number of enquiring clients were tested and the new cases followed up by MCSL staff. This continued until 2006 when the Home base care project for the chronically ill patients commenced. Support groups from all over the country visited the small centre to observe its operations and learn from this pioneering scheme in Sierra Leone. With

increased numbers of participants, charities supported three social workers, two field workers and three nurses. They assisted patients, counselled, treated opportunistic cases, procured and prescribed drugs and referred new cases for testing at designated clinics. The social workers visited chronically patients twice a week and supported stigmatised clients in the community.

The growing number of patients caused MCSL to release one of its manses at Wellington as a temporary centre for PLHIV. It became a drop-in centre for counselling, administering medications, meeting people groups and getting government support packages. Later the government sent more nurses and social workers but these were paid by non-government organisations and voluntary agencies. By 2008, participants had exceeded two hundred but support had started dwindling. Salary payments stopped and participants struggled to fend for themselves and their families. MCSL grappled with caring for patient with this and families a chronic disease due to its meagre resources when all supporting agencies left.



The construction of a new Community centre for PLHIV funded by Isle of Man MC

It was an answer to prayer when the Isle of Man Methodist Church agreed to partner with MCSL to build a PLHIV centre at Wellington in 2016. The construction has started though meeting with lots of delays because the construction has been in four stages. During my visit in January 2018, construction was going on and I met with the site engineer who explained few of the challenges encountered e.g. getting the local labour quota for work has been difficult. However the site engineer (who was also a Methodist) assured me that he plans to complete the building by March 2018. The next stage was to build up to the lintel and commence roofing by February 2018. The clients shared their challenges and were grateful for the faithful support from MCSL all these years. I was glad to see this progress and my office shall continue to work with MCSL on its mission priority in this regard. Updates shall be sent to the various stakeholders and the Centre still seeks ways of reducing the current HIV incidence rate in Sierra Leone from 2% to 0.5%. It was disheartening to see that majority of the clients were women with children, however implementing solutions to continue to reduce transmission must start somewhere.

Bathurst Street Society, Wesley Methodist Church, Freetown established 1819

It was a joyous occasion to attend the launch of 200 years anniversary to be celebrated in January 2019 by Bathurst Street Society, Freetown. The service commenced at 14 January 2018 at 9.30am followed by a procession from Lamina Sankoh Street to Bathurst Street Primary School. The Wesley Church members plan to renovate the old



school building into a more contemporary structure that would serve the school and its communities. This was to commemorate the start of its 200th anniversary milestone. Bishop Arnold Temple preached from two bible texts – Matthew 28¹⁹⁻²⁰ and 1 Sam 7:12 focusing on how Samuel took a stone as a memorial and set it between Mizpeh and Shen. He named it Ebenezer – hitherto the Lord hath helped them.



MCSL procession to old site at the start of the 200 anniversary procession



Laying the foundation of a contemporary Primary school and hall to replace the existing one

Bishop Arnold shared a bit of MCSL church history by sharing how there were several waves of missionary visits to Sierra Leone when Freetown was a protectorate of the British Empire. John Baker came with the third wave of missionaries. He was a passionate Christian and a welder by profession. He arrived in February 1819 and started a society at

Bathurst Street that same year. Towards the end of 1819, record showed over one hundred members attended the society. Many years after, in October 1827, five hundred and forty two slaves from Yoruba land were freed from a ship on the high sea and they came to settle in Freetown. One of them was called John Ezzidio, named by his master. He became an apprentice to a French merchant and was a quick learner. After the death of his master, he was employed by lucrative European merchants until he was able to establish his own business. Ezzidio as he was often called, was influenced by Charles Mark in 1842. Charles was a Methodist local preacher, a sincere Christian with a powerful mind at the throne of Grace. Ezzidio became a committed Christian and later a Sunday school teacher. He was grieved worshipping in a debilitated church building and he challenged intelligent and affluent Methodists to contribute for the great cause. He gave generously from his proceeds and visited Europe few times. It was reported that he managed to secure a grant of £1,000.00 from the Wesleyan Missionary Society to build a new chapel. On 24 March 1886, Wesley Methodist Church was constructed and they were able to say *thus far has the Lord helped us!* It is amazing what can be achieved when you have faith.

As in the Bible reading in 1 Samuel 10: 12 - 17, Samuel called for a return to God after repeated defeats by their enemies due to disobedience to God. Samuel encouraged the Israelites to recommit themselves to God. The reform became a reality. The people fasted, prayed and confessed their sins. Twenty years earlier at the same spot, the Philistines had conquered the Israelites at Mizpeh in spite of them having ark of God with them. However on this occasion, Samuel set a stone to remind of past mercies and to boast of future help from God -and God honoured the reform. This day, Bishop Temple said they remembered the contributions of past missionaries and members to the Methodist Church today. When the Israelites was obeyed the Lord, He prospered and blessed them as a people. Shall we obey Him?



Women Fellowship members at the street parade

I left later in the evening to catch the Sea express boat to Lungi International airport, heading for Lagos. I asked myself, how committed was I in seeking *reformation* within and outside the Church as Samuel did? Could I pay the price? God still seeks such people even in our days.

Psalm 72¹²⁻¹³: For He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy.

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