



Sierra Leone Team Journal March 4-13 2016

March 4, Friday – Chris Benson

A fun drive to Dulles-sharing interests and interesting stories. My first time to get to know a little more about my team mates.

I am thrilled to be a part of this journey and am really looking forward to meeting people in Sierra Leone-in Meken (although I'm sad it's at the expense of Mira not going).

I'm a bit anxious about going to a new place and processing the poverty we will see firsthand-however, I know I will grow from this experience. The support coming from the congregation of CUMC is tremendous-and I really look forward to sharing the stories with them on return-as much as I look forward to gathering images and stories. I know there will be great joy experienced during this trip-encounters which will be rewarding and enriching.

It will be great to link up with the team in Paris and continue this adventure.

Thank you, Mira, for blessing us with such a prayerful and heartfelt sendoff.

March 5, Saturday - Marnie Anderson

As I write we sit on the tarmac in Paris. Excitement is building as our companions in flight now are more African than American or European and we are reminded that we are heading into a different culture and will be by far a minority group-an unusual experience for most of us at CUMC. We were briefly split up as a team last night as Chris flew a different airline through Amsterdam to Paris while Brad, Ken and I came straight to Paris. We were blessed to find lounge chairs in the airport that allowed us to put up our feet and rest after a rather crowded night with little sleep while we waited for Chris to arrive from Amsterdam. As I rested with my 2 small bags of possessions by my side and a steady stream of people hurrying by, my thoughts turned to the many refugees in the world right now. What must it be like to sleep in public spaces in strange lands with small bags of possessions at your side?

When the team united in Paris we took a moment to acknowledge the flexibility that has already been required-Mira's absence (sad face), Chris's presence (smiley face), and rush to prepare with vaccines and visas, Ken traveling with a team he doesn't know well, changed flights, and changed housing arrangements. Each team member received a small Gumby figure to remind us to remain flexible as we enter a new culture and climate later today. We are not in air-almost an hour later than scheduled. We are Team Gumby-going flexibly with the flow.

March 6, Sunday – Ken Mengel

After a pleasant night in AC room at Alisum Guest House in Lungi , we ate a breakfast of fried eggs, bread and coffee. The car was packed and we had an uneventful drive to Makeni.

[85 degrees 10 AM] We dropped off our suitcases at Women of Hope Guest house (WOH) where we were greeted by Rebecca. It was good to see her and set up our new three-day home. We packed up some gifts for Rev. Mariama Bockari and 1st UMC Makeni. The 10 AM service started promptly at 10:45 after Sunday school taught by a fiery young man. Church was $\frac{3}{4}$ full with 150 ish (rough guess) people plus 50-60 children, youth and a full choir. The formal service began with scripture and liturgy. Unfortunately, the PA system was more hindrance than help. Overmodulation made it difficult to understand all that was being said. Many people participated and there were at least 5 offerings: children's choir, youth choir, adult choir, and special offerings, one of which had 2 offering baskets one held by a man and one by a woman.

The team was introduced and presentations were made including the CUMC photo album which was held up for all to see. Mr. Barzi , Secondary principal, gave a thank you speech. The service lasted two hours. There was a lot of singing – and it was joyous, loud and worshipful. Everyone brought their offerings to the altar while singing and dancing. Mariama gave a sermon about what if God left us on our own. Pastor Michael (Maboleh) and his new wife Mabinta acknowledged the generosity of the congregation. A young couple celebrated their 5th wedding anniversary.

The feast began and our team had fried chicken, rice salad, baked beans, soda and cold water. We spent some quality time talking to Mariama about her ministry, our schedule and her mother's ill health. The team had a very good discussion on their goals and purpose as a partner with 1st UMC Makeni. I was encouraged with the openness to ideas and possibilities. It is obvious the team is letting the Lord guide and direct their actions. I told them that opportunities will present themselves as they continue discussions at the church and schools.

Dinner at the guest house was Rebecca's famous ground nut stew.

