

Liberia 2009 #1

Wednesday found us on the road at 5:00 a.m. My revised flight itinerary took me to four countries before lunch. We left Nigeria, landed in Accra, Ghana, Abijan, Ivory Coast and finally Monrovia, Liberia.

The plane stopped in Abijan, I looked up at passengers boarding and saw Rene Mbongo, Partners International's USA Area Director for West Africa. I had asked him to join me to visit the Canadian West African partnerships. Our cancellations and change of plans put us on the same flight to the capital city Monrovia.

Liberia is a country founded by returned slaves from the southern United States. Their return in the early 1800's saw an Americo-Liberian dynasty that finally ended in the late 1980's. It ended bloodily and initiated over 14 years of war. Coup after coup ensued with hundreds of thousands slaughtered needlessly. 4 or 5 years ago, a new president was elected and the country entered a period of stability.

The damage has been horrendous with families, villages and whole cultures disrupted. The rebuilding has begun rapidly and there are signs of a very dynamic economy. The existing economy is miniscule at best. The roughly \$200 Million GDP is smaller than the New York Yankees payroll !

One of the great tragedies of the war is the orphans left by the incredible brutality. Our partners led us to an area deep in the bush of Liberia where hundreds of children were left to forage for themselves. They saw unspeakable horrors including their parents slaughtered in front of them.

We rented a 16 passenger 'worm-picker' van to travel back into the dense jungle of Liberia to visit the orphanage at Zuo. The brakes failed; the steering felt like rubber-bands and the fuel pump died just as we were arriving at the mission compound deep in the bush. We need to give GM more money so they can get these problems corrected☺ Thanks to the miracle of cell phones, we were able to stand on a hill in the jungle and call for backup 4WD to come and get the team.

The orphan kids were collected by the director, Bernard. They were living in absolute destitution in the remote forest. The broken down mission station was uninhabitable. The buildings had been destroyed by the fighting and weather had done the rest. Kids were sleeping on broken concrete floors. They had no food whatsoever and simply scrounged in the forest for nuts and berries.

Jerome Klibo, the Bishop of our partner churches, visited Canada 2 years ago and shared this story with my 87 year old mother-in-law, Lena Wideman. The Lord touched her heart to supply all the rice for a



year for the 80-90 kids. Jerome relates that he drove the shipment of rice personally to the orphanage. The kids were so excited to receive the rice, they were trying to unload the truck themselves, even though the bags weighed more than they did? They had never seen food come off a truck before.

David Miclash our team from Alongside International, went to help reconstruct one of the buildings and help them with crops, wooden beds, water supply and in other ways. They had a tremendous impact on the orphanage.



A visit to the orphanage is a life changing experience. I am haunted by these kids and will not be able to adequately tell the story. They are incredibly bright, warm kids. We were swarmed when we finally arrived deep in the jungle, several hours off the main road. You have to remind yourself that these kids had seen things no one should have to witness.

We stayed overnight in the jungle. I decided to spend time with the kids under the trees in the evening. It was cold overnight! The January temperature gets cool for equatorial Africa. The nice part is that there were no mosquitoes. I checked the kid's rooms and they

sleep with just a dirty sheet. Their clothes are rags.

A little guy, about 9 years old, snuggled up to me late in the evening. He put his head on my chest. It suddenly sunk in that the little guy had not had a mother or father to cuddle with for most of his life. He stayed there for about 20 minutes just enjoying having a 'grandpa' to cuddle with.

Orphans are not something we deal with regularly in Canada. The theory of God's pre-occupation with widows and orphans became something very tangible at that moment. There is no question that God expresses a bias and promises to judge us on how we treat them. It was never more apparent to me how vulnerable and exposed these orphaned children are to forces that would take advantage of them.

-Phil

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