

Helen Fallon worked with Volunteer Services Overseas in Sierra Leone for two years from 1989 to 1991. Last year, she returned to see the Church contribution to rebuilding the country



Sierra Leone home to a living vibrant Catholic Church

I RETURNED to Sierra Leone in March of this year. The country had been my home for two years - 1989 to 1991 - when I taught librarianship at the University of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone was established, through the efforts of the anti-slavery movement in England, as the Province of Freedom in 1787 - a homeland for freed slaves living in Britain and America. At that time Sierra Leone was just a 28-mile stretch of peninsular land, not the modern-day country which is about the same size as Ireland, with a similar size population.

While there, I lived in a mountain village called Leicester. This and neighbouring villages had a long association with Christianity. Charles MacCarthy, an early governor of Sierra Leone, who was half-Irish, half-French, established Leicester village and other villages with English sounding names - Regent, Hastings, Waterloo, Wellington and Gloucester - on the outskirts of Freetown. Himself a Catholic, MacCarthy was concerned that freed slaves were being put down in Freetown and being left to fend for themselves. He invited the recently established English Church Missionary Society (CMS)

and Sister Anne Marie Javouhey, foundress of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny to come - from neighbouring Senegal - to Sierra Leone to minister to the freed slaves. While in Freetown Sister Anne Marie contacted typhoid and returned to Senegal as soon as she was fit to travel. Later, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny returned and the Missionary Order of the Holy Rosary (MHRs), the Missionaries of Charity, Christian brothers and Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritan) established missions in the country, as did the Lutheran, Methodist and Anglican churches. Approximately 10% of the population of Sierra Leone is Christian, about half of these are Catholic. The remainder are Muslim or worship traditional African gods.

CRAFTING A NEW LIFE

Despite small numbers the Catholic Church has had a profound influence on the lives of Sierra Leoneans of all faiths any many Sierra Leoneans of all faiths have attended Catholic schools.

One of my first visits was to the Grafton camp for displaced people outside Freetown,

where over 13,000 people live. There, Sister Celia Doyle (MHRs) has set up a weaving and sewing project for women. Women sit working handmade wooden looms, weaving long strips of country cloth, a material not unlike linen but coarser. Others sew or crochet while children run about playing. It's all surprisingly normal and hard to believe these women have endured a ten-year civil war, have lost their homes, loved ones and all their possessions.

"This project is helping my children, helping me myself," Kumba one of the women stops in her work to tell me.

"I can earn my living from my weaving and sewing. My children are going to school. I can pay for books, for uniform. The other women are also reporting to me that the lifestyle has changed. I teach other women weaving so that they can become self reliant. There have been great changes in the camp thanks to this project - less trouble, less idleness. I say thank you to God Almighty and I say thank you to Sister Celia."

Sister Celia, a native of Wexford, has been in Sierra Leone, with some breaks, since 1968. Her role as a missionary has included science teacher, school principal, and development and community worker. She doesn't distinguish between the people she works with. An earlier sewing project she initiated provided training to women including some who were ex-combatants in the rebel army a force that - calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) - waged a ten-year civil war that devastated an already fragile economy.

"The women were girlfriends of the army men, so they just went along with them," Sister Celia explains. "After the war ended they came in from the bush and just wanted to rebuild their lives."



**OLD BUILDING
- NEW PURPOSE**

Rebuilding lives is what the three Holy Rosary nuns in Bo, Sierra Leone's second largest town, also aim to do. When the sisters left in 1995 the convent and school closed. Ten years later four Holy Rosary nuns came to Sierra Leone from Nigeria and set about bringing the convent back to life - a new life that meets the needs of the people in this post-war period. Sr Bernadette Ezeabasili explains how the nuns decided on what they should do:

"We talked to people to find out what they really need. There are many homeless girls as a result of the war. The Christian brothers are taking care of the boys, so we decided to help the girls. Most of them missed out on school. Some lost all family, some have disabilities. Many have been traumatised by the brutality of the war years and all that happened to them. We are trying to help these girls get an education. We will begin with basic education, then teach skills of different kinds - how to make soap, dye cloth, computer skills. We will also help them find markets for their work. There is a lot of work to be done and the convent will be put to a new use."