I am enjoying the company of the new team. It is always fun and pleasantly humorous to hear their reflections of what they are seeing and learning in Sierra Leone. Worship services truly are celebrations. The Holy Spirit is alive in people's hearts.

March 7, Monday – Brad Weiser

After a strong breeze moved in around 7 pm last night, it cooled down to a reasonable 88 in the room by 10 pm ☺ thus allowing for adequate sleep.

The agenda for the day was looking manageable on paper:

1. Visit with Pastor Mariama
2. Visit with Mr. Barzi at the secondary school (he is the school principal and district lay leader)
3. Visit the Primary school on the same property as the secondary school

The reality is that there are many layers to these visits. There are no shortage of needs. Everywhere. At every turn. Let's just get that out there. We can't touch on, review, assess or fix them all.

With First UMC and Pastor Mariana the list includes a dysfunctional latrine facility, some loan debt due to expansion of the church, a parsonage foundation that has started to separate due to erosion in the rainy season, needs to renovate for the 2017 annual conference that First UMC will be hosting, unpaid costs related to the church nursery school/kindergarten, and general educational needs for pastors, pastors in training, etc. in the district.

At the United Methodist schools there are some space concerns. For example all of the secondary classrooms we toured (which was approx.. 70% of the school) had between 80 and 100 students each packed into a 20'x25' classroom. Their 'computer lab' is a series of 2000's era desktop computer covered in a layer of red dust (it is the end of the dry season) and none of them have internet access. The primary grades are in the same predicament.

That said, there are many celebrations as well. At First UMC, their need for the prior mentioned expansion is due to exponential growth since Mariana arrived in 2011. They have a bustling preschool and kindergarten program that is also growing. Mariana is fostering pastoral candidates and worship leaders as well.

At the school, 100% of their 6th graders passed the national exams required to move to the secondary school. 100%! Even with the space constraints, the administration has lofty goals to allow their students to achieve post-secondary education and provide them the tools to do so (but with acknowledgement of needing science and computer material which are scarce to non-existent). The children/youth seemed grateful to be there and the teachers seemed to be passionate about their role in the development of these young people.

Other observations from the day are the type that sometimes make better pictures than words.

- The rampant use of motorcycles as taxis and the din of normal road transit
- The hauling methodology of lumber on hand carts that take up ½ of the road
- Watching the workers at Women of Hope hand chisel tongue and groove planks for wooden door construction
- A flock of hundreds of fruit bats circling a grove of trees in Makeni

We delivered the little dresses and boys' clothing at First UMC today as well as the pencils and school supplies to the primary and secondary schools. The gratitude expressed for both is pretty surreal. These are such things that we take for granted that are truly, truly appreciated because the alternative is that they simply would not have them or get them. They would just go without.

We again spent a good deal of productive time discussing mission goals and trying to loosely form short-term and long-term goals. The sheer bulk of the afore-mentioned needs makes placing value judgements somewhat complex.

If this sounds like rambling it could be that I am distracted by the aroma of wonderfully toasted ground nuts.

March 8, Tuesday – Chris Benson

Good morning! The day awakens in stages – call to prayer, the dogs barking and roosters crowing gives way to the happy chatter of small birds- and only a slight lightening of the day announces the day has begun. The cottage is quiet save for the fans rotating back and forth. It's a peaceful time of day – especially before the real heat begins.

Today we go to the village of Maboleh. At breakfast (of pancakes and fresh fruit) we learned of a young boy picked up along the roadside and taken in by a village family while waiting for admission to an orphanage (3 ½ weeks). Megan, the intern for the Women of Hope described the situation. The boy had walked at least 20 miles (to the point of exhaustion) that day along the road. He was hungry and dehydrated and had multiple old wounds from being stabbed and perhaps shot. A picture showed a boy with a beautiful smile and spindly arms and legs. A sad juxtaposition of custom (intolerance of disability) and red tape and thankfully wonderfully caring people willing to be strong in the face of discouragement. Speaking volumes through action and spreading God's message making a difference one person at a time.

