



GATHER THE FRAGMENTS BIBLE MISSION

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Sierra Leone, West Africa

FIELD REPORT: APRIL 2017

Dear Praying Family and Friends

Well, I assure you, we didn't fall off the back end of the earth though Laura and I sometimes joke that it feels like we did. We're all so accustomed to the ready access of Internet that when it goes away it feels like being back in the Stone Age. Just days after sending out our last Field Report, and with no warning to us, the British mining company in town closed down their satellite service and negotiations began for the company to be sold. This is the third sale of the company in our seven years of living in Baomahun and now, six months later, there is still no activity at the mining compound. At this time it's unclear as to when the new company will be operational and whether or not we will once again be allowed to enjoy convenient Internet access. Complicating our communications is the fuel price increase mentioned in our October 2016 Field Report. That did indeed take effect and the price of fuel doubled over night raising it to over \$3.50 US per gallon. That doesn't sound terribly high but for these people it is and as you can imagine, the consequences are far reaching. The few Internet cafes in Bo aren't as reliable as they used to be (which even then was tentative) because now they will only run their generators when a certain number of patrons are gathered. My time in Bo is extremely full and busy and I don't have time to hang around and wait for them to fire things up - or *not*; one can sit there and wait for two hours only to be disappointed. But due to a cancellation on our circuit, Laura and I have planned a long weekend in Freetown and will dispatch this report from the hotel. They're really modern, they have WiFi - most of the time!

Because so much has happened since our last report we've decided to break the dry season report into two parts. In this first part we'll deal with local events and part two will cover our circuit travels. I can't at this time promise when the second half will go out but we'll try for some time in June when most of our circuit will have concluded.

DRY SEASON RETROSPECTIVE PART 1

THE BIBLE MISSION CHURCH: A major highlight of this dry season was the ordination service for Brother Alfred Menjor. I had no intentions of "assigning" a man to the pastorate of our little church but rather, through prayer, have given time and space for the Lord to make his selection obvious to me and the members of the church. An Institute graduate, Alfred has naturally fit into the role of pastor. He has the full support of other graduates as well as the leading men and the membership at large. In recent months we've seen The Bible Mission Church become completely indigenous as they've taken over everything from handling finances to making sure we have supplies for the Lord's Supper; from organizing funerals to teaching the children's church. This is truly their church and the ordination service was simply a formality confirming what the Lord was already doing.

To make a more formal service, I had invited three area pastors and one other missionary to present brief messages regarding the duties of the pastor and the church body. Unfortunately one pastor and the missionary, Elmer Reifel, mentioned in our June 2016 report, had to cancel but even this was under the clear direction of the Lord. The two remaining pastors provided an interesting perspective as one, Pastor John Salaam of Pujehun, was the oldest, most seasoned and the other, Pastor Alucious of Emanuel Star in Kenema, was the youngest having himself been ordained only a few months previously. Their messages were outstanding. To accommodate the expected attendance of church members as well as invited guests, we rented a small hall in town which served us well. The children were well ordered, the music was a blessing and, of course, we followed it all with food and fellowship.

Interestingly, the ordination service took place on the exact five-year anniversary of the church, January 15, 2017. In those five years we've seen the church go from a membership of about eight to a now overflowing building. We regularly have first-time visitors and children's church is also growing under the capable direction of our son, John. We are now embarking on a building project. As mentioned in an update, the Mission was offered and has purchased a great piece of property at the entering of the town. Church members have begun the arduous task of manually forming the cement blocks (one at a time!) and we anticipate breaking ground in the 2018-2019 dry season.

