



THE LORD PROVIDED A



Finding themselves in the midst of a civil war in Liberia, these eight missionaries determined that somehow they would continue their work.

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When civil war broke out in Liberia in late 1989, eight native Liberian missionaries of the Church were serving in the country. By July 1990, conditions were so bad that those missionaries were shuttered inside their homes, unable to preach the gospel and forced to risk death just to meet with members.

With their work grinding to a complete halt, Elders Marcus Menti and Joseph Myers, zone leaders in Monrovia, determined to go wherever they had to in order to complete their missions and serve as they had been called to do. That meant leaving Liberia, so together with the other four missionaries serving in Monrovia—Taylor Selli, Joseph Forkpah, Roverto Chanipo, and Dave Gonquoi—they devised a plan. With the help of Philip Abubakar, a counselor in the local branch presidency and the missionaries' driver, the elders planned to travel north to Sierra Leone, cross the border, then continue to Freetown, where their mission presidency had already been compelled to flee.¹

The plan seemed like a long shot.

“Our driver himself was not really convinced we would make it,” Elder Menti later said. But the missionaries assured Brother Abubakar that they had fasted and prayed a great deal about this decision, and they were confident that the Lord would bless them in their efforts to be obedient.

The missionaries made ready to depart. Before they could leave, however, there was a crucial order of business to

attend to: Find and bring in the last set of elders in Liberia, Elders John Gaye and Prince Nyanforh, who were serving just outside Monrovia, in Paynesville.

Delivered from Death

The Liberian civil war that erupted in late 1989 was fueled in part by ethnic tensions that prompted unrest in the country. The rebels targeted and regularly killed civilians belonging to certain groups.

For Elder John Gaye, the threat of execution was very real. When rebels descended on Paynesville and Elder Gaye didn't dare leave, he and Elder Nyanforh were trapped in their home for some time. Elder Nyanforh had to sneak out to find food. He managed to get the missionaries some sustenance and return home safely—but just barely so.

“I told him that I would not go out there again because they killed two or three men, and I'm afraid to go out,” Elder Nyanforh later said. Rebels were everywhere, and the situation was perilous.

After several days, the missionaries' neighbors planned their exodus. They called for the elders to join them, and Elder Gaye and Elder Nyanforh did. But as the group was making its way out of the area, they were apprehended by the rebels.

“They came interrogating us—to know where we're from,” Elder Nyanforh recalled.



Missionaries are welcomed to Freetown by the mission president.

The rebels interrogated each person to determine the individual's identity and other information. But before they made it to the missionaries, darkness had fallen and the rebels decided to wait until daylight to continue their investigation.

Elder Gaye prayed all night, pleading for his life to be spared. "I was confident of the Lord's help," he said.

When morning came, the soldiers resumed their questioning. With just one more person to question before it would be Elder Gaye's turn, the missionary said he "began to imagine paradise."

But before he was questioned, a familiar face arrived. A Latter-day Saint who was fighting for the rebels recognized the missionaries. He was a clerk in the local branch, and he knew Elder Gaye. "But he concealed my identity to his colleagues," Elder Gaye said. The soldier told the men that the missionaries were brethren in his church, and without further question, Elder Gaye and Elder Nyanforh were released.

The elders were taken to a refugee camp 13 miles (20.9 km) from Monrovia, and it was during their brief stay there that the other missionaries in Monrovia planned their escape. The elders in Monrovia had sent someone to Paynesville, but by the time the searchers made it, Elder Gaye and Elder Nyanforh had already gone.

Fleeing Monrovia

The six missionaries and their driver began searching for gasoline to make their journey. Eventually they traded half a bag of rice for four gallons (15.14 L), adding it to what was left in the tank—all the while knowing the total would not be sufficient for the 370-mile (595.5 km) journey on bad roads.

On July 15, 1990, the seven men prepared for their journey. They held a sacrament meeting early in the morning, then planned to leave for Freetown. But small delays kept pushing back the start of their journey.

It was afternoon before they made it to the mission home to inform their acting mission president of their plans and bid farewell, and it was 2:00 p.m. before they left the mission home for Freetown. The timing turned out to be fortuitous.

"As soon as we were on our way down from the upstairs at the mission home we met our two missing elders on the steps," Brother Abubakar remembered.

After a week in the refugee camp, Elder Gaye and Elder Nyanforh—after many days of fasting and prayer—had felt prompted that morning to leave for Monrovia. After eight hours on foot, they arrived at the mission home just in time to join their fellow missionaries in their escape to Sierra Leone.

With nothing but a five-seat sedan, the eight missionaries and their driver set off. The tank held a total of five and a half gallons (20.8 L) of gasoline as they began their trip, and the prospects of getting more along the way were dismal.

