

LEARNING TO HOPE

Amid the horrors of a civil war, I found hope in a book and a plastic bag.

BY MARIAMA KALLON

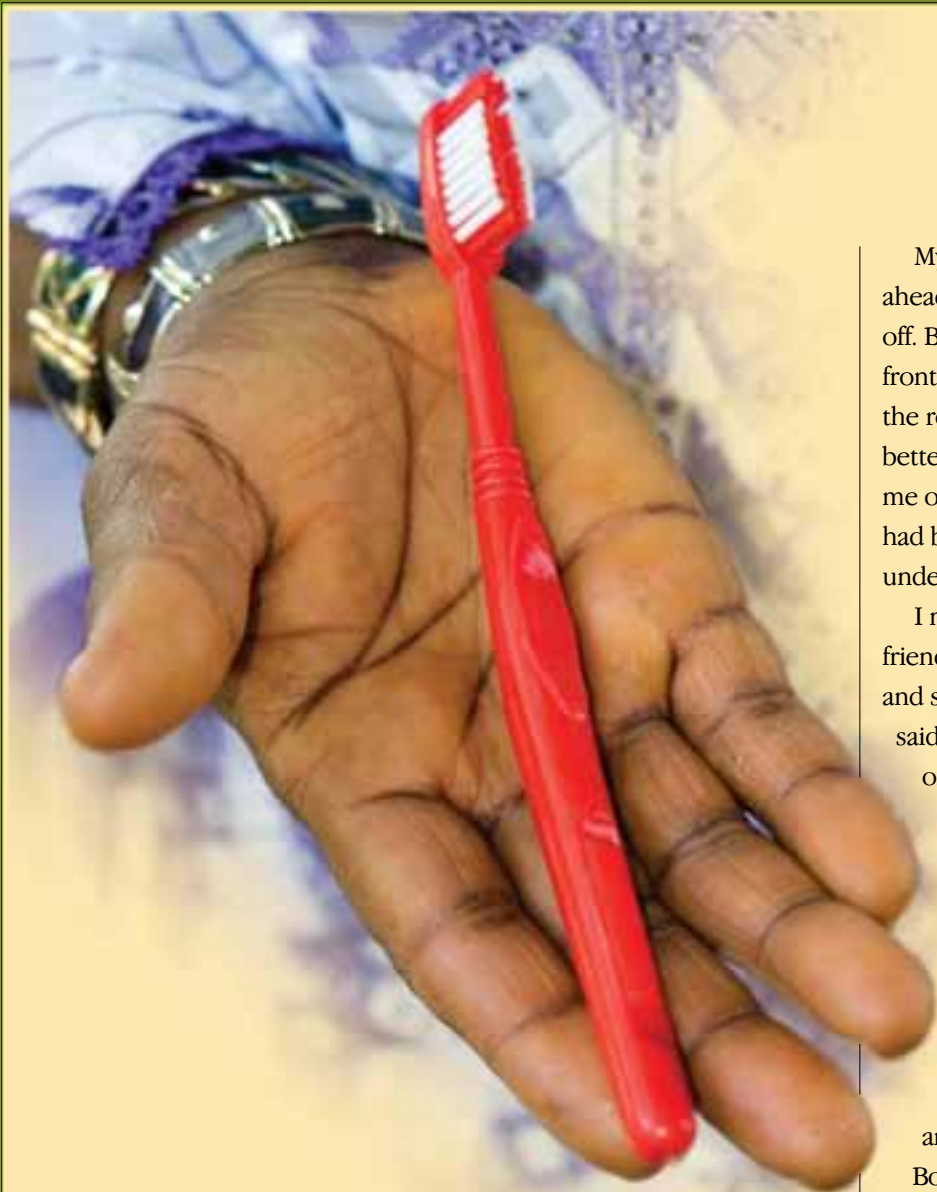
As told to Riley M. Lorimer, Church Magazines

Sierra Leone was a sad place during my teenage years, but it was my home. For much of my life, my small West African country was torn by a civil war. The war affected everything. My family and I were constantly on the run, trying to escape the rebel soldiers. It was terrifying every time the rebels came through a city. Someone would see their torches approaching in the night, warn the others, and we would all run for the bush, grabbing whatever we could along the way.

