



Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt

Sierra Leone, West Africa

FIELD REPORT: JUNE 2023

Greetings to our Family and Friends,

Thank you for all of your prayers, cards, calls, emails, and text messages regarding Laura's health. At this point, her recovery is going well and she is feeling better than she has in months. As mentioned last month in an update, the doctors at Shands research hospital in Gainesville FL have said it is an unidentified neuro-degenerative disease. They have completely revamped her medication regimen and that has helped. They also strongly believe that her many tropical illnesses, especially the cerebral malaria and dengue fever, have played a big role in wreaking havoc on her already compromised neurological system. Her local neuromuscular doctor has said it will be a balancing act, a trial and error approach to managing symptoms. We are happy to report that we do now have a protocol in place for when she gets into a serious flare up again. This new medication regimen should head things off before they build to the dangerous place she was in since November. She is able to read and write again which has greatly cheered her heart, and it seems she's not too far from being able to get back to work on the much needed illustrations. We are also very happy to report that Laura has been working with another artist who is joining the Illustrated Evangelism Stateside efforts; we now have an art department of two praise the Lord. It's become a great friendship and we are very thankful for the much needed help. These illustrations are the backbone of our evangelism in this highly illiterate country.

THE BIBLE MISSION CHURCH: We thought it would be fun to do this portion of our letter as a photo report. As Westerners accustomed to our modern, technological age, it is very difficult to conceive in your mind what an undertaking it is to build in a remote corner of Sierra Leone's interior where everything is done by hand. It was difficult to select photos and there was so much more which could have been said, but along with sharing the experience with you, we were also trying to keep it as concise as possible. So below you have five pages of pictures, a whirlwind tour of our church building project, West African style.

In 2019 the foundation for the new church building was poured. This was followed by months of hauling backfill so that it would be prepared for the next dry season, January 2020, when a team was arriving from the States. This group of men from supporting churches had experience erecting metal buildings and I really needed their help. Enter COVID-19 lockdown. By the time travel bans were lifted around the world, these men had moved on in life, some of them now on foreign fields themselves. The foundation then sat dormant for four years.

When it became clear that I wasn't going to have an experienced group of men to help with the metal building, I decided it best to go with block. I was able to contract out the block making which was a huge benefit as I didn't have to haul sand and stone myself. I also hired a five-man team of experienced builders who would keep the job moving at a good pace. The following pages are a pictorial chronicle of the building process. Laura and I hope you enjoy this method of bringing you along to Baomahun with us.





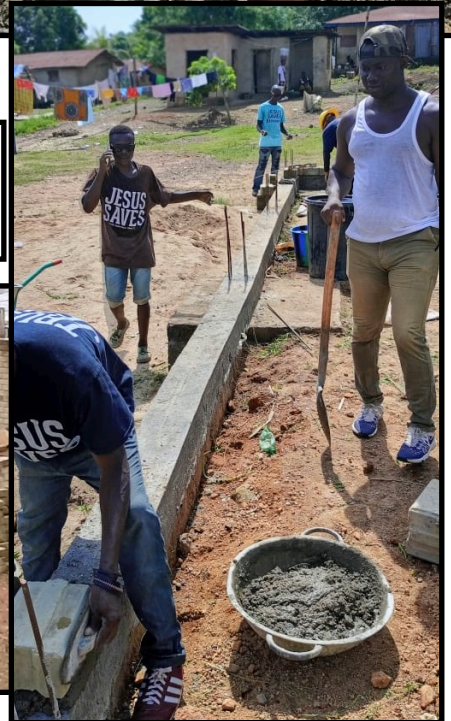
There was much preparatory work for the foundation to be made ready to receive the block structure.

Years of vegetation all needed to be scraped and cleared out of the inside of the foundation. Mostly youngsters took care of this task. Then we needed to haul freshly sawn boards in from the bush to fashion into forms for the concrete work. Our human cement mixers were kept busy mixing sand, gravel, cement, and water into endless mounds of concrete. At bottom left you can see the cottonwood forms set in place atop the foundation. At bottom right the forms are stripped away from the cured concrete and the first few blocks are being laid in November 2024.

