

Report of Liberia Education Project (LEP) Mission February 2011

From Saturday January 15 through February 28 Somerton United Methodist Church has been present in the Western African Republic of Liberia with the purpose of building a school in Kokoyah District, Bong County. LEP's Executive Director Jacob Madehdou arrived in country to prepare for the other 10 USA members of the team on January 23rd. He also stayed behind to continue "hand's on work until" February 27th until his return to the USA on Monday February 28th.

On January 23rd the full SUMC team arrived to meet Jacob along with a 7 member team from Montrose, PA. The 4 person SUMC team was composed of Dorothy Holland, George Memis and Dennis Fisher (in addition to Jacob). After recouping from 24 hours of travelling we set out for a day of visiting Liberian Government Ministries to introduce our plans. The first stop was a visit to John Innis, the United Methodist Bishop in Liberia and a one -time



speaker at SUMC (see the picture below). He was especially pleased that our mission was directed to the underserved rural bush country and he blessed our efforts with a prayer for God's guidance. We also visited the Information Ministry - where Jacob introduced us to a former classmate who is now the Deputy Minister of Information, and the Education Ministry where several

From left : George Memis, Dorothy Holland, Bishop John Innis, Dennis Fisher, Jacob Madehdou

levels of officials reviewed our plans. One official recommended some changes to our classroom sizes. Monday was an eye opening 24 hours. The city of Monrovia was a bustling place with every street full of people and commerce spilling into the street. Electricity was almost exclusively supplied by generator. Therefore the street lights – where they existed – were inoperable. Running water was supplied by hugh barrels on rooftops or by small barrels and buckets in bathrooms. Cell phones were the only reliable means of communication.

Tuesday brought new adventures as we embarked on the 8-9 hour journey to Kokoyah via the main road from Monrovia to Gbarnga. Some of us doubted whether we would make it, but only because our Liberian travel experience was still limited. The flat tire and pot-holed main highway were only harbingers of things to come. The last 20 miles from Gbarnga to Kokoyah took 2 hours over a badly rutted and stream filled road. On one occasion we stopped to replace the boards of a bridge (in the dark) before crossing. When we arrived at the town of Botota we were warmly greeted by dozens of locals.



We had a fish dinner before preparing our sleeping areas inside Jacob's mother's house – a one story 6 room block and mud building with 40 year old tin roof (known in Liberia as zinc) and newly added bathroom with toilet. While sleeping we dreamed about the site for the new school building which we would finally see on Wednesday.

The school site was just over 3 miles from the town of Botota. The school/ church was next to the village of Kpordyu Town which bordered the Ghenwein River. The ground was measured and the digging started at 10:40. We recorded the time because for over one hour there was a doubt/discussion/debate about the location –which ended taking one end of the community football (soccer) field. It turned out to be the only logical place to be able to dig a foundation in two weeks. Work proceeded quickly over the next few days. There were easily 20-30 workers digging the long 182 by 24 foot rectangular footprint. The trench for the footer varied from 8 to 30 inches deep with most of the depth about 18 inches, larger for roof support footers. Within the next three days concrete was being poured into the footers and concrete blocks were being delivered from Kpordyu Town, where our permanent work team of Cole, Peter and Junior had been manufacturing the block for the prior 3 weeks. We began to imagine that the foundation would be completed.



Sunday was a much needed day of rest. We attended Jacob's mothers church in Botota and returned to our home to sing hymns and have lunch. Later in the day we took a walking tour of the collection of village areas making up Botota. We found small stores selling cool drinks, churches, the local clinic, and valuable cell phone tower (which allowed us to communicate very clearly with our families in Pennsylvania). We also found the most exotic animal on our trip, a chimpanzee or babboo. Our diet featured fresh bananas, plantain, papaya, and pineapples. Other indigenous foods included eddoes, cassava, yams, rice, palm oil and more. Meats were offered sparingly but included eggs, fish and chicken (sometimes freshly killed). But there was always a rooster to wake us up each morning!

Meanwhile back at the worksite, despite some delays due to labor issues, we began laying the concrete block walls and even the classroom floors. See the pictures below. It was difficult work as every material (concrete, sand, gravel, water, large rock, blocks) required a special delivery via truck or caravan of villagers carrying them on their heads.



Left : George & Dennis laying concrete block walls

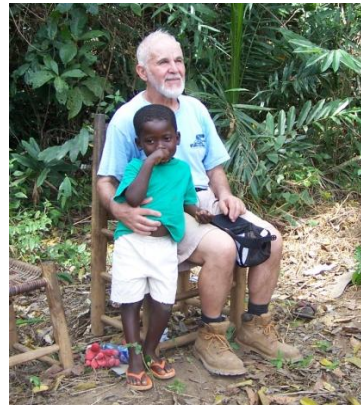


Right: Alex and Cole completing first classroom floor

After 8 hot days of work some said felt like 100°, we were ready to return home. The foundation was completed and 1 2/3 classroom floors were finished. We began to anticipate saying goodbye and tears were evident. Dorothy had befriended many of the women and Jacob's mother presented her with a beautiful garment. George acquired a young companion named Joseph. Dennis led singing groups of children and narrated picture shows on Jacob's computer (electricity provided by the generator).



Left : Dorothy and Jacob's mother Seti



Right: George and his buddy Joseph

On Friday February 4th we loaded up the trucks and started back to Monrovia via Buchanan. Before leaving, we paid the school children one more visit to distribute toothbrush kits and to say goodbye (see picture below). Then we embarked on a 14 hour



adventure of broken down vehicles and on the spot repairs over 100 miles of dirt road. When we finally reached the city areas and the paved road (some of it brand new and wonderful!) we were already covered in dust from head to foot. George's hair was orange and Dennis' was light brown. We needed 3 baths that night.

On Saturday George Wilson and Jacob gave us a tour of the greater Monrovia area. We did some shopping and had a great meal at a seaside restaurant near the government center of the city. We discovered one of the two flush toilets we encountered in Liberia while there. Later that evening we met with the Liberian LEP board and encouraged them to help us prioritize funding over the next few weeks and months. Many thanks to Sebastine Gaye, George Wilson, Martha Kangar and

many others for taking part on the Liberian side of operations.

Sunday we attended church at S. Trowen Nagbe UMC where we not only felt very comfortable with the service, but they also asked us to speak about our project (see picture below). We later attended the Worldwide Mission Church where Jacob not only attended in his youth, but where he and hundreds of others sought refuge during the civil crisis in the 1990's. It was evident that people love to attend services. Every seat was filled in each church we attended. God's Holy name was praised.



Left: Dennis speaking at Nagbe UMC



Right: Standing room only at Worldwide Mission

We returned to the USA on Monday February 7th after travelling about 21 hours in route from Roberts International Airport (including an almost 3 hour delay) outside of Monrovia to Accra, Ghana then across the Atlantic Ocean to Atlanta, GA and connecting to Philadelphia (just made it!).

God fulfilled our dreams and worked through our efforts to complete the tasks we prayerfully sought to do. It was only with God's help that his children from across the world and cultures and languages learned about each other, ourselves and the power of faith and prayer. AMEN!