LOCAL EVANGELISM: Mongeri is a larger town just 10 miles to our south. We must pass through this chiefdom seat every time we go anywhere yet somehow it remained completely neglected in terms of evangelism. On Friday, November 4 that changed and we made our first excursion there. The town seemed quite unsettled and we couldn't get any real traction with conversations. Later we saw the town witchdoctor sporting his devil suit and dancing through town; that might have something to do with the distractive atmosphere! Laura reported similar circumstances at home stating that her prayer time was like slogging through mud. There's nothing for the soldier of Christ to do with that but charge ahead and take the ground. The next Friday we returned to Mongeri and this time we hit the jock-pot: Chief James Flee, the town chief, whose conversion story has become one of my favorite accounts of God dealing directly with a lost soul. There's no way to give you the full and amazing account. After much conversation, drawing on his own experience as chief for 44 years, I asked what appeared to be a cultural question, "What is the procedure if a man is seeking your forgiveness as chief?" "He would have to pay the fine for the offense and then it could be forgiven." "But what if he doesn't have the money?" "He would have to find a way; he must make payment." "Can he beg you? Will you just forget it and allow him to go without payment?" "No! Of course not!" came the quick stern answer. Ah, just what I wanted him to say! Chief Flee, a Muslim, has believed his whole life that all one needs to do is pray and beg Allah to forget his sins; there need be no payment only begging by prayer. I looked him directly in the eye and asked, "You mean to tell me that you, mortal man, would refuse to do for another man, a Mende brother, what you expect the eternal, righteous, and holy God to do for you, a sinner?" With that question Chief James Flee fell silent. I could tell it stung his heart and he was thinking. This was a good point to leave him with his thoughts and we parted on friendly terms. Two weeks later our evangelism team returned to Mongeri and met again with Chief Flee but this time it was *Brother* Flee. Over the two weeks he'd thought much about that statement and had seen his need for the substitutionary payment made by the Sinless Savior; he had seen the need for Jesus Christ to be his Advocate. "Now I understand the cost of forgiveness," was his quiet statement. We had used the wordless evangelism book showing Jesus Christ as our Advocate with the Father. He went on to explain, "If a stranger comes directly to me, he has no voice. That person would need a mediator, someone who knows me as chief and he would be that man's voice to me. I understand now because I could *see* it [in the booklet pictures]. Yes, now I understand the cost of forgiveness." He confessed these things to us with no prompting whatsoever. All was in Mende through Moses, my dependable interpreter and right-hand man.

Three short weeks later, on December 20, Chief James Flee was buried. His death remains shrouded in mystery, speculation, and silence. When these elements mix we know a death is the result of witchcraft. At the time of Brother Flee's salvation there was a very tense political situation and he was under severe pressure to change his vote. For months prior to the vote, open witchcraft was being worked by both sides. Two days before the election the chief fell seriously ill and had to be carried to the place of voting. Being a man of integrity he remained steadfast to his word and refused to capitulate. This cost him his life but thankfully not his soul. At the chief's burial, Moses was able to give Brother Flee's conversion testimony and present the Gospel to the large assembly which included many high ranking men, mostly Muslim. We continue to marvel at this incredible story. Be sure to meet Chief Flee on our photo pages.

ANOTHER HOME-GOING: In our June 2016 Field Report we gave you the story of another gathered soul, Mr. Robert Combi. Over the months we've continued to visit Mr. Combi and encourage him in his loneliness. We had also been trying to help him nutritionally by sending enriched canned milk as it had become very difficult for him to eat. In his old age and failing health he remained abandoned by his Muslim "brothers" who saw no advantage to themselves in caring for an old soul. On Friday, February 3 Moses and I paid our last visit to our dear friend. Sunday the 5th we had just concluded the Lord's Supper when word came to us at church that Brother Robert Combi had gone to his final rest and we were being asked by the family to do the burial. "You people were the ones caring for him and we want you to bury him." Moses and I left church and went to assist the family. At the burial there was a large contingent of leading Muslims. "We have heard of Robert's conversion and we understand you people have been asked to do the burial. We only ask, that since he was a Muslim most of his life, that we be allowed to conduct the burial rites he would have received." The family agreed to this. We've seen this too many times. An elderly person who is shamefully neglected in their senior years, oftentimes even by family, is then piously honored at their death. But we rejoice in the gathering of Muslim men who came to "pay respects" as they all got to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

SPECIAL VISITS: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:35) This statement by our Lord is certainly true and we're seeing it fulfilled as word has spread throughout town that our church is different. "They care for each other," is the common remark. We're often asked to conduct funerals for non-Muslims who are not attending any local church. Additionally, we pay visits to neglected elderly members of the Community Church. Mrs. Kahnassi is mother to Section Chief Mohamed Kahnassi who is a good friend of mine but is Muslim. At his request Moses and I have been regularly visiting his very aged mother (who after Robert Combi is the second oldest person in Baomahun). Our testimony of making visits prompted him to ask us to visit with her, pray with her and be a Christian encouragement in her last days. She has been a member of the Community Church for many years but now is completely neglected by them. Her children are attentive to her needs but have all become Muslim. Our visits with their mother have opened the door for the Gospel.

Another neglected member of the Community church is Umu. She's become very embittered as she is forgotten not only by her church but also by her children. She's now mainly cared for by one of our church members who lives next door to her. When Moses and I visit we help her out of bed so she can sit outside in the fresh air. We let her talk and cry and we try to be an encouragement to her. These dear ladies are featured on one of our photo pages. Our church has a reputation for caring and it's speaking volumes in this harsh and cruel, predominantly Muslim culture.