At the village of Maboleh, the children flocked around touching our skin, posing for pictures and finding amusement – especially when I tried dancing with them. The children knew all the lyrics to all the songs of the hand-powered radio.

Meeting the workers was a treat- the new quarters for the teachers at the village school – elementary school for about 250 students. The apartment will be so nice – front porch, parlor/living room, bedroom with closet and bathroom- cinderblock construction, tiled floor, a fabulous resource for the school to attract qualified teachers.

The children were on public holiday in recognition of World Women's Day. Ken pointed out changes that had occurred since Crosspointe has partnered up. The church is sturdy and very attractive, beautiful tile pulpit and choir section with drums and triangles which would be excellent accompaniment music.

The children followed everywhere clamoring for attention and photographing as children do everywhere. It's easy to get caught up in their energy- and innocence- and to remember that they are the future – praying for a way forward to help without generating dependence.

An eye opening comparison to the local clinic – and one of the Makeni hospitals. The local clinic is wired for electricity, but it hasn't been installed yet – so no refrigeration for medication, vaccination, etc. A birthing room has meant every baby born in the village (save one who was not born at the clinic) was delivered safely – such a powerful accolade for the clinic.

The hospital has a series of specialized clinic buildings – the surgical centers were segregated by men and women, children's clinic, etc. Many new buildings have been added over the past 10 years – everywhere you see signs regarding Ebola care – and billboards addressing family planning, preventing teen pregnancy, staying in school & exhortation to not discriminate against Ebola survivors.

Jollof rice – a mixture of vegetables, rice and mild tomato sauce with chicken is delicious.

One of the highlights of the day was meeting with Pastor Mariama and the First UMC administrative council for their views on priorities for things to be done – there was such a generous voice – and

consensus on several items. We were so graciously welcomed – Pastor Mariama reminded us of the SL custom to receive guests with water and cola nuts – but since we don't chew them, they had different gifts – beautiful dresses for the women and shirts and pants for the men, made from the cloth their women had tie-dyed. The clothing is stunning.

Again, it is such a privilege to meet face to face with the leadership of the church – to talk about possibilities of partnership and to find a common path, to be able to start forming the bonds of future friendships and support. Alleluia!

March 9, Wednesday – Marnie Anderson

Sadly, a sick day for me – most likely heat related (it's been 103-105 at the hot part of the day). But a day of rest and relaxation and reflection and to really pay attention to how hard the staff of the guest house works to keep us safe and well and happy. Mysteriously, everyone in the compound knows I'm not feeling my best and I've had multiple people, aside from my loving teammates, checking on me throughout the day. From the manager Rebecca, who brought me bananas and rice and a Sierra Leonean version of chicken soup (not so soothing to my rumbly tummy but a sweet thought!) to the young deaf woman who came in to empty trash and sweep and "mop" the floor by bending over with a wet towel, to the carpenters in the yard, who are making beautiful doors and cabinets for the new guest house that is being built, who anxiously inquired about my wellbeing when I stepped outside, to the American couple who is staying here for a year to manage the construction project and checked in several times; the love of neighbors shines through here. The women cook on outdoor fires in this heat, filter water so we can drink it safely, wash our (very smelly) clothes, and clean our dishes with boiling water for safety. I couldn't be more grateful for their caring and compassion.

Brad: Last full day in Makeni. Full of joys, new beginnings and heartache all at the same time. We met with the Paramount chief and then the area chief nearest to First UMC. They are all full of gratitude for our visit. We, on the other hand, owe a debt of gratitude to Rev. Mariama, as she spends so much time with us even as she is visiting the hospital regularly as her mother is near her return to heaven.

We also visited the Women of Hope offices as well as their under-construction new office and guest house.

We are encouraged by the vision of both the Sierra Leone leaders as well as how we see CUMC being able to assist them, as that takes shape through many, many team discussions. Perspectives are shared, questions get raised, focus is sharpened.