Part of the new use will be counselling rooms. Sister Philomena Ezech studied in Maynooth and Trinity College Dublin, before completing a masters degree in Psychology, Counselling and Trauma in the US, a background which will be very valuable in dealing with the many traumatised people the ten-year war has created.

The third nun I meet on my visit to the convent in Bo, Sister Bernadine Ngizi Nnabuo, speaks warmly of her new home.

"I didn't come with set ideas. I want to really listen to the people, to see what their needs are. I am looking forward to working here. The local people are really welcoming to us and I am filled with hope."

For now the nuns are working on getting water and electricity to the convent. Very soon they hope to take in their first students. There's an air of quiet optimism and purpose about.

LOVING YOUR ENEMY

From Bo I travel to Kenema, Sierra Leone's third largest town. My base here is the Kenema Pastoral and Social Development Centre. Established in 1981 by Fr Ray Barry CSSp (RIP) the centre hosts course on a variety of development, social studies, religious and related issues. When, in 1998, Kenema came under attack from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the staff fled and the centre closed. Now re-opened, under the directorship of Fr Brian Starcken (CSSp), the centre provides a space for national and international organisations to conduct workshops and courses on various aspects of humanitarian relief and reconstruction.

"We need to sit down and talk with the people, listen to their stories. Then they can begin to heal. Healing the memories is the best therapy," Father Matthias A. Maidyu, from Nigeria, who is staying at the centre, explains to me.

From the centre it's just a short walk, through winding paths and towering trees to the home of Bishop Daniel Patrick Koroma. Born

into a Muslim household in a nearby town, Bishop Koroma attended the only school in the area - a Catholic school.

"The teachers impressed me," he tells me. "Through them I began to see another way of praying. At secondary school, I began to think seriously and to say yes to Christianity as a way of life."

Bishop Koroma goes on to talk about the war.

"In a civil war, the perpetrators don't go home, because they are already at home. One of the challenges for the Catholic Church is to build the peace among people who took up guns against each other. Loving your enemy has a deep meaning here. As well as rebuilding relationships, we need to rebuild the structures through which the society can function - our villages, our schools, our hospitals, and libraries. We work with the community to provide housing, to clear land, to begin to plant crops again. Many people missed out on school. We have a real need for adult literacy programmes. The personnel who were here before the war are now dispersed. Many are dead. The Church has a key leadership role. Of course our services are not just for Christians. The majority of the people in the diocese of Kenema are Muslim. We are trying, with the people, to create a culture of peace and justice which concerns itself with the well being of people. This will take time and resources."

HEALTH CARE

From Kenema I journey to Panguma with Sister Therese Flynn (MHRs). In the back of the jeep a cat purrs contentedly.

It was in Panguma that Father Felim McAllister, from Donabate in Dublin, was murdered on the 12th March 1994. Three other people - Dr Elco Krijin from Holland, his wife Karim and their young daughter Zita - were also killed in the ambush. Sister Therese Flynn is actively involved in the rebuilding of the hospital that Father Felim helped establish.

"There is no point in just putting up buildings," she explains. "We need to be able to provide services at an affordable price. In Panguma we have 31 staff but only five are fully qualified with a government certificate in nursing. We also have senior nurse aides who were trained in the Catholic mission hospital."

At the moment we are trying to recruit a matron for the hospital and also a doctor. It's a challenging time, a time of development, a time of great excitement. Of course it can also be a time of frustration, misunderstanding, but when you put everything together there is growth, there is a newness. We have an outreach immunisation programme, a team of four, using two motorbikes, go out to villages.

