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Sierra Leone

– Province of Freedom?

Come with us to the Banta Temne tribe of 30,000 people, and not a Christian among them until five or six years ago. But the Lord was at work in the life of Philip, a young Christian who left university after two years to go and live among them. During the war Christians had shown kindness to the Chief and so Philip was able to move freely among them, even to preach Christ in the mosques – and every village has its mosque. Now there are 80 believers. Philip left to study at Bible College and we were asked to help with teaching these new Christian leaders.

So we went to the village of Mabure which has a primary school of 260 pupils in six classes, just two of the teachers have the basic teaching qualifications (40% of teachers are unqualified).

The 10 church leaders attended along with a few Muslim men whose Christian wives had persuaded them to come. The women folk had their own class. For three days they all faithfully attended, and every day there was also an opportunity to teach the 260 children. God is indeed at work there.

The Gospel arrived in Sierra Leone over 200 years ago but many have yet to hear it for the first time. The first missionaries were the freed slaves themselves. Villages were built, each with its chapel and with familiar names – Sussex, Kent, Aberdeen, York. Foreign missionaries arrived to help and evangelise, teach and translate the scriptures. The Gospel spread slowly from the coast to the hinterland but here there was the challenge of Islam and paganism, the same challenges faced today. The work was slow. More missionaries came, new areas were reached with the Gospel, churches planted. Diamonds were found in abundance. In 1961 Sierra Leone gained independence.

In 1971 we went to Sierra Leone – to work in the iron ore mine. A Sunday School was opened and a church started - a time of training for us. After three years we left. But many missionaries (up to 200) were busy teaching God's word, encouraging, helping in schools, clinics etc.

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Sierra Leone cont

Every village has its mosque.

In 1990 came the rebel war, 50% of the population were displaced, many were killed, hundreds maimed for life. Missions closed and missionaries left. Many Sierra Leoneans left also. Churches were destroyed. We returned in 1999.

In 2002 the war officially ended. Many believers recalled with joy and wonder how God had been with them as they fled the rebels, found protection and food in unexpected places. God was still at work in the destruction and mayhem.

The church leaders struggled manfully to organise, to rebuild spiritually, and physically. There were unfamiliar tasks to undertake and God was at work but very few missionaries returned.

Back to the Banta Temne……On the way home on the final day we were stopped by the nurse at the village health clinic. A pregnant lady (deaf and mute) had a dead baby in her womb and there was no-one qualified to help. So our double cab pick-up became an ambulance, (not for the first time). Driving slowly over a very bad road, we managed to get her to the Roman Catholic Mission hospital 30-40 miles away. It brought back memories of 37 years earlier when our first child, Jennifer, was born in that same hospital, then just a one-room clinic with two maternity rooms.

Near the Guinea border are communities unreached with the Gospel. One evangelist who visited the area reports the Muslims as saying "we are only Muslims because nobody came to tell us about Jesus. Now that we have heard we want to follow Him". Indeed Islam (60-70% population) is making great strides in Sierra Leone building mosques, schools, Madrassahs, clinics. Libya, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran support and send missionaries. False teaching is rife among the churches – so attractive to the poor, but rarely pointing people to the Saviour.

The Gospel still has to reach many people, the majority of whom are poor economically and spiritually. Who will come and help the church leaders bring the glorious Gospel which gives true freedom? The spiritual needs are great, opportunities to serve are many: Church planters, Bible teachers, teacher training, doctors, (former Mission hospitals are usually run by paramedics), and many more.

Mike & Vi Webb

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