Aminata is a new member to our church. Shortly after she began attending she delivered the over-sized load she had been carrying for nine months: **Triplets!** A girl, Asahnatu, was followed by two brothers, Asahn and Aluson. Laura enjoyed several visits with the family and we had begun to assist them by providing infant formula and bottles for use at night. Poor Aminata would be nursing two of the babies while Papa tried to console the squealing third who was waiting his turn. And of course the one to eat last didn't get much. The formula helped them all to get some much needed sleep.

What I'm going to report I'll say cautiously with the understanding that in the West we have different experiences in spiritual matters. Here, the veil separating the spiritual from the physical isn't as distinct and the spiritual oppression we encounter is truly a darkness which can be felt. Six weeks after the birth of the triplets Aminata and the babies were in church when she hastily left, a look of fear on her face. Just one hour later the two oldest babies were dead. Our town medical officer could not determine how these two otherwise healthy babies had died; there was no discernible cause. Our quiet questioning has only brought firm silence. This tells us that, at some level, witchcraft was involved. It's not uncommon for one family to work revenge on another family and attacking the children sends a clear message. Is this what happened? I can't say and will likely never know. But as stated in the report of Chief Flee, deaths worked by "witching", though unfamiliar to Westerners, are becoming much too commonplace for us. I say all of this to ask you to pray for the intensifying darkness. With the economy continuing to spiral out of control, this type of activity is becoming much more common as each tries by any means to get a leg up on the other. The father of the triplets is a successful local gold miner (not affiliated with the British mining company). These miners are constantly jockeying for position and the best mining locations. In so doing, they regularly resort to witchcraft. Pray also for Aminata in her loss as Pastor Menjor tries to be a help to the family.

EVANGELISM BLITZ: In all of this activity and busyness we were able to slip in one three-day evangelism blitz before Alfred's ordination. This was conducted in Deep Eye Water, a suburb of Freetown. Yes, that's the name of the borough we were in! I have no idea where they got the name but we sure had us a time. Our seasoned team worked well with the church members who were raw recruits to street work. But this is what we do - train, encourage, and equip churches in effective evangelism, door-to-door visitation, and the thrill of public ministry. This effort is highlighted on one of our photo pages which will tell the whole story in pictures and serve as a bit of a "teaser" for Part Two of our Dry Season Retrospective where we'll focus exclusively on our circuit travels which have been greatly expanded this year.

Until then, this is the King and Queen of the jungle, alive and well and still having fun!

Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt

Post Script: Just as we were "going to press", so to speak, we got the news that Mrs. Kahnassi passed quietly to her home in Glory. Unfortunately I was out of town on other business and could not assist with the funeral. Pastor Menjor and Michael Sillah, along with one man from the Community Church conducted the service and hymn singing to honor this dear old saint. Though brief, my friendship with her was quite meaningful to me. Please pray for continued openings with her Muslim family.

SCROLL DOWN TO SEE PHOTO PAGES BELOW

ORDINATION!



As an Institute student preaching the first meeting at The Bible Mission Church January 15, 2012; graduation June 2014; and on through his ordination (L), Pastor Menjor has consistently displayed faithfulness and care for his flock.



(R) Guest pastors, in center, were called first to lay hands on Alfred followed by the men of the church (L)

Below: We had over 40 invited guests in addition to the church family and of course there was a celebration with food!

Moses Menjor (L), Alfred's brother served as my interpreter



Fruit to Your Account

Our last visit with Mr. Combi just two days before his death.

Below: Transporting Brother Combi's empty earthen vessel to the burial site.

A large group assembled to pay respect to the oldest resident in Baomahun - they are primarily Muslim and all heard the Gospel.



These two old souls say

"Thank you for giving to the Lord."



In Mongeri with the town witchdoctor in his devil suit and Michael boldly advertising the remedy on his shirt!

Below: Don't mistake the look on Chief Flee's face to be disinterest. He sat quietly for a long time considering all we talked about. He's pictured with his wife and grand daughter.



(R) Two weeks later - A new name written down in Glory! Lauretta and Moses helped gather this precious fragment. Please note the obvious softening of Brother Flee's countenance.



Special Visits

(R) Our final visit with Mrs. Kahnassi. She was able to speak though very faintly.

Far Right: A very discouraged and heart broken Umu.



The Triplets. Mother on right, Grandmother on left, Grammi Laura holding the youngest, Aluson, the survivor



A difficult task for Pastor Menjor

(R) Aluson the morning after his brother and sister died.



Explaining the infant formula with Alfred's language assistance.

EVANGELISM BLITZ - DEEP EYE WATER



The team loaded with materials and ready to hit the streets



In the shade of a mango tree, at the busy open market, or in the bustling “ocada park” where people wait for motorcycle taxis, street work is about meeting people where they are at and giving them the Gospel.

We had several veteran street evangelists along with new recruits for this effective urban blitz.

