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Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt
Sierra Leone, West Africa

FIELD REPORT: JUNE 2023

Greetings to our Family and Friends!

We are finally ready! Laura has purchased my tickets, I've begun packing my baggage, my doctors have given me their blessing, all is good to go! I depart for Sierra Leone on July 7, 2023, arriving on the 8th. Needless to say, I'm very eager to be under way. And though it may sound odd, Laura is also eager for me to be heading back as it means progress on the work we began together back in March, 2009. More later regarding my departure date.

UPDATE ON THE MUSTARD FAMILY: During the time that the Mustards have been in Sierra Leone, the entire family, but predominately the children, has experienced constant bouts of malaria. This is very dangerous for their longterm health, especially for the kids as the cumulative effect of repeated bouts of malaria has devastating effects on the liver. After much prayer and counsel from their pastor, myself, and others, the Mustard family has made the difficult decision to move their field of ministry to Zimbabwe, located in southern Africa. Due to significant climate differences, malaria is not a major threat in this area. They will be serving with established missionaries, the Lee Cadenhead family and the Cody Rich family, both of whom are sent from Cornerstone Baptist Church, in Carthage, TN, which is also Bro. Mustard's sending church. Both Laura and I have given them our full support in this very wrenching decision, with Laura being of particular encouragement to Rebekah. None of them wanted to leave Sierra Leone, but for the longterm health of their children, it was imperative. This move will give them the longevity in ministry they desire to have. As of this writing, they have already landed in Zimbabwe and are getting settled. We ask that you pray for them during this time of transition.

You may recall Neil Schilling, a young man who served with GTF for three months during the summer of 2021. He returned to Sierra Leone in November 2022, assisting the Mustard family in the Bo area and other ministries. But most excitingly, Bro. Mustard and Bro. Schilling led an evangelism team of six to Kabala in the far north of the country. This is the farthest north that the GTF Dry Season Circuit has been, penetrating deeply into the Muslim stronghold. Neil has rented a house in Kabala and continues to make forays into the north. This major advance for our circuit ministry has been very well received by locals, and I look forward to making some trips north with Bro. Schilling. With the departure of the Mustards, Neil is maintaining the Bo area ministries, some of which he assisted in implementing. Please keep Neil in your prayers as he seeks the Lord's will for his future service. He will be in country until November.

CHURCH BUILDING PROJECT: On June 1, I received word that the truck delivering 1,300 of the 8,500 blocks already made for our church building project had broken down. The rear axel had actually snapped in two, stranding the truck just 10 miles out from Baomahun! What followed was a fiasco of trying to get another truck to finish the job. We thought we had secured one such truck and driver, but on the scheduled day, he was nowhere to be found. Try again. Finally, after more days of negotiating, we secured an alternate truck. Unfortunately it was smaller than the original vehicle, and would require as many as five runs to finish the job. They began transferring block to the new truck, and made one run before the tide unexpectedly turned in our favor (suspenseful music in the background). One week after it broke down, the original truck was ingloriously towed, blocks and all, into Baomahun, thus completing its ill-fated

delivery. This driver wanted his full pay! Welcome to ministry life in West Africa! I assure you, not all stories end so well. And we still need an additional 2500 blocks to be made. I'll let you know how that goes!

All of this is difficult enough to coordinate while in country. Being Stateside has greatly raised the bar of difficulty to achieve these tasks. Thankfully it's moving ahead as smoothly as can be expected.

I will be getting back into Sierra Leone as the rains move into their peak months. But this is actually a good thing as it will afford me time for things such as amassing other building supplies, making connections for workers, arranging for cooks and food for the feeding of our workers, and many other logistical matters impossible to handle from Stateside. Training our workers in how to use these particular blocks is another major rainy season undertaking. These are not the conventional mud or cement blocks familiar to our men. These are an innovative interlocking block method developed in South Africa, called Hydro-Form (for any nerds out there who may wish to look it up). The beauty of this system is that it greatly reduces the amount of cement used, thereby reducing the overall construction costs. First, there is significantly less cement used in making the blocks, and second, there is no mortar used between the blocks due to the way they lock together. This is a great blessing to our budget as the cost of cement rises.

GOOD NEWS FROM A FAR COUNTRY: Several months ago I received a call from fellow Sierra Leone missionary, Jon LaBelle. He had been contacted by a brother in Christ from the Philippines. This man, John Congson, expressed to Bro. LaBelle that he had surrendered to work with an established missionary in Sierra Leone and was hopeful that Bro. Jon could help him. Brother LaBelle directed this man to me and told me to expect a call from him. A few days later Bro. Congson did indeed call, and I have had many long talks with him as well as his pastor since that initial contact. Bro. Congson has begun his deputation ministry and will be arriving in Sierra Leone in September for a month long survey trip. If all goes well, he and his family will arrive for service once they raise their support. I have a very full month planned for Bro. Congson when he lands in September. He will experience everything from coordinating logistics for the building project, to an evangelism excursion to Kabala in the north. He will see how I make contacts for new partner churches, build a schedule for the dry season circuit, and, if the rains are tapering in early October, he will assist with the beginning phases of the building project. Laura and I are excited about this development and we ask that you pray for Brother John Congson and his family as they prepare to serve the Lord in Sierra Leone.

LAURA'S HEALTH: In mid-May I had my final post operative review with my surgeon. My back has healed very well, the bone growth is where he wants it to be, and at that time he gave me the all clear to return to Sierra Leone; I could have left shortly thereafter. However, Laura has a major appointment on June 27 with her new neuromuscular specialist, and I made the decision to stay another month to attend this appointment with her. In the months since her previous appointment, Laura has had several tests and has begun two medications. Dr. Jerath will be reviewing the results from these tests with us as well as discussing treatment options. One of the new medications is a steroid which, because it is helping, has indicated to the doctor that we are indeed dealing with an autoimmune disease. That's one step closer to an actual diagnosis than we were just a few months ago. It is hoped that the results from all the tests will shed more light on this mysterious malady. We cannot thank you enough for your prayers.

We are so grateful to all of you for your kindness and confidence in continuing to support Gather The Fragments Bible Mission during my extended absence from the field. And we are so very grateful to the Lord for getting us through the past two years of my own health challenges, while also making progress for Laura's complex health issues.

You remain in our prayers as you serve our Great Savior in the homeland.

Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt

Our next Field Report will feature photo pages as always!