

NEVER ALONE

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How would the Church survive if your country, still recovering from civil war, became infected with a deadly virus and then was isolated from other nations because of that disease? What would you do if missionaries, other than local missionaries, were withdrawn, not just once but repeatedly?

If you lived in the West African nation of Sierra Leone, you would rely on the Lord and watch the Church flourish anyway. You would see local leaders magnifying their callings. You would see members strengthening each other, missionary work continuing, and faith overcoming fear.

Steady Growth

Despite civil war from 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone has seen steady growth in Church membership. Full-time missionaries first arrived in this sub-Saharan country in May 1988. Two years later a district was created. At various times in the 1990s, missionaries were withdrawn because of the war, but local members kept the Church going and growing. In 2007 the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission, which included Liberia, was created. Then in December 2012, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles organized a stake in Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown. It was the 3,000th stake of the Church.

Battling Ebola

Then came Ebola. The outbreak of hemorrhagic fever caused by the virus originated in Guinea in March 2014. It entered Sierra Leone in May and spread rapidly. Full-time missionaries were reassigned, and the mission president in Ghana was asked to also serve as the mission president of Sierra Leone—while remaining in Accra.

“When the missionaries were gone, we worried about being left to find our own way,” said Kenema District president Jonathan Cobinah. “However, that same week we received a letter from the Africa West Area Presidency reassuring us that would not be the case.” From that time forward, the 13,000 members in Sierra Leone received area support, and as international organizations geared up to provide relief, Church Welfare Services and emergency response worked with implementing partners in various international organizations to meet community needs. (See sidebar.)

“Within a few days, we had a videoconference with the newly assigned mission president,” President Cobinah said. “He told us Church meetings and activities would require caution in order to avoid contracting the disease, but otherwise we would continue just as we had in the past.”

To prevent the further spread of the disease, in September 2014 the president of Sierra Leone announced a nationwide lockdown to begin in just a few days. During the lockdown, all citizens would be required to remain

IN SIERRA LEONE

Despite disease, isolation, and the lingering aftermath of war, Latter-day Saints in this African nation know that Heavenly Father remembers them.



Latter-day Saints remained faithful in studying and sharing the gospel, conducting meetings at home when necessary to avoid spreading Ebola. Right: Cleaning supplies, provided in plastic buckets, helped fight the spread of the deadly virus.





WORKING TOGETHER

Beyond giving timely help to its members, the Church reached out to battle Ebola in many communities where there were no Latter-day Saints. Through its humanitarian organization, the Church partnered with various groups to provide relief

through seven community projects. Thanks to these cooperative efforts, communities hit hard by Ebola in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali received food, bedding, hygiene supplies and instruction, medical and sanitation supplies, and protective clothing for Ebola workers.

indoors. Most people would have to make do with whatever food they had in their homes.

Just in Time

Fortunately, just weeks before the lockdown was announced, the Africa West Area had begun working with Church headquarters to authorize delivery of cleaning supplies for all 7,800 Latter-day Saint families in Sierra Leone and to provide a 110-pound (50 kg) bag of rice and several liters of cooking oil to more than 2,500 LDS families on an as-needed basis. Unaware of the impending lockdown, local Church leaders still raced to deliver these supplies.

“It is hard to explain the urgency that we felt at the time,” recalled Sahr Doe, a special assistant to the mission president. “The weekend when distribution of the supplies was approved, we learned that a particular area might be quarantined. That would make it very difficult to deliver supplies, so we worked around the clock to load trucks and get them on their way to branches throughout the country. In one city, supplies arrived only hours before access restrictions were imposed. Throughout the country, we were able to deliver supplies just prior to the lockdown. It was a blessing to all of us and a modern-day miracle.”

The Ebola outbreak also brought widespread unemployment. “I was almost without hope,” said Sister Sai Kamaia of the Allentown Branch, a mother of three children who makes her living trading small goods. “All of my money was gone in September, even before the lockdown. People were afraid to trade. I did not know what I was going to do.” Like others, she shed tears of joy when she received Church supplies.

