



Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt

Sierra Leone, West Africa

AUGUST 2017 UPDATE

Dear Praying Family and Friends

I have had so many encouraging cards, emails, and text messages for which I'm very grateful; Stephen and I appreciate your care and concern not only for my health status but also for his wellbeing during another time of calamity for our beloved Sierra Leone. I've somewhat delayed writing an update regarding my health because I wanted to have sufficient information and test results to report.

When I first returned to the States I was able to quickly get into the pain management clinic to be evaluated. I have had my medications adjusted a bit which has truly helped. During that first visit, however, it was discovered that my blood pressure was dangerously high and I was to immediately report to my general care physician who prescribed a low dose of medication to bring that under control until the cause could be determined. While the medication is working in a general sense it's remained difficult to moderate the blood pressure when engaged in normal activities such as grocery shopping and even attending church where the overstimulation causes it to spike again. The alarming thing about this is that I have always had a very steady normal-range BP even when at a doctor's office. Before returning to Sierra Leone in May of 2016, I was examined and the BP was fine as always so somewhere during that last year in Sierra Leone something has happened to cause this curious and potentially serious condition. Stephen likes to say he's the cause of my high blood pressure!

On a good note is the final analysis of the infectious disease specialist who, after taking *14 jumbo-size vials of blood*, has cleared me from anything tropical in nature including the chronic strain of malaria. Because my malaria test in Sierra Leone only indicated positive for the presence of the parasite, we'll never know if it was cerebral malaria (which is not chronic) though the symptoms could concur that it was.

Everything now really rests with the neurologist as we suspected would be the case. Our main concern was in regard to my previous surgery for decompression of my brain stem and upper spinal cord for the condition known as Chiari Malformation Type II. Through MRI imaging I've been cleared of tumor and stroke but also was informed that my surgical site looks very good. I'll be continuing with some further testing to determine the cause of the increased blood pressure (controlled in the brain stem), severely increased pressure in my head and spine (much improved since being on the blood pressure medicine as blood pressure links with flow of spinal fluid), and markedly increased pain (from added pressure on the damaged nerves). How fearfully and wonderfully our bodies are made!

Because my blood pressure continues to be difficult to maintain and becomes problematic with exertion and over stimulation, I'm typically not attending church except when well enough for the mid-week service. I'm ever so grateful for the live-stream broadcasts and the work of those at church who make that possible. On occasion I'm able to work on art projects when my head and neck are agreeable and I'm trying to work on some writing projects though that remains slow as well. I'm doing a lot of resting, reading, praying, and learning about contentment in whatsoever state. Good lessons in the school of life.

When I left Sierra Leone in June, Stephen and I had the thought that a few months of rest and good nourishing food along with the healthful tonic of time with family would be sufficient for my recovery as it has in the past. But we didn't realize just how ill and worn down I had become and we now see it's going to take more time than we thought. We'll continue to keep you updated as things develop.

MEANWHILE IN SIERRA LEONE: Many have asked for Stephen's welfare in regard to the severe flooding and mammoth mudslides in and around the Freetown area. We are well inland of that so for us specifically it's not been a problem. However, we are very saddened by the news that Michael Sillah, Stephen's second right hand man who comes from a large family, has confirmed 17 deaths of family members and three remain unaccounted for, likely also dead. Michael is *the only Christian* in his family; everyone who perished was Muslim. Stephen is doing all he can to be a help in this terrible time of grief for Michael and his remaining family, many of whom live in our town and another nearby town. Michael is an excellent witness to Muslims displaying the tender and gracious love of Christ. He's frequently witnessed to his family but they have remained staunch in their beliefs so as to not dishonor their ancestors. Please pray for him and his remaining family. Michael's birth name is Mohamed. When Stephen baptized him in March, 2014, Michael gave a stirring public testimony stating, "Mohamed was buried in Christ!" That day he took the name Michael as an outward symbol of his new life in Christ. He is a treasure in what we call our growing "Former Muslim Band."

LOOKING AHEAD: We're excited to announce to you that we're in full swing with our church building project. As you may recall we were able to purchase a prime location at the entering of the town on which to build a church. Men, women, and even children of The Bible Mission Church have been working very hard to make this a reality. They have hauled sand out of the river to make the concrete blocks — one pail load at a time! They have made nearly 4000 blocks — one by one! Our ladies and children haul water to mix concrete, prepare meals, run errands, and do what ever else might be needed. We've got a great esprit de corps among the workers with Pastor Alfred Menjor as involved as the other men and keeping the work parties well organized. We have a contractor working out an estimate and should have some numbers from him within a few weeks. We also have a surveyor/designer working on drawing the plans; very rough plans to be sure and nothing like the blueprints to which we are accustomed. There will be no wiring or plumbing in the building making the construction much more simple and keeping the costs at a minimum. All of our "plumbing" will be outdoors at the latrine which will also be built on the property. We had initially thought of building in another year but Stephen's assessment of current events leads him to believe this dry season will be wiser. With the presidential election slated for March, 2018, he's hearing low rumblings of social and political discontent which is not unusual during West African elections. But with the continued post-Ebola collapse of the economy, high unemployment, and the accusations of political corruption which aided in the death of nearly 1000 citizens in the recent mudslides it's just wise to have this project behind us before the election. Indeed, at the time of this writing, the news is saying that the "grief of people in Freetown is turning to anger toward politicians who have turned a blind eye to corrupt building practices and deforestation" both of which are *the major cause* of the mountainous mudslides.

Another factor in this decision is my health. While we're encouraged with recent test results, we do still have a lot of unanswered questions and it will be easier for Stephen to return to the States, should it be necessary, with this project off his mind. As things stand right now, I'm able to maintain a "holding pattern" as such until we have all the necessary testing complete. From there we'll be able to make decisions regarding how best to move forward.

Be sure to scroll down as we have a few photos to share with you. We appreciate each one of you, our prayer partners and faithful supporters of the work in Sierra Leone. Thank you for allowing us to be your voice in this dark and needy country.

Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt

State-side Recovery Time



What could be better than grand children to nurse and entertain their Grammi! Caleb has become quite the young gentleman and takes good care of me.



Michael with his wife, Beatrice, and daughter, Little Laura, the day before my June departure
Michael at his March 2014 baptism coming up in newness of life

Building Project



One pail at a time, the sand comes up from the bottom of the river and is piled riverside to drain several weeks before being loaded by shovels and strong backs into a "tipper" which delivers it to the site.



Work crew size varies on availability; the day the camera man (Stephen) took pictures, the crew was small. The delivered sand is mixed by hand with cement and water then packed into the block forms. To date we have nearly 4000 blocks prepared! The building pictured is the GTF classroom which currently serves as the church but is quickly being out grown.