

## WORD IN ACTION



# The joy of the people

**The school that I attend**, St Anselm's College, Birkenhead, has had links with Sierra Leone since 1995 after our headmaster, Brother Senan Kerrigan, was ambushed and killed on the road during the civil war. Since

**Pietro Piccirillo** shares his experience of a recent school visit to Sierra Leone.

then the Christian Brothers linked our school with a fellow Christian Brothers school in Makeni. We have supported them and other schools in the Makeni area with economic aid, clothes, shoes and sports equipment which has helped their community immensely. Every year a group of twelve boys go to visit Makeni and see how the colleges work has helped. This year I was lucky enough to go.

### The first hour

The hardest part of the immersion for me was definitely the first hour. Seeing first-hand the reality of their lives truly hit me. People begging for clothes, money and

some for a plane ticket presumably to get away. The desperation could be seen in their faces and it was hard initially for me to cope with. Outside the gates of the airport there was a shanty town with hundreds of people going about their business at 10 o'clock at night, in the pitch black. I stared bewildered, how so many people could be present when only a dozen buildings could be seen. The more I thought about it, the more I remembered those Red Nose Day videos of how people lived in countries like Sierra Leone. Instantly it struck me, how I had always thought that these videos showed the worst possible situations in that country. However, now I understood that this is their daily life and the norm for the majority.

### Sister Mary Sweeney

You cannot visit Sierra Leone without hearing about the extraordinary work of Sister Mary Sweeney. Originally from Donegal, Ireland, she has spent the last forty years working tirelessly for the people of Sierra Leone. She



founded St Joseph's school for the hearing impaired and has selflessly devoted her energies to giving deaf children better opportunities in life. She has survived through the toughest parts of Sierra Leone's history and been evacuated three times. During the war, the rebels made the school their headquarters, using it as a makeshift hospital, with the nuns still on site. As the war intensified, the rebels installed ground-to-air missiles at the school and the nuns were forced to leave. One of the school buildings was used as a brothel which the soldiers were reluctant to relinquish, even when peace was achieved.

The school has played a huge role in Makeni and is one of the only sources of fresh water there. Malnutrition and stunted growth is common, impacting on the nation's capacity for development. Eight out of ten people in Sierra Leone are classified as poor by the UN. The work Sister Mary and her team of teachers do is heroic on many levels. Some of them haven't been paid for years and get by through doing other jobs outside the school.

Four decades on and Sister Mary is writing papers to help the government to develop a policy for special needs education.

### The Joy of the People

Though the country has suffered through an eleven year civil war, the Ebola crisis and a struggling economy, the people of Sierra Leone are very welcoming and respectful. They live in harmony together whether Muslim or Christian. They have a strong sense of community that never ceased to amaze me during my time there. Everything was done together whether it be cooking or singing. There was never a lonely moment, with this profound sense of community, helping people live their daily lives. Sierra Leone has fourteen tribes and each play a role in the country. Those in and around Makeni helped us with cooking and travelling, with one tribe baking bread for us and for St Joseph's school for the hearing impaired. We felt so welcomed from the first moment we stepped into the school and the children there were an absolute joy to get to know and to play with. This was certainly an unforgettable experience and one which will remain with me for the rest of my life. 🍷

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