We work with the village elders and paramount chiefs. A lot of the people cannot read or write, so we use poster and pictures as teaching aids. We give health talks where we tell people about the importance of vaccination and ante-natal care. The cat, we'll be dropping off with a local man. She's just one a number we are bringing into the area to help stop the spread of lassa fever which is caused by rats."

SISTER THERESE FLYNN

From the hospital, which is partially opened, we walk to the nearby Catholic Church and visit Father Felim's grave. A mural depicting him baptising a child has been painted on the church wall. The local people are

happy that he has been laid to rest in this now tranquil spot.

ADULT EDUCATION

The next day I travel to Kailhaun. En route we stop for lunch with Father Jack Nugent (CSSp) in Pendembu. This is his fifty-second year in Sierra Leone. In Kailhaun I meet Sierra Leonean Edison Bockarie who works with Generating Empowerment through Learning (GEL).

Edison and thousands of fellow Sierra Leoneans crossed the nearby border into Guinea to escape from the brutal and bloody ten-year civil war that devastated their country. Three Holy Rosary nuns - Mary Coleman and Brenda O'Sullivan from Ireland and Sierra Leonean Angela Karimu - crossed with them.

"In the refugee camp most of the people could not read or write and were afraid to speak out, especially the women and children. Even the ration cards they got, sometimes somebody would take it from them and there was nobody to speak for them," Edison explains. "So we came up with the idea that we could advocate for these people. When the Holy Rosary Sisters saw what we were doing they began to assist us. With their help we started giving loans to women so they could improve their condition. They began small business such as selling fish, rice, salt and other provisions in the camp. Their business grew up and their condition totally changed. That was in 1998. Soon there were movements in ten different camps."

We train people in how to read and write and how to speak out and to participate in discussion of issues. We aim at social change

through social awareness and the creation of a society where gender is no barrier and the dignity of both women and men is maintained."

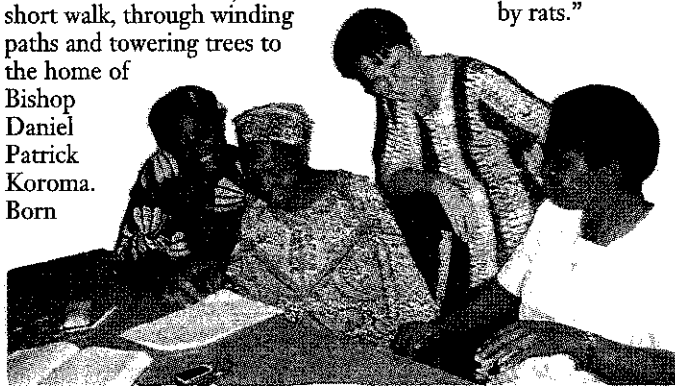
The programme spread through a number of refugee camps in Guinea and when the war was declared over in 2001 Edison returned from Guinea to set it up in Sierra Leone. With the assistance of the Holy Rosary nuns and a grant from Trócaire, fifteen centres have been established in Kailhaun and fifteen in Kono a neighbouring district to the north. Three Irish Holy nuns - Anne Kelly, Mary Mullen and Brigid Lacey - have recently gone to Liberia to start the programme there. The Holy Rosary sisters helped Edison to get funding to go to Kimmage Manor to undertake a one-year course in development studies.


MINISTERIAL VISIT

Back in Freetown I attended a reception to mark the visit of Minister Conor Lenihan to Sierra Leone. There he pledged an increase in Irish aid to Sierra Leone. Sometime in the evening we hear the whirring of a helicopter overhead. It's Charles Taylor, Liberian warlord, being extradited to Sierra Leone. I'm back in Ireland when I read that he will be tried for war crimes in Sierra Leone, in The Hague.

BUILDING ON STRONG FOUNDATIONS

On a two-week visit it was impossible to see all the work the Catholic Church in Sierra Leone is involved in. I was left in do doubt of the huge contribution the Church is making to the rebuilding of Sierra Leone, building on the strong foundations laid by Irish missionaries.






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