

PETER AND JANICE CLARK IN SIERRA LEONE

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As the theme for the eight days of prayer and reflection on Christian unity comes from Scotland and was prepared by the group responsible for the Edinburgh 2010 Centenary celebration*, it has an increased significance as we study the material at a distance from a wintry Europe and in an African city.

As yet there are no visible signs indicating that Salone's churches are engaging in the annual reflection which began on January 18th and concludes on the feast of St Paul. That may be because the ecclesiastical tradition is to follow the southern hemisphere's preference, which is to recognise the octave of prayer at the time of Pentecost. Ecumenism in Salone is however, clearly evident in the training of ministers from several denominations at the Sierra Leone Theological College and Training Centre where we work. Our colleagues are from a variety of different churches which affirm the search for unity but not necessarily in the same manner or to the same end.

In taking chapter 24 of St Luke's gospel as the base of the eight days of reflections, the theme of "giving witness through..." has been a useful lens by which daily life and its events can be examined.

Day One is that of "giving witness through celebrating life", and is followed on Day Two by "giving witness through sharing stories". The following account combines the two.

In walking the narrow, rutted road towards the Wellington community centre, some of the hundred or so members of NETHIPS might have been momentarily distracted by a football practice session being played out in front a large mosque. Hopefully the spectators of the football match had not been distracted by the large number of women approaching the centre, would have delighted the organisers of the monthly gathering, as maintaining anonymity and ensuring confidentiality is a key aspect of the work of the Network of HIV Positives in Salone (NETHIPS).

Inside the centre the group gathered for a programme of physical exercise, teaching on health and hygiene, distribution of condoms, eating together and of course renewing friendship. This gathering is but one aspect of the work of Methodist Church's Primary Health Care Centre in Wellington, where a trained team of nurses, social workers and volunteers coordinate a response to the needs of over 300 clients who are registered with the centre. The photograph below is that of Hawa Juana, a nurse at the centre and Idrisa Songo, its director, who, as people living and affected by the HIVirus, endeavour to give ecumenical witness to a celebration of life through their daily work.

On arriving at the meeting the first person we shared a conversation with was Chris, who as a journalist working in an office close to our home was aware of our presence in Tengbeh Town. He quickly acknowledged his HIV status and that he had suffered for witnessing to it. Two days later he arrived at our home with a copy of The African Champion, a newspaper carrying a report on the meeting held in Wellington under the title "Methodist Church, open doors for HIV/AIDS clients" which he had written. NETHIPS vision is to work towards a nation in which PLHIVs and orphans will enjoy equal rights and opportunities to live productive and meaningful lives, and claim their basic human rights. And in so doing encourage other to witness to these things.