

2020 Ministry Trip

The ministry this year has obviously been impacted by Covid – but by no means dominated by it. In fact the ground we had laid in previous years, and especially during our trip this January, has allowed the churches to blossom and grow despite the Covid restrictions. In January, the Lord directed us to focus entirely on church in the community as opposed to church in their church buildings. As leaders, we discussed what church could look like if we didn't have buildings. This was important because of planting churches in rural areas where there was no available public or church building in which to gather for services. So we talked about home-based family gatherings with a few neighbours. Then we sent the church members out into the communities to establish these little Christian communities with their neighbours. Little did we know how strategic these would prove to be. As we left Liberia, the world was waking up to Covid.

We were unable to travel to Lofa county because of a severe fuel shortage, so focused our ministry around Weala, Fendell and Mount Barclay. We spent a few days visiting our new school in Diamamu and another in German Camp.

It was not long before church services were closed down in Liberia, but our churches continued to flourish because they had already been introduced to "church with their neighbours". The lockdown also encouraged the rapid growth of Growth Groups. In fact, the lockdown was a great blessing in this respect, because it prevented the leaders from leading all the Growth Groups and they had to trust the Holy Spirit to take the lead. Another "blessing" was that because the people were not allowed to gather on Sundays, the pastors had to go out to visit the people in their communities which has also greatly sharpened their focus on mission and discipleship instead of running services. As lockdown was imposed I received a string of messages from excited pastors saying how much they were reaping the benefit of both Growth Groups and church with their neighbours.

At the beginning of the Liberian lockdown the schools were all closed. But that did nothing to diminish our commitment to the children. The teachers prepared work sheets for the children to do at home and they collected them for marking. Throughout this time the schools were receiving no fees from the parents, partly because the children were not actually attending school, but also because the Covid restrictions have had such a devastating effect on the economy which was already on its knees. So unfortunately the schools we are supporting have become entirely dependent on us to pay the teachers allowances each month.

Despite these practical and financial difficulties the pastors have continued to labour for the education of these poor children. So this year we have improved and extended three of our schools and built two new rural schools. We now have six schools – each making a huge impact in their communities. Each school is the heart of a thriving Christian community.

I am so encouraged by Pastor James Willie. I met him for the first time this January and immediately felt at one with him. He readily embraced our principles for Growth Groups and "church with your neighbours" and immediately put them into place in his churches. He has a church in a village called Naipolor Kollie Town. The villagers begged him to help them build a school. He didn't have the finances to do that, so instead he talked to the church members and explained about church based around their homes. Then he asked them if they would give their church building to the community to start a school. They readily agreed and have started to convert it into a nursery school. This action by the Christians has amazed and motivated the rest of the community who have now devoted themselves to building the rest of the classrooms. Not surprisingly, the Gospel is flourishing in that village and Pastor James is so excited he can't stay still when he is telling me about it!



The new school in Naipolor Kollie Town

The continuing global Covid crisis means that it seems most unlikely that we will be able to visit this coming Spring, so we decided to try having a zoom conference. As you can imagine, this is not quite as straightforward as it is for us, nevertheless we bought them some phones and modems and gave it a go. The first session was a complete failure, but on our second attempt, a week later, we had twelve participants who really enjoyed it and were able to participate. Although it was more difficult than being in the same room together, it was far easier for them not having to travel. We met over five Saturday mornings on the theme "Listening to Jesus" and had a wonderful time. We are now giving time for putting the things we learnt into practice. Zoom has opened up a whole new way of reaching our growing number of pastors and their people.

It is such a privilege to be able to share in the lives of so many friends in West Africa, and through them to give so many youngsters an education and introduce them to Jesus. But it is not just the young children. Several pastors are also giving adult education and vocational training, and one of them is entirely focussed on discipling youth. Several of them regularly travel long distances into the rural areas taking the Good News into places where there are no churches or schools. No one has asked them to go, or sent them. They are motivated by love and compassion and by the Holy Spirit. And they go "without purse or staff" – they go trusting that somehow God will provide their needs.