

In the work fields, youth was no protection against the overseer's lash; these are the scars of a lost childhood. The Israelites had a history of enslavement in Egypt which weighed upon them: *Let heavier work be laid on these people and they will do it instead of listening to deceptive speeches!* (Exodus 5:9; see 1:8-14) That was a dig at Moses!

Listen to another speech from a prophet and leader of his own people from our own times:

Fifty-eight years ago the Rev Martin Luther King Jr, a Black American Baptist Minister, proclaimed at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC in the USA: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today." (Washington DC, August 28th 1963) His speech was not deceptive, but it is still to be fulfilled: a half-century later, you can still be born into oppression for the colour of your skin. As you might across our world today because of poverty, or ethnicity, or caste, or gender, or religion, or simply someone else's fears....

In Psalm 129:5-8, the music turns – not to a dream, but to a nightmare. The scars of childhood have hardened in the heart; the oppressed turn on the oppressors: *Let them be shamed and routed.*

*Let them be like grass on the roof  
that withers before it flowers.  
With that no reaper fills his hands,  
No binder of sheaves his arms.*

It has the makings of a curse: No harvest, no greeting, no blessing. The psalm has need of the prophet's dream! *Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.*

It was Martin Luther King's conviction that non-violence can change hearts on both sides. He described it as *"the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."*

*"When all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro Spiritual,*

*'Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'* ■

Martin Luther King's speech was given at Washington on 28th August 1963. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace on October 14th, 1964. He was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4th, 1968. The first Martin Luther King Day took place in the USA on January 20th, 1986.

Fr Dermot Connolly spent many years ministering in Nigeria and now works in the District of Ireland.

**Helen Fallon**, Deputy Librarian at Maynooth University meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams. *"In June 2021, Reverend Dr Sahr John Yambasu became the first African-born leader of Ireland's Methodist Church. I first met Reverend Yambasu in Freetown. We caught up recently in Ireland and he shared his story."*

## Sharing Our Stories

*From Sierra Leone to Ireland: Reverend Dr Sahr John Yambasu tells his story...*

### Childhood

I grew up in Lalehun, a Kissi farming village in the eastern part of Sierra Leone, near the border with Guinea. Like other families in the area, ours was a large extended family. My mother Sia was the fifth and final wife of my father Tamba Yaniwah. I had five brothers and three sisters, of whom only four brothers are alive.

After school, we went each day to the farm, returning to the village in the evening. We grew rice, yams, cassava, cotton, cocoa and coffee. Most farmers had a separate rice farm in the swamp land.

We also hunted, setting traps for antelopes, deer and rabbits. Back at the farm, the meat was smoked over firewood, portioned and stored in containers of palm oil which preserved it. We would use the meat gradually in what we called a sauce (stew) with rice.

### Stories from the Gospels

It was my father who brought the Methodist Church to our village. There were no shops nearby, so he travelled with other farmers, with their palm produce on their heads, to sell at the shop in a town 27 miles from our village. One evening he heard a bell ringing. He walked towards the sound and came to a public area where a man was preaching. Storytelling is very much part of our tradition and he enjoyed listening to the man's stories. From then on every time he went to the town, he listened to the preacher telling stories from the Gospels. After a time, he decided to become a Christian. He told the elders in the village about his

new found faith and asked their permission to start practicing his faith. We prayed at home. While my father couldn't read or write, he had a good memory and repeated the stories he had heard. As time went on people became curious and some came to join us. Our compound couldn't fit the numbers coming, so he and others built an enclosure in the village where people could go to pray and listen to the Gospel. Soon, that too, was not big enough for the congregation. He went back to the missionary, who was a Methodist from England and invited him to come to the village and run the church.

### **A child's prayer**

My father died in 1966 while I was still at primary school. After I completed my 11 Plus, with very good results, there was no money to pay the school fees for me to continue to secondary school. I remember walking with my mum to the farm. She began to pray to my father asking him to intercede with God to provide funding so that I could continue school. I too prayed and told God that if He found a way for me to go to secondary school, I would work for Him all my life. About two weeks later, one of the missionaries sent someone to fetch me. I walked the seven miles to see him. He told me his brother and his wife in England had agreed to pay for my education. This was an answer to my prayer and stayed with me. The second way God answered my prayer was getting me a government scholarship for five years.

