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Solar Oven Partners UMC

Dakotas Conference Mission Newsletter for SOP UMC

“Be Careful When You Say ‘Yes’ to God”

The seven members of the Solar Oven Partners (SOP) UMC mission team settled into the Freetown office of United Methodist Bishop John K. Yambasu. It was time to review the impact of its first pilot project in Africa. Over the past six days in March, this motley group of South and North Dakotans had demonstrated the wonder of solar cooking to more than 90 people in three regions of Sierra Leone, a country of more than seven million people along the coast of West Africa.

The reports that this Bishop of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference was receiving from the ground were positive. He had even taken time out of his busy schedule to see the ovens at work at one of the sites. In a country blessed with heat and sun, but besieged with more than 60% of its population living in poverty, limited access to safe drinking water and a rapid deforestation rate, the need for a solar oven program seemed obvious. With a strong partnership through the United Methodist Church of Sierra Leone, the prospects looked promising.

“I think this is a God-sent ministry,” said Bishop Yambasu, adding with a smile, “Be careful when you say ‘yes’ to God, because you never know where it will take you.”

Saying ‘yes’ to a Milbank connection

The opportunity for SOP to say ‘yes’ to the possibility of Sierra Leone as a new mission field began months earlier with a conversation between then-SOP Director Rick Jost and Roger and Melanie Reiners, long-time mission partners to Sierra Leone and members of Milbank Central United Methodist Church in Milbank, SD. The Reiners are deeply involved

with the operation of the Lowell and Ruth Gess UMC Eye Hospital, formerly Kissey Eye Clinic, in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital. The Reiners felt that the people they’ve come to serve and love in Sierra Leone could benefit greatly from a solar oven ministry.

“Because of this special connection to the Sierra Leone UMC, and Roger’s willingness to travel with the SOP mission team to provide the introductions and get us up-and-running on the ground, being invited by the Bishop to run a

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Bishop Yambasu, left, discusses the concept of solar cooking with SOP's Rick Jost during a demonstration in Bo, Sierra Leone.



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Be Careful When You Say ‘Yes’ to God (cont.)



From left to right: Roger Reiners, Pastor Phil Lint, Rick and Lorna Jost, Barbara Krumm, and Connie and Bill Smith were part of the mission team involved in the pilot project in Sierra Leone.

pilot project this year provided an amazing opportunity to assess the possibilities for a significant solar cooking project in Sierra Leone,” said Rick. As a result, SOP shipped 20 ovens, tools, and supplies ahead of the mission team, again benefitting from this special connection in the form of space made available in a sea container being loaded with supplies for the eye hospital.

Sierra Leoneans enthusiastically say ‘yes!’

The goal of the pilot project, explained Smart Senesie, director of Missions and Development for the UMC of Sierra Leone, was to learn more about solar cooking, to gauge the interest of the people, and to train community and church leaders so that they could train others. Approximately 30 teachers, pastors and lay leaders converged at each of three strategically selected sites—Freetown, Makeni and Bo.

The excitement was palpable as youth, women and men quickly became solar oven assemblers with the help of mission team members; and women, dressed in their beautifully colored and patterned dresses, chatted in their native Krio as they cut

up onions, pepper, chicken and squash, or mixed up the makings of pineapple-upside-down cake, or kneaded French bread dough. Once food was in the ovens they sat intently as team members, with help from local translators, explained the concept and benefits of solar cooking. “The people who came were happy,” said the Rev. Winston Ashcroft, director of Connectional Ministries for the UMC of Sierra Leone. “They were actually participating in every step of the program.”



Participants learn to put the ovens together as well as how to cook with them.

Even during the two days in Bo, when the sun was uncharacteristically behind clouds, they marveled at eggs that had enough sunshine to cook to a hard-boiled stage—with the translator peeling and then popping an egg in his mouth to the delight of the participants. After each two-day demonstration, ovens were left at each location—10 in Freetown and five each in Makeni and Bo—to be used to spread the solar oven experience to others throughout the country.

Once the SOP mission team returned home, Rick received confirmation of another ‘yes.’ An e-mail from Bishop Yambasu said it best: “Following a review of your visit and the potential impact the solar oven project will have on the people of Sierra Leone, I take this opportunity to invite your organization, Solar Oven Partners, into a new mission partnership with the Sierra Leone Annual Conference with the specific goal of providing solar ovens for the impoverished people of Sierra Leone.” The SOP Board of Directors and the Sierra Leone UMC will now define the details of that partnership.

Our supporters saying ‘yes’ to new mission fields

Toward the end of the 15-day mission trip, while the team waited for its flight out of Freetown and back to the U.S., Rick reflected on the fact that this new opportunity, along with a growing program in the Dominican Republic, is possible because partners from across the Dakotas Conference and beyond have been so generous in their support of this ministry. In other words, they continue to say “yes” to God through their financial support and volunteer efforts. Isn’t it amazing where God takes us when we say ‘yes’?



Already developing local leadership .

Sierra Leone is located on the coast of West Africa. The capital is Freetown. To the north and west is the country of Guinea and to the southeast is Liberia.



The climate is marked by a dry season, which runs from approximately November to April and a wet season, from May to October. This means that our teams will target the months of the dry season—corresponding to our winter months—for mission trips, as solar cooking is not possible without sunshine!

Why Solar Ovens Matter in Sierra Leone

When the sun is slow in coming out behind clouds at Makeni, Fredrica Saffa and other women quickly round up a traditional charcoal stove to cook rice and stew for hungry participants until the solar oven food is ready.