Can I take a moment on food? Of course I can! I'm always fascinated by what people can do with such simple ingredients: crain-crain (shredded, sautéed wild greens), cassava leaves (ground, braised with chicken or fish), fried plantains, ground nuts (peanuts), ground nut stew, fried snapper, mangoes from the ever-present mango trees, bene cakes (sesame seed brittle). The list goes on ...all excellent and prepared with detail. Off to Freetown tomorrow and it feels like we will be leaving friends behind.

March 10, Thursday – Brad Weiser

Last night was very warm, even with the fans – 92* and humid. The bedding was damp.

Breakfast was fruit and oatmeal and unfortunately, Marnie couldn't tolerate the food. There was no medication in the first aid kit for upset stomach.

We moved slowly, finished packing and prepared to go to Freetown.

Accounts were settled, donations given to Rebecca for WOH. Les and Deane Willard came to bid us goodbye.

We enjoyed the ride to Freetown and it actually felt cooler. Malcolm, the very big man who sang bass, gave us a tour of Kissy. Marnie wasn't feeling too chipper.

We sat at conference until 4:30, decided to forgo the march and worship service, and drove over the mountain to Lunly and our guest house for the next 2 days – Posseh.

We met and talked with Nancy Robenson, Bishop Middleton, and the delegates from Makeni and Mabileh. Ken also reconnected with SLAC friends Beatrice Fofanoh, Etta, Smart, and the pastor from Lokotown.

The activities at Annual Conference highlighted how entrenched in tradition the UMC is. Women wear uniforms as do the children, brass bands and a formal march through town highlighted the opening ceremonies.

Our first stop on the ride to Freetown was a stop with Mariama to leave funds that were agreed to by Carlisle UMC.

I spent time talking to Phillip Janius about the part he will play with Cross Point and Mabileh.

This is a very good time. There is a lot of thought, reflection, and compassion in the discussion about issues and challenges both churches are facing.

Edison returned to his home while we had a wonderful dinner at the guest house.

We received the sad news that Mariama's mother passed away this morning.

March 11, Friday – Ken Mengel

A long day – and a day of contrasts. After English breakfast at the hotel (the proprietress, Madame Posseh is Sierra Leonean but has spent time in England. Her daughter lives there now along with a 3 yr. old grand-daughter), we headed out of the compound for an explore. Before we left, we looked at fascinating photos of Madam Posseh's grandfather – a military man who received a reward from the Queen, and her father – a chief. Her photos tell the story of colonial and post-colonial SL. She is quite prosperous and running a lovely guest house with good service and good food.

As soon as you leave the hotel compound you are on a rough, dirt road. A school is next door with lots of joyful noise-some chaotic sounding voices and other times very organized educational chants and

songs. The road to this relatively prosperous place is pitted and rutted and dusty with open sewers lining it. The neighbors pull together to take care of the “stuff” that accumulates in the drainage ditches. Other contrasts: incredible poverty here. So many vehicles, so much standstill traffic and few signs (no lights), lots of beeping, but we witnessed no accidents despite many close calls. Hot overhead sun and the cool of the famous Freetown Cotton Tree—as old as the city of Freetown itself and full of fruit bats despite efforts to chase them away as part of Ebola prevention. Large container ships at the quay vs wood fishing boats that could be from biblical times as teams struggle to cast out and pull in the nets by hand. The shacks and absolutely inhuman conditions of “Kroo Bay” shanty town vs to coolness and international clientele of the Crown Bakery with their famous coconut macaroons as big as your fist.

The amazing gratitude from the people of the annual conference that we took the time to attend. If only for a short while, and the beautiful personalized plaques they crafted for us and presented to us by K.O. Robinson at dinner. The joy of all we were able to see and experience contrasted with the death of Pastor Mariama’s critically ill mother yesterday and the many numbered, not named Ebola graves we passed today. We were told that many don’t know where their loved ones were buried during the epidemic.

