

Sierra Leone Initiative: Background

Sierra Leone is located on the Atlantic coast of western Africa between Guinea and Liberia. It is about the size of the state of South Carolina. The name Sierra Leone means "lion mountains." It has a hot tropical climate and is one of the wettest places in West Africa. It is home to many animals, including elephants, crocodiles, chimpanzees, monkeys, hippos, birds, and antelopes. Sierra Leone is divided into three regions: a coastal area, a forest covered central plateau, and a mountainous region in the east. Most people live in rural farming communities. 2/3 of the population engages in subsistence farming.

Agricultural products include rice, cocoa, coffee, palm, peanuts, poultry, cattle, sheep, and pigs. The diet of the people generally consists of rice, cassava, and leafy vegetables. A typical home is a mud hut with a dirt floor and a thatched roof. 60% of the population is Muslim, 30% is Christian, and 10% have indigenous beliefs.



Sierra Leone was a departure point for thousands of West African slaves in the 1600's and 1700's. 10% of the current population are descendents of freed slaves, known as Creoles, who established the capital of Freetown in the late 1700's. It was a British colony until 1961. The Creoles spoke a derivative of English known as Krio, and this is the most common language in the country today. The official language is English, but is only spoken by a minority of the population.

The church with which we have been partnered is the Yengema United Methodist Church in the Kono district, which is located in the mountains of eastern Sierra Leone. This area is known for diamond mining and was featured in the movie Blood Diamond. Although Sierra Leone has traditionally relied on diamond mining as the basis of its economy, the illicit diamond trade played a major role in funding and prolonging the Civil War and its human rights abuses. Due to a government crackdown there has recently been a dramatic decrease in the illegal diamond trade.

During the Civil war, which lasted from 1991-2002, 1/3 of the population was displaced and thousands died or were maimed by the rebels. Sierra Leone now has a constitutional democracy as its form of government. Sierra Leone has one of the lowest average incomes in the world. The average annual income is \$240. 3/4 of the population lives on less than \$2 per day and 1/2 of the population lives on less than \$1 per day. There are few job opportunities and few opportunities to start small businesses.

The social system is not well developed and there are few health and human services. Many people die of preventable or treatable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, and tuberculosis. 1% of the population is infected with AIDS. This is low in comparison to many African countries where the infection rate can reach 20%, but we are still talking about over 50,000 infected people, and thousands of children have been orphaned by the disease.

Here are some sobering statistics about the country of Sierra Leone.

- 1/2 of the population is undernourished.
- 1 in 5 children will die before the age of 5.
- Sierra Leone has the world's highest infant mortality rate.
- 2/3 of the adult population is illiterate.
- Only 41% of children are enrolled in schools.
- 43% of the population does not have access to clean water.
- The average life expectancy is 41 years.

In conclusion, we hope that you will join us in supporting the Sierra Leone Initiative. Scripture tells us to love our neighbors and to serve God. Our neighbors are not just the people in Linglestown, but throughout the world. We have been inspired by a book entitled [The Hole in the Gospel](#), to which Pastor George has referred in many of his sermons. Reading it has increased our understanding of third world poverty and how the Church can have a great impact on the lives of our brothers and sisters in third world countries. A small investment of time and money can bring about a great change in these places. Please join us in Loving God and Loving Others by supporting this initiative.

Jim and Karen Withrow