

Called and Sent: A Charism of Service

School Sisters of Notre Dame, History of the St. Louis Province
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Independent from Britain since 1961, Sierra Leone's self-government of an elected president and parliament members came under military control, and then back to civilian government. An uneasy truce existed among those in administration until 1991 when a constitution permitted multi-political parties. But again a military coup intervened. Neighboring countries also struggled with issues of power and control, each recruiting mercenaries from across borders until there were no clear distinctions between rebels and soldiers who, either for survival or expediency, often switched sides. The sisters in the north at Kabala, and those in Port Loko, nearer Freetown on the coast, were in radio contact with each other and those in Yengema, close to the Liberia border. All maintained a semblance of normalcy, but news of outbreaks of fighting was alarming.

News from Liberia in the fall of 1991 told of the arrest and murder of the five Adorers of the Blood of Christ. On reports of the killings in the outlying districts near Yengema, the villagers fled the area. An attack seemed imminent. When word was received that a friend of the mission had been taken hostage, Sisters Luanne Boland and Kathy Schmittgens, together with the teachers living at the mission compound, prepared to leave. Since rebels had blocked the main road, plans were made to travel across the bush. On November 1, 1992, they began a hazardous trek north away from the border. Along the way others joined them until they became a convoy of seven vehicles and about one hundred fifty similarly displaced persons.

Stopped and questioned, held at gunpoint, and harassed by soldiers turned the journey into a frightening experience for all. They were saddened and depressed when they learned some soldiers were 14 -18-years old, and like them, fleeing from the rebels. Other military groups stopped them demanding money; others asked them to take their girlfriends with them. Around mountains and across rough terrain, the refugees headed for the safety of Kabala, more than a hundred miles to the north. Thirty-six hours after that hurried departure, dirty and disheveled but unharmed, the two sisters found their way to the Catholic Mission where Sisters Andre and Geraldine Neier warmly welcomed them.¹

The next two years saw outbreaks of rebel activity throughout the country. On November 7, 1994, rebel forces attacked Kabala. Sisters Andre and Geraldine, and the most recent missionary, Sister Barbara Brunsmann, had a fifteen-minute advance warning, just time enough to pick up bags prepared for such an emergency, load the jeep, and leave for Makeni. They stayed overnight with the Sisters of St. Joseph of

¹ Information on the up-rising in Sierra Leone was given by Andre Aubuchon, SSND, Inez Bocklage, SSND, and Luanne Boland, SSND. A brief account of leaving the mission was included in an article on war experiences of sisters in several provinces. NAMA NEWS, December 2005. The St. Louis section was contributed by Adrienne LaCroix, Communication Director.

Cluny, and moved on to join their sisters in Port Loko. But on January 1, 1995, along with other townspeople they took to the road. Rebel forces were twenty miles away. Twelve School Sisters waited in Mange Bureh, hoping and praying the fighting would soon be over. As they listened to reports on the short wave radio, their hopes were dashed. It was only a matter of time before they would have to leave the country. The American Ambassador sent word that she could not be responsible for anyone's safety. Finally, by January 25, passage was arranged and they left from Freetown.

They were leaving Sisters Claret Feldhake and Carol Kleba in Yengema in the eastern district where rebel activity had subsided. The two sisters had reopened the mission in 1994, calling together young women willing to attend class. But soon they, too, had little choice. In May, 1995, Bishop John O'Riorden, C.S.S.P. concurred with the Ambassador. He would not accept responsibility for the safety of any religious in the country. The last two School Sisters of Notre Dame left Sierra Leone.

In June 1996, all the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Africa traveled to Rome for the first African Assembly. It was at this assembly the decision was made to form the District of Africa. On February 1, 1997, the General Council formally approved this decision. Sister Marie Antoinette Naumann, of the St. Louis Province, was chosen as the first District Leader. The new district included Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria.²

² The Polish Province had sisters in The Gambia, but they chose to remain a mission extension of their province and not join the District of Africa. Ed. Note. As of 2007, They are officially part of the District of Africa.