The tremendous amount of industry and hard work demonstrated by those who make little vs the large homes blooming on the hillsides like cement daisies, most likely obtained with ill-gotten gains at the expense of the common people. The lack of real tourism vs the beautiful beach at Lumley where we stopped briefly to stick our toes in the Atlantic and admire the beauty of creation. We look forward to finding out more about how God’s at work in this place of contrasts.

March 12, Saturday – Christina Benson

A visit to a beautiful beach! The white sand was clean and a delight to walk on, the ocean a clear blue – sunny skies-light breeze-a wonderful respite from the noise and busyness of the city – and fresh air away for the traffic. Edison said it would be busy by afternoon, but when we arrived it was nearly empty. Walking along the waves was so refreshing.

We saw some elegant and very large homes on the hillside, not far off the road, in very sharp contrast to the small shops and corrugated tin shacks. It is sobering to see the proximity of the haves and have nots and wonder who is my brother’s keeper, if not your neighbor.

I take my privilege for granted so easily, and delight in a chance to escape from the crowded confines to someplace open and clean. Yet, I think of the joy that comes from being with people who are on the fringes whether here in SL or in Carlisle or elsewhere. I want for the people at home to have the opportunity to experience and share this joy in person or vicariously through the team.

A young minister approached us at Annual Conference and explained why they are such a blessing to us (we obviously are a blessing to them as well) as in Matthew – whenever we feed the hungry, visit those in prison, clothe the naked, we are doing this to the Lord. What greater gift than to be part of Jesus’ command, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In thinking about bringing this message to the congregation, wanting to encourage a commitment to serving God in the world, in our country, in our state, our community, in our homes and in ourselves.

We have so many opportunities to find the joy in serving others and to obey God's word. The Methodist Church in Africa is part of our world. We are invited to make a small piece a part of our community and home. The world is after all, a very small place!!!

March 12, Saturday – Brad Weiser

I am so thankful Marnie seems to have perked up a bit. This heat has been brutal, and although she has been uncomplaining, it has hit her hard. After a cool night's sleep she rallied, but sitting in the heat had her starting to fail. Thankfully water, food and cooler temps near the air conditioner has revived her a bit.

We are all sorrowful at leaving, Pastor Mariama and Edison are on our minds and in our hearts. The children, Rebecca, Madame Posseh and so many others who have made this trip possible. It remains to us to figure out the best way forward.

I know we conveyed the love from our congregation to the members of First UMC Makeni and now look forward to bringing the love back to the members of Carlisle UMC.

With God's grace we will continue to realize what a small place God's world is and that by loving our neighbors in Makeni, SL we will be richly blessed.

March 13, Sunday – Brad Weiser

Last leg: Paris to Washington, DC. The bodies are worn out. We are all excited to see our families. To thank them for their sacrifice while we undertook this mission to see our partners in ministry in Sierra Leone.

If nothing else tells the story of Sierra Leone, the flight home will. If the pictures, the history of the war, the aftermath of Ebola, the conversations with the people and our personal accounts don't clarify their current standing on the African continent, then a simple flyover can really paint the picture. Because part of the return trip is a short 20 minute flight to Conakry, Guinea; the neighboring country to the north. In the very next country (Guinea) the infrastructure is light years ahead. Piped water, street lights, highways...worlds apart - separated by 70 miles. Imagine if we at CUMC boarded a plane in Harrisburg, flew to Williamsport and when we landed we found the city to have rolling blackouts, erosion, shredded roads, constant food shortages, no water treatment and all the children had 0-2 outfits for them to wear on rotation until they outgrew them.

There are signs of progress. The conditions for us as visitors were much better than I expected. The children are bright and so eager to learn. The culture makes a beautiful presentation. I don't know what is next. We'll take some time to process our thoughts and our visit, some time to re-acclimate, some time to heal and some time to share.

Then we will see where God takes us.