### **Ministry**

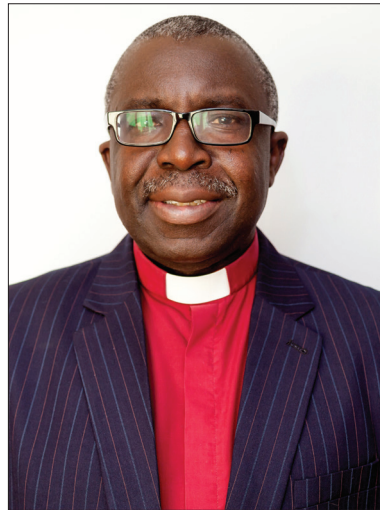
When I was finishing secondary school I went back to the same minister and told him I wanted to be a Methodist minister. I started training, doing local preacher exams, then went to theological college in Freetown for three and a half years. I worked for a little while in ministry in Freetown and Kailahun in the east. I then got a scholarship from the Methodist Church in Ireland to go to Edgehill College in Belfast. While there, I was invited by a retired Methodist missionary who had served in Sierra Leone to spend Christmas at his home in Longford. There, I met my future wife Clodagh. She was a primary school teacher at the time and had sensed a call to the ministry. The next year she resigned her teaching post and came to Edgehill to train as a minister. We were married on July 14th, 1988, and in September I went to Cambridge University, where I completed a PhD on the history of Methodist Evangelization of my people.

In 1992, myself, Clodagh and our three children returned to Sierra Leone. I became principal of Sierra Leone Theological Hall and Church Training Centre.

My expectation was to live and work in Sierra Leone, but God had other plans for me.

### **A New Country**

Things were very bad economically in Sierra Leone and the civil war which broke out in 1991, was spreading. We left in 1995 and joined Clodagh's parents in Longford. I worked as a hotel porter and in a meat processing plant. Then myself and Clodagh were invited to serve the Methodist Church in Ireland and took up ministries in Wicklow. In 2000, we were transferred to Galway, where we remained until 2009. I worked nights as a taxi driver to help fund my children's education and to support my family in Sierra Leone. I was the only one on a salary at the time. Then Clodagh was posted to Bray and I was posted to Carlow and Kilkenny.



**Reverend Dr Sahr John Yambasu from Sierra Leone is the first African-born leader of Ireland's Methodist Church.**

### **Family**

My children grew up in Ireland. Abbie studied speech and language therapy in Trinity College, Fayia studied supply chain management in Dun Laoghaire Further Education Institute and Sahr Jr studied medicine in Trinity College. They have visited Sierra Leone a couple of times with me. They enjoyed their visits and keep in touch with my family.

Six years ago I was moved to Waterford. Clodagh served in Birr/Athlone/Tullamore at the same time and has since been posted to Mountmellick, all in the Irish Midlands. There are 14 or 15 different nationalities in our church here in Waterford. It's very exciting and I'm realising that there are many different ways of doing things. I'm very involved with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. I work actively with the Church of Ireland and other Churches. Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan and I are involved in an interfaith group which includes Bahai and Muslim representatives.

### **Called to Lead**

In April I got a call from Head Office in Belfast, asking if I would agree to be nominated to be President of the Methodist Conference in Ireland. I was shocked and honoured. This is a one-year post. I will remain in Waterford for the foreseeable future and I will also have a base in Belfast, where we have a lot of churches; so I envisage spending a lot of time there. Life is busy but fulfilling. Our first grandchild is due this year, and that is exciting. Because of my experience in Sierra Leone I've learned to take things as they come and trust in God. ■

You can read more about Sahr Yambasu in his book *Between Africa and the West: A Story of Discovery*. Available from Amazon and other outlets.