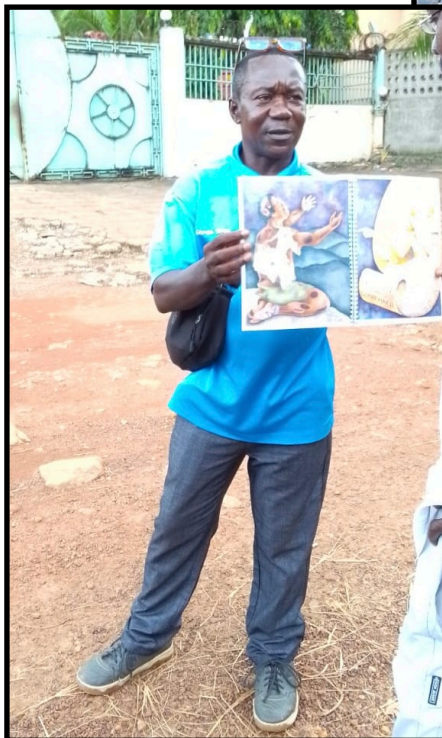
Praise the Lord! After four years of idleness, we were finally commencing the work on our church building! Thank you for praying us through to this point.



Below: With the project running smoothly, I was able to get away a few times and conduct a limited Dry Season Circuit.



Right: A highlight of this circuit was being in the far north of the country. This regional head Muslim Imam, a very powerful man, was quite gracious and interested in the Gospel message for his people. He has extended an open invitation to return as often as we are able and this is now a priority for us. Below: Pastors and church leaders assembled for evangelism training using Laura's illustrations in book as well as banner formats. The two men in blue shirts are GTF Bible Institute grads who often accompany me on the circuit. At center right, the man in the dark jacket is a local church pastor as we conduct open air evangelism in his area. For most this is their first exposure to public ministry and most enjoy it! We were also in a few schools. We always have standing invitations to schools where the majority of students will be Muslim.



While away on the circuit, much progress was made on the building! This is thanks to a steady and willing support group without which we could not have gotten anything accomplished. Men, women, and children from the church, along with students from the junior secondary school (middle school) all lent a hand as they were able, taking time from their own daily work needs to keep the project moving.

Below Left: Hassanautu (red cap) is carrying gravel in a head pan. She is a good representative of our church. She is a former Muslim who got saved after reading a tract given to her during in-town visitation. She loves the Lord and her church. As one of the few women who can read, Hassanautu also frequently accompanies us on the circuit as a bold witness for what Jesus Christ has done for her. For her conversion she has been disowned by her family but she keeps going on for Jesus.



Clockwise from Top: Even little ones helped! One of many group pictures. Endless water was transported atop the heads of our ladies and girls, pulled from the well by a bucket on a rope! Then there were cold water packets for workers, chilled in our solar fridge, carried by young boys. When the junior secondary school let out, the students were on site where the young men mixed yet more concrete and the girls helped with the necessary water supply. Dusu, the pastor's wife, taking her turn to provide workers with a meal of rice and sauce. All working together to the common goal.



The Roof Goes On!



More cottonwood forms to pour the concrete headers on which the steel trusses will rest. These forms were filled one head-pan of concrete at a time. After several days of curing, we were ready to hoist the trusses to span the 40 feet. Each truss was actually two pieces which were raised by rope, reach poles, and strong backs! Unfortunately no one got any photos of the rope and pole efforts. **Bottom Center:** As the roof was going on the building, one of our church members unexpectedly died, the young men respectfully carrying the funeral bier past the church to the gravesite. **Bottom Left:** After a long day at the building site, I often had young friends on the veranda with me relaxing and enjoying each other's company.



And finally brethren ...



It was at this point when I had to leave for the States to help Laura through this difficult time with her health. Our adopted son, John, served as project manager while I was on the evangelism circuit, proving himself well, so I left the remainder of the work in his hands. Corrugated zinc went up, doors and windows were installed, and the cement floor was floated.

Then the work was abruptly halted due to a land dispute between land holding families in town. Because the church property was originally a portion of the disputed land, the judge in Bo ordered and immediate halt work on the building. We have a legal conveyance so there should be no threat to the ownership of the land and building. However, we were stopped at the point where we need to whitewash and paint the building before the rains come in May. I am going to attempt to petition for us to be allowed to at least get whitewash on to protect the blocks during the rains. Pictured at left is one of my closest friends, Chief Kahnasee. He has always supported the work of GTF Bible Mission and has been a strong voice for us among the Muslim town and chieftom leaders. Though he is himself Muslim, he has told me that he can see a difference in the Christians who attend The Bible Mission Church. "I don't have to worry about your people causing trouble or being a problem in town," he once told me. Please pray for his eternal soul.

Plastering by "torch-light." This is a great representation of what I would like The Bible Mission Church to become — a light in a very dark place. A city of refuge set on a hill that will not be hid from those seeking spiritual light.

As of this writing, my plans to return to Sierra Leone are on hold but I anticipate that it will be no later than this summer, perhaps sooner. Through prayer and looking to the Lord for guidance, Laura and I will know when the time is right. We are grateful for your continued interest in the souls of Sierra Leone.

Because He is Worthy

Stephen & Laura Holt

