

Report of visit to Sierra Leone June/July 2007.

Jane Knight

This was a private visit to spend time with long standing friends and to attend the 5th Anniversary celebration of the Bishop of Kenema's ordination. However I also had the opportunity to discuss OWL matters with various members of the OWL committee and the forthcoming visit of local councillors from Warwick District and Warwickshire to Bo City Council next November.

CONTEXT

I travelled to Freetown with 3 teachers from Kenilworth Sports College on a slightly nightmarish journey that left us sleeping the first night for 2 hours and hanging about tired out the next day for several hours at the British Council. Not a good start when they had to leave for the UK 4 days later.

I was in the country at a time of transition as the people wait for the elections on August 11th. Very little money is being released for any activities as donors sit and wait for the results and try to appear neutral in the run up to the elections. Thus the schools have not had their subsidies and the councils have not had the grants due to accompany the devolvement of powers process because without donor funds the government does not have enough money to maintain all its functions.

Mussa Conteh (ex MP and OWL founder) was trying to come to terms with the fact that he was one of the 67 out of 83 SLPP members of Parliament who have not been selected to stand again for Parliament. It will be interesting to see whether he will be appointed as a Minister which is the gift of the incoming President. It was also with a sense of pride that I heard the news that Momodu Koroma who has been a long standing friend of OWL has been chosen as the running mate for the Presidential candidate Mr. Solomon Berewa.



I was in Sierra Leone at the onset of the rainy season. Most of the roads were muddy, slippery and potholed. Despite buckets of rain falling just at the times fixed for meetings with OWL friends, we covered a lot of business. I also had an interesting meeting with a Mr. M Conteh, deputy administrator of Kenema.

Finally, for those of you who know Bishop Koroma, at least a thousand people came to the cathedral to attend his anniversary ceremony which was so moving. He traced the progress made from arriving in the diocese which had been very affected by the war and he has slowly with his people restored their communities and buildings. He had so many gifts processed by grateful members of his flock down to him at the altar including chickens and goats.



MEETINGS

1/7/07 Reception by OWL of visitors from Kenilworth



I popped into Bo for this occasion and was delighted to note how enthusiastic and happy the Kenilworth group were despite the difficult beginning. They had had a packed programme organised by their partners – Bo Govt. School - and were obviously delighted with all of it. Their sports partnership was being extended to QRS (Queen of the Rosary) girls' school as Bo Government School is male only. They were delighted also to see the OWL Centre and to meet Johannes Mallah and some of the committee.

3/7/07 David Ngombu, Joseph Bockarie, Mary Bakarr

In a brief early morning meeting I was told that it was the tail end of the school year and teachers were going on holiday. Some head teachers had not been able to close on time because they had to sort out results to qualify for subsidies that did not seem to be forthcoming.

I passed on our hopes to look at some of the issues raised re. the women's groups and what to do re. Aylesford school's request for responses to their post cards. Some of the postcards did not have contact details on them. So I told David to get letters anyway and they could be distributed among those who were interested. However we agreed that would not be possible now as the term is ended. He and Joseph thought that St. Andrews UCC School would be the best partner for Aylesford as they were linked with them before the war and when I spoke to Joseph later he confirmed the head is interested. I certainly remember visiting St. Andrew's School several times over the years with messages from Aylesford.

Kayoma women- Theresa, Catherine, Sally Kargbo and one other.

Theresa explained at some length how upset she had been about the various misunderstandings which arose re. the distribution of the sewing machines sent out from us. I explained that we were all happy at the Warwick end that the fault lay at our end and the matter was closed as far as we were concerned.

We then discussed the question of the Sisters in Development connection with Kayoma and what seemed like separate communications going between them and the women at our end re. pen friendships which were possibly duplicating the Kayoma pen friendships Theresa was trying to set up. We agreed that all arrangements should be coordinated by Kayoma.

Finally we discussed the problem arising from Kayoma's success. They originally had 8 groups under their umbrella and now they have 13. More and more women are joining Kayoma groups but the capital sum in the credit loan scheme is not enough for women to borrow and pay back with a profit to themselves and the capital fund. I hope that it will be possible for us to assist with this by raising some money to increase the capital reserve. Theresa said she would give us some figures to guide our decision. Such a situation can lead to difficulties among the members.

On the subject of shipments they said that if their requirements were available locally, it would be better for them to have money to buy locally rather than expensive shipments. What they particularly would like now in the next stage of their development would be a covered "shed" to house sewing machines and other equipment as well as space for training activities. They have some land and will let us know the costs which I fear may be a problem. Sally Kargbo deals in building materials and would give a good price although since the meeting I have heard a suggested sum was £24,000 which is totally out of our capacity or objective as a link..

Johannes Mallah, Maada and later Mary Bakarr and VV Bockarie.

Bo OWL has about £2000 left in their bank and they still have to "dress" the rooms with air conditioning and 3 digital satellite TVs. They are determined to have a high standard of accommodation to get best possible income. *(Photo shows committee on beds stored in hall for the bedrooms!)*



Johannes with the agreement of the rest of us was quite concerned that although it is good that DFID are completing the OWL centre, they have never informed OWL about what they are planning to do precisely, when they aim to be finished and how much they are giving us. He said he would like to be able to thank them but does not know what they are giving. I said I would contact DFID about this on my return.

Regarding the future of OWL centre, there has not been time recently (power supply refurbishments and school admin. needs etc) for sitting down together to work on the future arrangements. However they plan to do so soon, and will keep us informed of progress. Meanwhile what thoughts Bo OWL has had are similar to those discussed by us in Warwick.

There was a feeling that specific tasks like running the guest rooms and café should be franchised out to specialists in those fields and Owl would take a % of profits from then. Maada even asked "What are we going to do with the profits?!" I hope that will be a problem. Apparently Danny has suggested a possibility of Magnus coming over here to do a course on IT which would enable him to work on IT possibilities in the Centre.

- Questions re. managing the centre included:-
- Who should the centre target?
- Should they provide low cost meals?
- How big a profit should they aim for?
- Need for a business plan
- What kind of monument is Warwick going to have to make sure the link is permanently remembered?

I mentioned the generous donation from Kenilworth school and they thought it would be good to put it to the resource centre.

Maada is looking forward to visiting us with Johannes. All being well they may come October November to fit in with the climax of our anniversary year on November 10th.

We talked a bit about how to coordinate individual/sub group contacts between link partners and work out how they fit in with OWL proper, especially if they include fundraising. Such matters will be on the agenda when Johannes and Maada visit.

It was a great trip as all trips to Sierra Leone are and my thanks to my hosts, Bishop Koroma and Mussa Conteh while I was out there.



I will do a separate report for the local authority group. Basically I met the Administrator - Melvin Caulker (right), and Environmental Health officer –Eric Moosa -(left) and Wusu Sannoh (Mayor) and Joe Pyne (Deputy) and we discussed arrangements for the WCC and WDC visit in November.



There will hopefully be an exchange of information between the various people concerned so that the programme will be based on their pre visit communications. The administrator is anxious to visit us as soon as possible and the British High Commission are

willing to give us £1000 to pay for him.

Jane Knight
13/07/07