



WHERE IN THE WORLD IS TODEE??

Mary van Son

Most of us here at Bush Hill Church know at least part of the fascinating story that answers this question. But for anyone not familiar with the whole story, here's a bit of background. It involves a country—Liberia—on the west coast of Africa. The country itself was founded by freed slaves from the U.S. in 1820. But there was already an indigenous population there, complete with its own rivalries, ethnic loyalties, and warlords. For some time Liberia did well. It became known for its academic institutions, iron mining, and rubber. But gradually unequal distribution of power and wealth smothered the harmony.

So, the story also involves a long, tortuous conflict. Tensions between indigenous warlords and those who descended from former American slaves exploded into 2 civil wars and 14 years of devastating destruction. Thousands of Liberians fled their homeland to survive. Among them were Ophelia and Carney Johnson, who found a new church home among us here at Bush Hill Church. For over a decade they were a blessing to us all, sharing their amazing experiences and faith. In August 2003, under intense international and U.S. pressure, the worst “bad guy” of the story, then President Charles Taylor, went into exile and let a transitional government take over. Two years later democratic elections were successfully held and Africa's first female head of state was elected. The Honorable Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated in January 2005. If we didn't pay much attention to the news in the papers, we certainly did when her brother, our own Carney Johnson, announced it in church. The majority of people would most likely have been happy to enjoy the victory and watch the rebuilding of Liberia from the comfort of their U.S. home. But Ophelia and Carney Johnson, while of retirement age, weren't ready to retire.

Here's where the initial question, “What is Todee?” is answered:

Todee Mission was founded in 1945 when a Liberian Presbyterian Minister persuaded the Paramount Chief, (Yes, there's even a chief in this story!) to donate land on which to establish a mission school, to be led by the Presbytery of Liberia. Chief Goba wanted to have the people in his district to have access to education and a brighter future. He donated the land, built the Goba Town Presbyterian Church and helped the mission school get its start. The Todee district, in a rural county of Liberia with about 50,000 inhabitants of mostly subsistence farmers, had not only a school but also the only school in the county providing a high school education. At its peak, Todee Mission had pipe-borne water, plumbing, and electricity supplied by generators. It had a large classroom/office building, principal's cottage, dorms for girls and boys, and a kitchen/office building. Best of all, it had 460 students, 152 of them boarding, and the students were receiving an education based on teaching the love and lessons of Jesus Christ.

In 2007 when the Johnsons felt God's call to return to Liberia and rebuild what was left of the school, it was in ruin. For a generation at least, the fight for survival made education irrelevant. The school was stripped of all that could be ripped off and carried away. Squatters and vegetation took over the shells of the buildings. Over the past three years, Ophelia and Carney have amazed us all with what they, by the grace of God, can accomplish. Despite the Johnsons having children and grandchildren in the U.S., their health problems necessitating frequent trips back to the U.S, and their working among teachers who have had war and deprivation in their lives, there is again a Presbyterian mission school at Todee!

As of the end of the 2009 school year, there were 99 students enrolled, 54 of whom board. Bush Hill Church can be proud and thankful of the support we have been able to give the rebuilding of Todee Mission. Dick Szymanski has been in constant motion solving problems like how to get money

transferred to Liberia and where to store enough items to fill a 400-foot container while the goods are packed for shipment. We've had fantastic support of all kinds from our own congregation as well as many other individuals and organizations.

The purpose of this article isn't to list all the things that have been shipped to Todee or all steps involved in furthering God's work. All this information is available at www.bushhill.org under Todee Mission. The purpose is to make sure we all can share the knowledge of this fascinating story. It is to, again, raise our awareness of this project that is still in so much need of our prayers and our help. Dick is deep in the planning of another shipment that may go as early as September. More information on this exciting project will be shared very shortly.

And while we're raising awareness of Todee, please watch for details soon on a screening of "Pray the Devil Back to Hell," a documentary recently released that tells how Liberia's women used the power of their faith to outmuscle some of the most powerful men in West Africa and force peace for their country. *Stay tuned!*