

Sierra Leone

History of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Countries of Africa, 2001

by LaLande Edwards, SSND

The St. Louis Province took the 1972 General Chapter mandate to allocate 5% of its personnel over the next five years to ministries in the Third World to its 15th Provincial Chapter and translated that into sending at least two sisters to Africa in addition to supporting our commitment to Honduras.

Sister Rosemary Muckerman, provincial councilor, contacted Archbishop Edward O'Meara, National Director of the Propagation of the faith for assistance. He sent a letter giving the needs of the church in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, and Zambia. He put the provincial council in touch with Archbishop Francis Carroll of Monrovia, Liberia, who came personally to Archbishop O'Meara to get assistance for Bishop Joseph Ganda of Kenema, Sierra Leone. As Apostolic Nuncio to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Gabon, he promised to make arrangements for two sisters to personally evaluate situations in Liberia, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

In May, 1973 Sisters La Lande Edwards and Rosemary Muckerman, provincial councilors, were met in Monrovia, Liberia, by Archbishop Carroll to start a fact-finding trip of possible ministries in those countries to which the St. Louis province could respond. From Liberia the sisters traveled to Ghana and finally to Sierra Leone, where they met Father Tom Barry, CSSP, headmaster of Yengema Secondary School for boys. He spoke of the educational needs of the country and especially of the neglect of female education.

Bishop Joseph Ganda of Kenema came to Freetown to accompany the sisters to Yengema. He, too spoke of educational needs especially for girls. He toured Yengema Secondary School in the Kenema Diocese with the sisters, pointed out a plot of land on the mission compound designated for a future girls' school, and introduced the sisters to the Paramount and District Chiefs, educational representatives, the Holy Ghost Fathers, and the Yengema faculty. Through an interpreter, the Paramount Chief pleaded with the sisters to send teachers for a girls' school and pledged to ask for a special tax for a secondary school for them. He asked that we send three sisters to work with seventy girls to be accepted for the first class.

The sisters drew up a list of requests from West African bishops:

- -Bishop Azzolini, Makeni, Sierra Leone – teachers for a Women's Teacher Training College and the Lunsar Vocational School
- -Archbishop Carroll, Monrovia, Liberia – teachers at St. Theresa's Secondary School and at the new seminary soon to open
- -Bishop Andoh, Accra, Ghana – teachers in St. Ann's Vocational School and directors of Religious formation for a native sisterhood
- -Bishop Missah, Cape Coast, Ghana – teachers for the seminary

The sisters placed these requests before the Provincial Chapter in June 1973. In turn, the delegates placed the decision-making on the Provincial Team and promised to support their decision. After prayer and dialogue, the Provincial Team announced to the province in July that we would go to Yengema, diocese of Kenema, to start a school for girls. They also communicated that the first mission band would be Sisters Andre Aubuchon, Marie Inez Bocklage, Eileen Buseman as teachers and Sister Mary Louise Jacobi, semi-retired assistant in school and convent.

After summer training in the Institute of African Studies at the University of Notre Dame, they left for Freetown, arriving there on September 14, 1973. Father Barry met them and took them to Yengema. The following day the sisters attended morning "assembly" outside the classroom blocks for prayer and announcements. After that they received their teaching schedules and went in their classrooms.

Soon Bishop Ganda was prompting the sisters to visit Bishop Azzolini, who badly needed women religious for his diocese of Makeni. Port Loko had pressing needs for teachers at the Women's Training College and at the secondary school. Both lacked adequately prepared personnel. Even though Sister Bernadelle Zurmuehlen, provincial leader, told Bishop Azzolini there was no available personnel for "1975, 1976, or subsequent years" he and the sisters at Yengema turned up the pressure. In February 1976 Sister Bernadelle informed the Bishop that she would send one sister to teach in the college and two to assist in catechetics. So the second foundation in Sierra Leone was made at Port Loko in July of that year.

Two years later Bishop Azzolini was appealing for more sisters, this time for Kabala in the northern part of the Makeni Diocese. Even though personnel shortage was again cited, the sisters from Port Loko and Yengema backed the "Kabala project" and encouraged the Bishop and parish priests to importune. By July 1978 Kabala had two sisters to open the third foundation.

The St. Louis province opened its fourth mission in Mange Bureh in the Makeni Diocese. Bishop Biguzzi blessed the convent and commissioned Sisters Ruth Emke and Eleanor Ewertz as pastoral administrators at Our Lady of the Rosary on September 3, 1990.

Although formal education in classroom settings at the secondary and college level was the major thrust of service in Sierra Leone, work as teachers and coordinators of religious education, supervisors of teachers and educational programs were also part of their educational ministry. In addition the sisters ministered to the poor, sick, needy children; served in liturgy planning, sacramental preparation, and RCIA; directed retreats for priests and sisters. The founding of Mange Bureh called the sisters to their newest ministry as parish administrators.

The Sierra Leone missions were supported mainly by the salaries earned from teaching positions, province funds, grants, generous contributions from American and European donors. Housing and cars were sometimes supplied by the mission.

During the first ten years of presence in Sierra Leone each local house had an appointed local leader. A sister was also named to be liaison person between the bishop and the School Sisters and to attend conferences of major superiors. However, as the number of foundations increased, it was deemed advisable to have an area leader. At first she was appointed by the provincial leader after consultation with the sisters of the area. In 1983 Sister Carol Kleba was named the first area leader for a three-year term. The area then revised its government structure calling for a two-thirds election by the sisters of the area. Terms were still for three years. Sister Vicki Speno was elected from 1986-89 and Sister Ruth Emke from 1989-95.

The celebration of twenty years of ministry in Sierra Leone was a joyous occasion. We had grown from one to four foundations, had made many friends in this new territory and were especially joyful that we now had two newly professed Sierra Leonean women with—Sister Catherine Sia Dauda and Gertrude Yema Jusufu.

Yet all was not well because serious political and economic problems were developing in the country. Rebel incursions were occurring; unrest escalated and bloodshed and torture were becoming all too common. The American Embassy ordered American missionaries and Peace Corps members to evacuate. In January 1995 the Port Loko sisters fled to Mange Bureh to join the other refugee School Sisters before leaving for either the generalate in Rome or for the motherhouse in St. Louis. Sisters Claret Feldhake and Carol Kleba chose to remain in Yengema; but by April they too were departing.

After months of reassessing their possibilities of returning, some sisters chose to remain in the United States; other displaced sisters returned to ministries in other African countries; The Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya. Two sisters returned to Sierra Leone to try to re-establish ministries there when hostilities let up. They were soon again in turmoil and danger and had to give up. All of these women dream of a day when they may return to Sierra Leone and the dear people who have suffered loss, death, mutilation, and the ravages of war.