“As a widow and the head of our family, I feel so good that the Church was able to help us,” said Sister Mary Margay of the Kissy Second Branch. “We were wondering where to stay during lockdown. We felt overjoyed that we could remain at home with food to eat.”

Like Church members everywhere, the Saints in Sierra Leone strive to be self-reliant. But in this unanticipated period of need, supplies arrived just in time for many who had nowhere else to turn. “These timely interventions let the Saints here know they will never be left alone,” said Mariatu Browne, the Church’s public affairs director for Sierra Leone. During the quarantine, Latter-day Saints also shared their supplies with their neighbors, blessing many who otherwise would have had little or nothing.

In the Lord’s Hands

Unfortunately, avoiding hunger was not the only concern. Some Latter-day Saints contracted the disease. Simon Kamara of the Teko Road Branch, who had been a member of the Church for only a year, saw his wife and son pass away from Ebola. Then he too became infected.

“My life is in the Lord’s hands,” he said while in a treatment center. “Like any father, I want the best for my children. But now that I have found the gospel and understand the plan of salvation, I have great hope for myself and my family no matter what happens.” Despite initial signs of recovery, Brother Kamara passed away. His surviving children miss their parents very much, although they are now being cared for by members and friends and are doing fine.



Left: Rice, oil, and cleaning supplies arrived just in time for many who had nowhere else to turn. During the quarantine Latter-day Saints shared their supplies with neighbors, blessing many who otherwise would have had little or nothing. Above: Baptisms in the Naije Town Branch.

A Personal Miracle

Sister Haju Julloh of the Waterloo Branch is a nurse. Caring for the sick, she was exposed daily to the virus. As patient loads increased, protective gowns at the hospital where she worked were sometimes not thoroughly washed and cleaned. Shortly after she joined the Church in August 2014, Sister Julloh tested positive for Ebola and was quarantined in her home.

“I could not attend church, so branch members called and encouraged me,” she said. “Confined to my room, I decided to concentrate on studying the Book of Mormon. I read about many spiritual experiences, including miracles that happened to ordinary people like me. I wanted a miracle but did not know if I should even ask. I kept reading and talking to friends on the phone about the things I was reading. After some weeks at home, I was retested for the virus and the test results came back negative. I had to remain quarantined for another week and was then retested. Again, the results were negative. So I was allowed to leave my house and attend church as well as return to work. That was a miracle to me.”

Hastening the Work

During stressful times, should missionary work go on? The Saints in Sierra Leone have a tradition. They continue to share the gospel no matter what.

“Rather than bemoaning our lot or remaining stagnant, we were encouraged to rally the Saints by calling branch missionaries to replace the full-time missionaries,” explained President Bai Seasy of the Kossoh Town District. “We had no time to feel sorry for ourselves; we had the work of salvation to do. We paired returned

missionaries with prospective missionaries and organized them into zones.”

“Each branch mission leader was authorized to have a phone card for proselyting purposes. They must account for its usage, but it has helped the branch missionaries remain in contact with new investigators and recent converts alike, and staying in touch has made a huge difference,” said Brian Robbin-Taylor, another special assistant to the mission president.

“We have ‘phone lessons’ with investigators and new converts,” he continued. “That supplements weekly missionary lessons held at church. We have adapted to the needs of members and investigators who otherwise might have no contact, due either to quarantine restrictions or apprehensions about getting the disease.”

Today convert baptisms in Sierra Leone are only slightly lower than when full-time missionaries were there, many less-active members have returned to activity, and growth of the Church is steady.

Great Reason to Hope

During the outbreak, unemployment exceeded 60 percent. Crops could not be delivered to market because of quarantine restrictions. Many loved ones perished. No doubt there are many more challenges ahead in Sierra Leone.

However, despite such challenges, the Saints are faithful and the Church is thriving. As Mariatu Browne said, “We know that Heavenly Father is mindful of us. And when the Lord is with you, the Church sustains you, and you work together side by side, there is great reason for hope. As Saints in Sierra Leone, we are never alone.” ■