

Harford School for Girls

FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS HARFORD SCHOOL HAS BEEN PREPARING GIRLS IN SIERRA LEONE FOR LEADERSHIP. by **NILE SPRAGUE**



United Methodist Women scholarship student Jennifer Saiyu, 19, studies at Harford School for Girls in Sierra Leone.

Harford School for Girls is the oldest all-girls school in Sierra Leone, located about 100 miles from the country's capital, Freetown, in the Moyamba District. Although established as the Harford School for Girls in 1900, it began in 1887 as the Mary Sowers Home for Girls in Rotifunk, a mission effort of one of United Methodist Women's

predecessor organizations, the Woman's Missionary Association of the United Brethren Church. United Methodist Women today continue to support the school.

Harford served students from all over the country until January 1995, when the civil war that started in 1991 finally forced it to close. The 11-year war took the lives of 50,000 people, destroyed the country's infrastructure and forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. During this time, a makeshift school was established in another location. By late 2000 the hostilities began winding down. People were able to return to their homes, and the school reopened.

Today Harford serves 700 girls, about 300 of whom are residential students boarding on campus, including 19-year-old Jennifer Seiyia.

"My favorite subject is literature because it teaches me how to speak and how to express myself to other people," Ms. Seiyia said. "I want to be a lawyer. I really admire those practicing in that field."

Ms. Seiyia is one of three students receiving United Methodist Women scholarships that are awarded based on need, participation in church functions, performance in school and good character.

"I feel good about coming here and getting the scholarship because the burden on my parents is reduced," she said. "I was given the scholarship because I

was working hard and doing well in school. I am very grateful because without this support I would not be able to come to this school."

Ms. Seiyia is the youngest of four brothers and two sisters. Her father is a minister and her mother a teacher.

"Sometimes I feel sad because I'm living away from my family, and I miss them," she said. "But I know that if I want to pursue my education I have to spend time away from my family, and that I'm just here for a moment of time, and I will go back and join them."

Harford School has a junior secondary curriculum for 10- to 15-year-olds and senior secondary classes for 16 to 21 year-olds. Students in the junior school study a broad range of general subjects, and then must pass a test to enter the senior school, where they choose a specialty on which to focus their education. Specialties include arts, science, domestic science and business management.

In a normal day, residential students wake at 5:30 a.m., do their chores, and then come to the cafeteria for breakfast. School goes from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., with a 40-minute lunch break at noon and dinner served at 5. In the evenings after school, the girls wash their clothes, do other chores and their homework, sing, practice musical instruments, and play. Every three months the school has vacation for several weeks and residential students return home to visit their families.



Nile Sprague



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Sierra Leone United Methodist Women supports day programs for preschoolers, left, while older girls, below, attend Harford School.



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Scholarship student Mary Battu Charles, 15, lives with her family and walks the 30-minute trip to school each day. She's the youngest of three girls and her father works for the World Food Program while her mother teaches home economics.

"I am studying an alternative subject — business management — so my class size is small," she said. "I want to continue to university and then work in business management after I com-

plete my schooling.”

“The girls who receive the scholarships are good students and work very hard. We are proud of them,” said Harford School Principal Lucrecia Marian Shereen, who also attended the school as a young woman.

Early childhood education

United Methodist Women of Sierra Leone support the work at Harford School. The women’s mission organization opened a preschool and day care next-door to the Harford School in 1985 to care for teachers’ children while they worked. In 1995 the program expanded to accept other children from the community, but it soon closed because of the civil war.

Like the Harford School, the preschool’s buildings were vandalized during the war. Zinc roofing sheets, all the furniture and even the then newly installed windows were taken.

In 2002 the center reopened. United Methodist Women’s Mission Giving helped administrators repair the buildings, put up fencing, build an amphitheatre and get new furniture. Today the institution serves 142 children in the preschool and 15 3- to 5-year-old children in day care. The school is overcrowded and needs to expand again.

“Without the day care and preschool, these children would be at home and vulnerable,” said Sarah Jalloh, the head teacher at the preschool and day care. “It would be difficult for their parents to work, or they would have a large financial burden because they would have to pay caretakers. When they bring their children to this preschool, they know they are in good hands, safe, fed and looked after properly.”

The program was free, supported entirely by the United Methodist Church.

However, when the center reopened in 2002, administrators recognized that arrangement was no longer sustainable. “We had to take up some of the responsibility ourselves,” Ms. Jalloh said. “Today, the parents pay 21,000 Leones [about U.S. \$5] every three months for each child. The price is low so that families can afford it.”

A typical day starts with 8 a.m. devotions, then the children begin classes, including religion, arithmetic, alphabet writing, rhymes and poetry and a 30-minute lunch break.

“We typically serve rice with a sauce of cassava or potato leaves and vegetables, fish or meat,” Ms. Jalloh said. “The kids appreciate meat because they don’t normally get it at home.”

Children in the day care stay until 3 p.m. when their parents pick them up.

Help for women

United Methodist Women in Sierra Leone also has three women’s vocational training centers for women, said Beatrice Pfofanah, national women’s coordinator of the United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone.

“We train the women to do sewing, traditional *gara* cloth dyeing, weaving, and hairdressing,” Ms. Pfofanah said. “We also teach basic adult literacy so the women can read and write or at the least sign their names. And, of course, we do a lot of Bible studies to lift up their spiritual lives.”

Eighty percent of the women in Sierra Leone are illiterate. Sierra Leone United Methodist Women provides opportunities for young women and girls who cannot afford schooling or who have dropped out of school. “We want to help women who are illiterate learn skills so that they can become self-reliant,” Ms. Pfofanah said.

Sierra Leone has the worst infant and under-5 mortality rates in the world. The country’s infant mortality rate is about 16 percent, and its under-5 mortality rate is about 28 percent, according to the 2006 United Nations World Population Prospects report. This is number 195 on the U.N. listing, the worst in the index.

Ms. Pfofanah said Sierra Leone United Methodist Women’s mission programs emphasize health care and encourage women to visit the doctor when they are pregnant to get prenatal care.

“At our vocational training centers and annual workshops we educate women about prenatal care, prevention of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS infant mortality, maternal mortality, under-5 mortality, safe motherhood, hygiene, sanitation, clean environment, clean water, and hand washing,” Ms. Pfofanah said.

Like the schools, the Sierra Leone women’s training centers were looted, unroofed, vandalized and generally destroyed during the war, Ms. Pfofanah said. “All our equipment was gutted away, and we are now struggling to put the centers back on course.”

With the Sierra Leone women’s own resourcefulness and hard work along with help from U.S. United Methodist Women’s Mission Giving, the centers are gradually recovering.

“We now hold two or three workshops each year, and 40 or 45 women graduate from our centers annually,” Ms. Pfofanah said. “Little by little, we are rebuilding, and helping the women and communities of Sierra Leone recover from the devastation of war.”



Nile Sprague is a photojournalist covering the work of nonprofit organizations.