

Special Update Edition September 2014

Dear Praying Family and Friends

Laura reporting. Earlier this month an update was sent out via e-mail regarding my return to the States along with Aimee Tanselle. Since that update there have been questions regarding the reasons for Stephen's decision to stay in Sierra Leone as well as questions concerning the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) status and how it's effecting the mission work. In this Field Report I will attempt to answer your questions. Where possible I'll use Stephen's own words taken from the e-mails I've received since my return to the States on September 1.

Why did Stephen stay in Sierra Leone? The reason for Stephen staying in Sierra Leone is multi-faceted. While it's true that if we were to leave together we would not likely have much left upon return, this was *emphatically not* part of the decision. We don't own anything; it's all God's and "stuff" can be replaced. Our main concern was the welfare of our three adopted boys, young men really (ages 20-22). These are traditional adoptions not legal but we do have a responsibility to them. Due to the current social instability and uncertainty we could not in good conscience leave them in charge of the mission station to fend for themselves. They would be targeted and could even suffer physical harm by people wanting to loot the station. This was our Number One consideration.

Secondly is our sense of responsibility to our church family. We are just beginning to see the fruit of five years' hard labor. Without Stephen's oversight this would crumble. There is truly much growth particularly in the area of husband/wife relationships. Stephen has been swamped with requests for home visits and family counseling in the one week since my departure. Church attendance is up and the "present distress" is having a profound spiritual effect in our church and town, and prayerfully the country. But the fruit is young and fragile; it needs tending and Stephen is committed to nurturing that fruit.

Lastly is our commitment to the people of Sierra Leone. Here, Stephen's words will tell it best. "I am thrilled the Lord has allowed me to stay here. The Lord blessed me as I made my trip back from Freetown [after leaving the girls for their flight to the States]. Brother David Johnny, was traveling back to Baomahun with me and as we passed through a village a man called to him. I stopped the truck and as the man approached the truck his face expressed confusion and doubt. He asked me if I was leaving? I said, 'Yes, I'm going home.' Visibly upset, he cried out, 'Why?' I told him I'm going to Baomahun, I live there. He said, 'Oh? You stay with us! That gives us great reason for encouragement, thank you, thank you.' He then proceeded to talk to David in Mende and then disappeared back into the village. Brother David explained to me later that he is the brother-in-law to the Paramount Chief and he was going to tell others to be encouraged because not all the whites have left us; that white missionary from Baomahun *is with US.*"

We live in a very rural area. The people are mostly illiterate. They prefer traditional healers to the medical personnel who can help them. They are frightened and confused. Because Stephen is so widely known and accepted in the area he can be a great help and encouragement to people who shun strangers and outsiders. We're grateful for the opportunity to be a help to these needy people.

How is EVD effecting the GTF ministries? The first, and most obvious effect is that all of our planned evangelism and circuit training events for this coming dry season must be placed on hold due to travel restrictions, curfews, quarantines of whole areas and restrictions on group gatherings. Kenema, one of our main urban ministries, is completely quarantined from the rest of the country with only medical personnel and aide trucks being allowed in. This quarantine is enforced by armed military personnel. Please pray for our partnering church, Emmanuel Star Baptist, as we have not been able to contact them for several weeks and don't know if they've suffered any losses. Kenema is the hardest hit area in the country and we cannot assist the church in any manner. This weighs heavily on our hearts.

Also affected by the virus is Gema and its cluster of smaller villages. You may recall this remote village from Field Reports earlier this year. Stephen and Aimee along with Bible institute students ministered in this area to great effect adding it as a regular stop on the Dry Season Evangelism circuit. Gema is about 1 ½ hours from us by time but the distance is not all that far. Again we'll hear it in Stephen's words from an email he wrote to one of our supporting churches.

“We are very fortunate; to date our town has been Ebola clean. However, I just learned that on September 2nd the Chief Health Officer (CHO) and his wife in Gema died from Ebola. [To our knowledge] this is the first time the virus has entered our area. Gema and its surrounding villages were fruitful areas during this past dry season evangelism sortie.

The still unanswered question is, who and where are the infected patients they were treating? You can see how easily this virus can spread. All it takes is for someone who had contact with the CHO or his wife or one of his patients to board the transport truck with its 50+ passengers and travel to the city of Bo. In Bo one would at least have access to the government hospital. Consider however, the person treated by the infected CHO for a non-Ebola issue who then walks back to his village deeper in the bush and 3 weeks later dies of Ebola and is buried traditionally. These are the cases where it's impossible to trace the contacts even if the health system does eventually learn of the deaths.”

With the death of the CHO and his wife, this area now has no trained medical workers to service the many small villages. Their only option will be the traditional healers – witchdoctors who can do them no good at all.

The second effect is good and was largely outlined above. People being people, the present distress is having a profound spiritual effect as people are forced to face the uncertainties of life in a very real way. The absence of the circuit work is more than made up for in dedication to home visits, counseling, town evangelism, and, beginning next month, a new wave of students eager to study at GFT Bible Institute. All summer, as the EVD issue intensified we've been seeing this fruit budding and pushing forth. It's now in full bloom and waiting to ripen. It's an exciting time for our little church. Stephen now has institute graduates who are continuing their on-the-job training by accompanying him to counseling sessions and home visits; a facet of ministry usually ignored by churches in Sierra Leone. Our men are learning to care for the flock and minister in love to their fellow townspeople. People are seeing a difference. Stephen described another encounter as he drove home from Freetown last week.

“Further along on our trip back home, as we passed the Gema junction, David told me that after our second trip to the villages in the area of Foya, Talia, and Mono that the Islamic council held a joint meeting and the feedback is that we left a good impression on the villages. One of the members of the council addressing the larger group said, 'Do you see how united those Christians are? A missionary came and spoke to them and now they have come and spoken to us. What have we done? All our

council does is collect money from us to pay the imam [Muslim “pastor”] to pray with us. We have failed. They did not ask us for money but gave their time and books and papers. Great shame.' They are seeing that we care.”

What are your future plans? Right now that question cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. When I left Sierra Leone, Stephen told me to plan on being gone a year based on WHO and CDC estimates of how long it will take to bring things under control. While it's difficult to be separated, I do accept it as the best course given the circumstances. Stephen can operate with more freedom if he doesn't have to worry about me. He does have an exit plan and should the need arise for him to leave, he can move more quickly alone. I support his choice to stay and am doing all I can Stateside to assist him. A large part of my job is that of communication which was my job before leaving Sierra Leone. I still scour the news, then edit and compile it into emails to help him stay informed. And keeping in good communication with you, our co-laborers, is also an important aspect of my function. I will be sending updates as the situation warrants though the more formal Field Reports may not be as regular. Please feel free to email if you have any questions; we always enjoy hearing from you, our partners.

We're so grateful for your care and concern and especially your prayers. We've seen God mightily answer those prayers and are confident that He will continue to do so. On behalf of Stephen, Aimee and myself and all who benefit from your faithful support of Gather The Fragments Bible Mission, we say “Thank You.”

Addendum: Since the writing of this letter I have had communications with Stephen via email and one brief phone call. He's been in contact with the pastor of Emmanuel Star Baptist Church in Kenema. They are well but struggling due to food shortages and rapidly increasing prices. From Stateside we have wired them some money to assist the church family with food needs. Please pray for this situation as the widening ripple effects of the Ebola tsunami affect every aspect of life in this poverty stricken nation.