While lighting the charcoal she shares her excitement about solar cooking. First, the sun is free. "Everything is expensive now," says Fredrica. One estimate is that a week's worth of charcoal for a family of five costs anywhere from 15,000 to 25,000 Leones (the Sierra Leone currency)—equivalent to \$2 to \$4—depending on where you live. In a country where 60% of people live on less than US\$1.25 per day, \$0.28-\$0.57 for cooking fuel each day represents almost a quarter to a half of people's limited income literally going up in smoke.

But it's not just about cost. As Fredrica lifts the large metal pot on top

of the small stove she complains about the smoke and heat. "You see a lot of smoke. It burns my eyes, and the pot is hot and very heavy. You can see my hands," she says, pointing to scars. "They get burned. It is painful. And you have to keep watching your food on the fire. If you go to do something else, the food burns."

Sierra Leone is also seeing the painful impact of charcoal and



Fredrica Saffa starts a traditional charcoal stove with help from a friend in Makeni, Sierra Leone.

firewood production on its environment—speeding deforestation. "What we are now facing is worrying," says Gaskin Amara, a teacher and church leader at Makeni United Methodist Church. "About 95% of our citizens use firewood and charcoal to prepare their food. If we don't have a substitute for charcoal I wonder what will happen in the next 20 to 25 years, especially with the threat of climate change. Solar cooking can be a way to drastically minimize this menace that lies ahead."

To Edwin Momoh, who came to observe the demonstrations in Freetown, solar cooking could be part of the solution to a host of issues caused by a heavy reliance on charcoal and firewood. "Sunlight is easy and free for us," says the Secretary to the Sierra Leone UMC Annual Conference. "We do have sunlight, but are we using it? We have the forests, but we have been deforesting and leaving our lands bare. There are better ways of cooking without having to fan the fire, go to find firewood...It is about stewardship. This is God's work you are doing and it is so exciting for us."

Ovens Ready for Ongoing and New Possibilities

The emerging solar oven partnership with the United Methodist Church of Sierra Leone is an exciting development, but other doors are also opening for SOP. On July 9, a mission team will leave for Arizona to conduct a pilot project on the Navajo Reservation. Team members include SOP Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio, Rick and Lorna Jost, Dave Silbernagel, Joshua Krumm and Charlie Schnabel. SOP is partnering with FaithWorks, a far-reaching, multifaceted, ecumenical outreach based in Flagstaff.

In addition, SOP mission teams head to the Dominican Republic July 22-August 2 and in mid-December. The July team, led by SOP Board Member Gloria Borgman, will include Gloria's husband Ron, Marj, Pastor Scott McKirdy, United Methodist college student Zona



Hairgrove, Marlys Larsen, Christine Davis and Bruce Robinson. Reservations for the December trip, to be led by Marj, will open once specific dates are determined.

More good news is coming out of the Dominican Republic partnership. Under the leadership of SOP's in-country Director Erasme Figaro, local teams have begun training and distributing ovens. In January, 28 ovens were distributed in Batey La Jagua, a community comprised of Haitian sugar cane workers. In February, a team returned to La Jagua to see if ovens were being used and to answer any questions or concerns. One woman had actually started a bread business with her oven! Twelve more ovens were distributed in Santana, Nizao, a community of small farmers and cane workers. And in April, a five-member team, including Rev. Figaro and Global Ministries missionaries Gordon and Ardell Graner, conducted three seminars, distributing an additional 96 ovens.

SOLAR OVEN PARTNERS UMC

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SOP's Focus Continues Under New Leadership

Solar Oven Partners UMC's purpose has always been clear: to demonstrate *Christian Love in Action* by placing solar cookers in the hands of the poor to alleviate human suffering and environmental destruction. The new director of SOP is ready and willing to take up that mission and lead SOP into the future.

Marjorie (Marj) Evans-de-Carpio came onboard in mid-March, first with a 1,700-mile Tour of Introduction across the Dakotas Conference, followed by a month-long over-lap with retiring Director Rick Jost. Marj brings a passion for the solar oven ministry and an extensive background in the skills needed to build cross-cultural relationships. Fluent in Spanish, she holds a BA in Spanish and Ibero-American Studies and a Masters of Divinity. She has served as a certified Spanish interpreter for the Minnesota Judicial Branch, assisted immigrants transitioning into Minnesota, and is a trainer with the Kaleidoscope Institute, an ecumenical institute that trains clergy and church members in building knowledge and skills to effectively minister across cultural differences.

The new director also brings a deep understanding of the Dominican Republic, where SOP is now working. Her husband Lalo, hails from the Caribbean nation, and she started and operated an English-language school when the couple lived in the DR for close to two years.

In visiting SOP supporters across the Conference, Marj



Marj Evans-de-Carpio

says she is continually reminded of the impact this ministry has—both on those it serves and those who are invested through their giving of dollars, talents and time. “I’m very aware that this is a well-respected and supported ministry, and that the responsibility of something really precious is in my hands,” says the new director.

In the meantime, Rick Jost has not stepped away from the SOP ministry. “I will continue to serve as a volunteer,” he says, explaining that he’ll manage the manufacturing of ovens at the Volga workshop and occasionally lead mission trips. He says the program developments and successes in the Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone (West Africa), and coming soon to the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, should keep the Solar Oven Partners community fully engaged. “There seems little doubt that my retirement project of managing the workshop holds a very promising and busy future for me as a volunteer.”

He adds that he’ll always be thankful to the Solar Oven Partners family. “Seventeen years and 10,000-plus ovens later, I remain in awe of our many volunteers, donors, and solar oven recipients,” says Rick. “Their excitement and understanding of the great opportunity and even greater need for this ministry continue to amaze. The month-long transition period in bringing Marj onboard as the new director has gone smoothly and the future of Solar Oven Partners is filled with sunshine!”