



Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt

Sierra Leone, West Africa

FIELD REPORT: JANUARY 2023

Greetings to our Family and Friends!

Another year gone! We pray that 2023 will bring many advancements in the Lord's work on both sides of the Atlantic. This Field Report will primarily focus on Laura's and my health issues which were certainly the dominant feature of 2022. Laura's situation is somewhat complex so we are providing a fairly detailed section on her health. Thank you to each one of you for your prayers as we navigated through all that has transpired this year in regard to our feeble physical frames of dust. Thankfully it is time to move on from that!

GOOD NEWS: My health has recovered quite well, and we are thrilled to inform you that we are finally planning for my return to Sierra Leone! Our plan is for a departure the first week of February, and we are preparing for me to be in country for a minimum of one year. This last 18 months of being Stateside due to my unexpected health issues has really been a challenge for us, but at every juncture we can both say that we have seen the Lord's clear directing of our way. We are truly grateful for your patience with the repeated delays in my return to the field. We also appreciate your understanding with regard to our not being available for any church visits. My next return to the States we will be making visits to our supporting churches; something which we both eagerly anticipate.

You will recall that my initial return in July of 2021 was to assist Laura with some medical appointments, anticipating an uneventful November return to Sierra Leone. That tidy plan went downhill quickly, starting with the need for injections in my back for sciatica. This was rapidly followed by an unplanned full knee replacement. In preparation for knee surgery, routine bloodwork revealed alarming numbers for aggressive prostate cancer which was treated with nine weeks of daily radiation along with three months of hormone therapy. That brought us to the summer of 2022 when I was able to spend two months back in Sierra Leone.

LAURA'S HEALTH: Scattered throughout my own medical concerns has been appointments for Laura's worsening and as yet unresolved health issues. Her initial appointments which brought me Stateside were for specialized physical therapy. It was hoped that an exercise program tailored specifically for her would aid in the management of her Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS). We spent a week in Boca Raton, Florida with a therapist who, herself having EDS, has developed a course of exercises specific to the fragilities of connective tissue disorders such as EDS. We learned a lot, were greatly encouraged, and went home with a routine which Laura started immediately, keeping in touch with Dr. Perretto through tele-health video calls. However, after several weeks and some adjustments to the routine, it was clear that she could not tolerate the exercises which greatly exacerbated her pain. The therapist instructed Laura to discontinue the exercises, and make an appointment with a neurologist, preferably a movement specialist. It was at this point that we learned of my cancer so the pursuit of another new doctor for Laura was put on hold.

Fast forward to November, 2022 when Laura was initially screened by a general neurologist in a neuro group about an hour away in Orlando. She was then referred to the movement specialist who did not think that his expertise was a good fit for Laura's symptoms. From there we were referred to the neuromuscular specialist also in the same group. Dr. Jerath has already been a huge answer to many prayers, including yours. She was incredible, giving us 90 productive minutes, getting to know Laura, not just as a patient, but as a person. She explained things very well and answered our many questions. Our

daughter was also able to go with us which was a big asset as she and I added helpful information when Laura had difficulty describing her symptoms.

The first two neurologists were considering that Laura could have a severe condition called Stiff Person Syndrome (SPS), a very rare autoimmune disease effecting the brain and spinal cord. This is why we were sent to this third doctor as she is already treating a couple of patients with this condition. Though Laura does present quite similarly to SPS, Dr. Jerath is not fully convinced that this is the correct diagnosis. Unfortunately, she's not entirely certain what the problem is, nor how to treat it, stating that it could indeed turn out to be Stiff Person Syndrome, which is notoriously difficult to diagnose. Laura will be having some more bloodwork, along with two specialized nerve conduction tests. This will help the doctor to better understand what is happening with Laura's nerves to cause such radical symptoms. Fortunately Laura was already tested in December 2019 for seizures, which she is not having, otherwise Dr. Jerath would have included this in her testing.

The doctor stated that Laura's is a very complex case. Our videos of her severe cramping and spasm episodes were very crucial in giving her understanding. She was amazed at how protracted and violent these episodes are, and she will start by treating Laura similarly to SPS. At this point the doctor believes that Laura's many bouts with tropical fevers, most particularly the cerebral malaria and Dengue fever, have triggered an autoimmune response which has effected her already fragile neurological system.

LOOKING AHEAD: On January 10, I will be having carpal tunnel surgery on my left hand, having had the right hand done in December. This is a very minor surgery, the prep taking longer than the surgery itself. My orthopedic doctor hopes this will reduce the numbness and weakness which I have been experiencing. There is no formal rehab for this surgery so I will be good to go at just one week post-op. Later in the month I will be having my urology check-up and cancer screening. My last Stateside event will be our home church's annual Bible Conference. It will be a blessing to be in attendance, and to have the opportunity to fellowship with the pastors from several of our supporting churches.

Laura has already started on the first of the medications which Dr. Jerath is planning to use in stabilizing her symptoms. She is seeing some minimal improvement which is certainly a huge encouragement, but she really needs to have more improvement. Please pray that Laura could see enough amelioration of symptoms to pursue her greatest heart's desire of using her artistic gifts in support of the evangelism ministry in Sierra Leone, Illustrated Evangelism. It is in this way that she remains closely connected with the work of Gather The Fragments Bible Mission. Having Laura stay connected with the work in Sierra Leone through her artwork will be a tremendous spiritual encouragement for both of us as we face another protracted separation.

A FINAL NOTE: In December we received some photos along with the exciting news that Laura's evangelism booklet, The Advocate, is now being used by missionaries in Zimbabwe, southeast Africa (below). This was such a boost for her, as the list of countries effected by her artwork continues to grow!

Lord willing, our next report will be from the field! We expect to give you an update on the building project as well as our new courses at GTF Bible Institute along with plenty of photos from The Bible Mission Church and in town evangelism. We have a lot planned and are eager to share it all with you. Thank you for your continued faithfulness to support GFT Bible Mission through your prayers and sacrificial giving. Thank you for allowing us to be your voice in Sierra Leone.



Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt