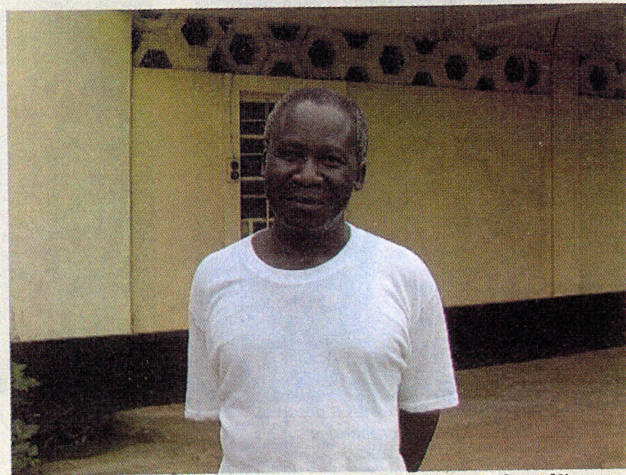


Interview with Bishop Daniel Patrick Koroma, Bishop of Kenema, Sierra Leone

By Helen Fallon



Daniel Koroma, Bishop of Kenema

In March 2006 I returned to Sierra Leone. Fifteen years previously I left this small West African country having completed a two year Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) assignment at the University.

The months leading up to my departure in July 1991 were marked by a six o'clock curfew in Freetown. Still the fighting in the Eastern Province seemed a long way away. Like my students, I thought it would blow over fairly quickly.

It didn't.

The years of government mismanagement of the country's vast natural resources, including diamonds; the decline in essential services such as transport, healthcare and schools; widespread unemployment and massive inflation, created the rise of a group calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Commonly known as the rebels, the RUF was initially welcomed by the people.

Back in Ireland, via letters, the television and later the internet, I saw how what had seemed to be a skirmish, rapidly develop into a brutal and bloody civil war. It lasted ten years and left thousands of people dead, homeless, maimed, and orphaned. There was widespread destruction of schools, clinics, hospitals, libraries and all the other structures society depends on to function effectively.

Rebuilding the physical and the social structures is just one of the many tasks Bishop Patrick Daniel Koroma has to address. No stranger to this place, he grew up in a village just twenty two miles from the town of Kenema, Sierra Leone's third largest

town, where he now lives. His diocese takes in Kenema, Kono and Kailhaun districts. 10% of the area's one million people are Catholic.

Bishop Koroma took up his post immediately after disarmament in 2002. I spoke with him at his home in Kenema in April of this year. The following is a transcript.

We still cannot understand the brutal aspect

The war was thrust on people. In a civil war everybody becomes a loser. Now the church has to work with both the victims and perpetrators of violence. It is a very delicate situation. Some people do not want to go to church with former rebels. Gradually they begin to discover they are brothers and sisters. It is a challenge for the church, to get people to make peace, and to face the reality of the war - what caused it and understand the frustration of their own brothers and sisters. Now, when you go to the market, you might encounter the man who burned your house or raped your daughter. That is hard.

The brutal aspect is what we still cannot understand - people taking guns against their own people. Maybe if it had remained at a local level it would have ended quickly, but when the international players got involved it became so muddled that it was no longer a local war. Players committed for other reasons, such as control of the diamond mines, and it was those players who prolonged the war.

The community, helped by the church, must now find space to discuss what we have endured and space to heal. We are trying, with the people, to

create a culture of peace and justice which concerns itself with the well being of people.

Our services are not restricted to Christians

As well as rebuilding relationships we must rebuild structures that offer services to the people. Many people went from here as refugees to Liberia and Guinea. Many died. Some have not returned to this area because their homes and villages have been completely destroyed. The needs are so great - hospitals, schools, water, sanitation. How to prioritise - that is very difficult. Needs vary from time to time. Money is in short supply all over. It will take time. It is really building the whole society to what they had before, which is not possible to do in a short time. These structures were not developed overnight but were destroyed in a very short time.

The church is a group responsibility. Our services are for the whole community. They are not restricted to Christians. The majority of people in the community we serve are Muslim. We have to look at non-spiritual needs such as housing, clearing land, growing crops.

What can we as a church do? We cannot rely on government alone. We are living in a global world and that creates further challenges. The price of the crops we are growing again - cocoa, coffee, groundnuts - have dropped on the international market. As a country, we are getting little from our diamond resources.

Caritas is offering support to farmers, to people repairing houses and to other rebuilding efforts. Each

diocese has a Caritas development office. This office collaborates with local partners to meet needs. The Pastoral Centre here in Kenema trains personnel. It runs courses for catechists and other educational programmes for groups working in the community. We have a network of small Christian communities all over the diocese and are well placed to know what is happening.

Children and women

There are over 200 Catholic primary schools in the larger Kenema diocese and eight secondary schools. All these need resources. Children missed out on school. Now they are adults and need literacy programmes. We are also trying to refurbish and re-open Panguma Hospital. We have an outreach vaccination programme with health workers going out on motorcycles to carry out vaccinations and to provide health education programmes. Roads are sometimes impassable in the rainy season. Women have traditionally been marginalized in this society, with very few completing secondary school. Now circumstances, including the loss of many young men in the war, have thrust them into the role of major players. Women are heads of households and we have many many one-parent families.

As church it is our responsibility to support education and other programmes for women and to keep their needs in mind in our all institutions.

Children missed out on school. Now they are adults.

We need lay and religious development workers

These are some of the difficulties we face – schools, clinics, hospitals, libraries – destroyed and personnel scattered and perhaps dead. Doctors we don't have, nurses we are training. It is going to take some time to train the personnel needed to ensure that the social structures function effectively. We need both lay and religious development workers. We need skilled volunteers. We need partnerships. The town of Bo had a link with Lemington Spa. This has been very useful in helping to develop schools and libraries in Bo. These things help support the community.

We have had visits from people from a number of different countries who want to help and work with us to find a way forward. People who do Development Studies at college can come here and see how their theory fits into a real situation. There is no point in knowledge for knowledge sake.

Bishop John O'Riordan CSSp had profound influence

I grew up in a Muslim family in a predominantly Muslim village. The only school in the area was a Catholic school, so that was where I was sent. The teachers impressed 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. My parents didn't oppose me. People tend to support what their children want to do. There is tolerance. Parents say "as long as you are not a non-believer."

Also we realise that people can be saved through the prayers of others regardless of their faith. There is openness to the possibility of religious salvation not coming through one religion. I studied in Nigeria and was ordained by Archbishop Thomas Brosnahan CSSp who was Archbishop of Freetown and Bo. Our archbishop now is Archbishop Ganda. My predecessor in this diocese of Kenema was another Irish Spiritan, Bishop John O'Riordan. Before that he was my parish priest. He had a profound influence on my vocation.

Facing challenges we will grow

It is slow but there is progress. People have not despaired. The whole of life is a challenge. You must be willing to face the challenges that come along this road. There are many people who will support you along the way. It is in facing these challenges we grow both spiritually and socially.