About seven years after the war began, the rebels came to our city. My whole family was running to escape, but my parents, who were just a few steps behind me, were shot and killed. I was so sad to lose them, but I had to keep moving.

Mariama Kallon, dressed in her traditional African clothing, holds one of her most precious possessions—a hygiene kit.





The Church sent food and humanitarian kits for members of the Church and others in Sierra Leone. I received a blanket and a hygiene kit. They were invaluable.

My brother, sister, and I moved to a safer place, and for a short while we were all right, but the rebels eventually hit that town too. This time we didn't have time to run away. My brother was taken and later killed. My sister and I were lined up outside with all the other women. The rebel soldiers were chopping off limbs of all the women in the line. We were all so frightened. Everyone was crying and praying—even people who had never believed in God before. I was not a member of the Church at the time, but I believed in God and prayed that His will would be done and hoped that He would find a way to save me.

My dear sister, who was several places ahead of me in line, had both of her legs cut off. But as the rebels reached the woman in front of me, our army came rushing in, and the rebels ran away. I know that I was not better than the people who were in front of me or behind me, but I thanked God that I had been spared and prayed that I might understand His plan for me.

I moved to another village to live with a friend. As I was telling my story to my friend and some of her neighbors, one neighbor said, "Mariama, we don't have anything to offer you except an invitation to church tomorrow. That's where we find safety. That's where we find hope." I loved God already and needed comfort in my life, so I decided to go.

My first Sunday in that Latter-day Saint branch is a day I will never forget. I learned of hope. You could just see that there was hope in those people, and I was drawn to them. I was given the Book of Mormon and started reading right away. I remember hearing in church about how families could be together again after death and then reading in Alma 11 where Alma teaches about how our bodies will be made perfect again in the Resurrection. I felt the Spirit so strongly as I thought of my family. I knew that the Church was true and that we could be together forever—each of us well and whole.

There were no missionaries in Sierra Leone at that time, so I took the lessons from my branch president and was baptized and confirmed soon after. We were blessed in our town because the Church sent food and humanitarian kits for the members of the Church and others. The food kept us all alive.

Everyone was so grateful even to receive a small bag of rice or beans. I received a blanket and a hygiene kit that included a toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, soap, a comb, and a washcloth.

Not long after, the rebels hit again. They burned down the house I was living in, and as I was running to escape the flames, I took time to save only two things—my scriptures and my hygiene kit. We had to live on the run for a while after that, and I used my hygiene kit to help those around me. I would squeeze out one pinch of toothpaste for each person, or we would go to the river and carefully pass my bar of soap from person to person. The kit was so precious to us. The blanket too was invaluable. It sheltered us for many days until I used it to wrap an old woman who had died and had nothing to be buried in.

Eventually, I went back to my town and my branch. It was then that I decided I wanted to serve a mission. This was a difficult decision for me because I had nothing and would be leaving behind people I loved. As I was trying to decide, I read D&C 84:81 and 88, which say, “Therefore, take ye no thought for the morrow, for what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, or wherewithal ye shall be clothed . . . for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.” I knew the Lord would care for me, so I turned in my mission papers and was called to the Utah Salt Lake City Temple Square Mission.

I arrived in Utah with practically nothing, but I insisted on bringing my hygiene kit because it meant so much to me. One day,

my companion and I were taking a tour of the Humanitarian Center in Salt Lake, and I recognized a blanket that had the Relief Society logo embroidered on it, just like the one I’d had in Sierra Leone. I looked around and saw hygiene kits like mine and familiar bags of beans and rice, and I began to cry.

“This is where they came from!” I thought to myself. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I remembered what these things sitting in stacks in the Humanitarian Center meant to my friends and to me in Sierra Leone. I was so grateful to the Lord for preserving me, for bringing the gospel into my life, and for allowing me to serve a mission. I knew that His angels truly had been round about me, to bear me up. ■

When I received my humanitarian kit, my stepsister received a school kit. She was the only child in her school who had paper. Carefully, she tore out one piece for each of her friends and broke her three pencils in half, giving one half to each friend. Every day, the children would write down their lessons and then gently erase everything each night so that they could use the sheet of paper again the next day. They were so grateful for the tools to learn.