"Some said we would end up pushing the car many miles toward the border," Elder Menti wrote. But the missionaries continued to trust in the Lord. Quoting 1 Nephi 3:7 ("I will go and do . . .") to their driver, they were determined to move forward.

It was less than 100 miles (160.9 km) to the border, but with nine adult men in a small sedan and more than 50 checkpoints at which they would be stopped along the way, the odds were solidly against them. However, they set off believing that Heavenly Father would help them.

Elder Menti recalled that Brother Abubakar was surprised when there was no change in the gas gauge, even

GUINEA

SIERRA LEONE

Missionaries run behind the car for miles at a time.



Bo

Kenema

Zimmi

Red line indicates journey traveled by the missionaries.

Border between Liberia and Sierra Leone

The missionaries reach the border and initially are unable to enter the country.

LIBERIA



Klay District

Elders Gaye and Nyanforh arrive in Monrovia in time to leave for Sierra Leone.

Eight missionaries and their driver set off in a five-seat sedan.

Mamba Point, Monrovia

Six missionaries in Monrovia are trapped and unable to work.

Paynesville

Elders Gaye and Nyanforh leave Paynesville and are captured by rebels.

Elders Gaye and Nyanforh are released and sent to a refugee camp.





THE CHURCH IN SIERRA LEONE

1981: Michael Samura, a native of Sierra Leone, is baptized in the Netherlands.

January 1988: The first official Church meeting is held in Sierra Leone.

May 1988: J. Duffy Palmer, president of the Liberia Monrovia Mission, welcomes the first missionaries called to serve in Sierra Leone.

June 1988: A group of 14 people are baptized—the first to be baptized in the country.

May 1989: From atop Leicester Peak, Elder Richard G. Scott blesses the land of Sierra Leone.

July 1990: Missionaries from Liberia flee to Sierra Leone.

October 2004: Groundbreaking takes place for the first meetinghouse.

December 2012: Elder Jeffrey R. Holland organizes the 3,000th stake in the Church and the first one in the country, in Freetown.

after many miles: “He was very much astonished. We were not for we knew the Lord would provide a way.”

The missionaries made it to Sierra Leone that evening, with gasoline to spare, and they were able to buy five more gallons at the border.

When they arrived at the border, the immigration checkpoint had already closed, so the missionaries took turns sleeping in the car that night. The following morning, yet another obstacle arose.

Of the nine men in the car, only five had documents that would enable them to cross the border. They were all told to return to the embassy in Monrovia, but after some time the immigration officers offered to help them because they were missionaries.

Once the missionaries were across the border, the journey in some ways became more difficult, as the roads in Sierra Leone were far inferior to those in Liberia. At some points there were gaps in the road that the car had to be pushed across or lifted over.

When the road became almost impossible to drive on, Brother Abubakar ordered the missionaries to get out and run behind the car while he navigated through the rough areas.

Elder Menti recalled having to run after the car for stretches as long as two miles. Along the way, they passed many cars stuck on the road.

Late that night, after 34 hours on the road, the eight missionaries and Brother Abubakar arrived at the home of mission president Miles Cunningham in Freetown. After the starved and exhausted missionaries ate, they were able to have their first night of peaceful sleep in two months.

Blessings in Freetown

For the missionaries, the move was a monumental one. Most of them had never left Liberia before, but they felt a powerful desire to continue their work. A month later, blessings for their sacrifice became evident: With the missionaries assigned to the three branches in Sierra Leone, the rate of baptisms rose and the number of branches quickly doubled.

“All that was seriously needed to open the branches was more priesthood,” recalled Walter Stewart, a senior missionary from the United States who was serving in Freetown. Elder Stewart also felt that the Liberian missionaries were better equipped to communicate with and relate to the investigators and members in Sierra Leone than the senior missionaries had been.

Elder Stewart said these missionaries “brought a powerful spirit of faith and devotion to this part of the mission,” which was bred from what they had suffered in Liberia. “They are [the] first to recognize the hand of the Lord in this modern miraculous exodus.”

“We know that the Lord [had] more work for us here in Sierra Leone,” Elder Menti later said. “Many areas have been opened to the preaching of the gospel.” Though their journey was difficult and perilous, Elder Menti said, “the Lord provided a way” for them to continue their missionary work. ■

NOTE

1. Quoted material and historical information in this article come from the following sources in the Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah: Walter Travis Stewart, “A Modern Miraculous Exodus, 1990”; Prince S. Nyanforh, Oral History, interviewed by Steven R. Sorensen, 1999, James Moyle Oral History Program; accounts by Marcus Menti, John Gaye, and Musa Philip Abubakar collected in “Accounts of Latter-day Saint Missionaries Escaping Liberia, 1990.”