

Experiencing Community and Faith in Sierra Leone: Earlier this year by invitation, I visited Mattru on Rail, a village located just outside Bo, Sierra Leone. This village is a community of people directly or indirectly affected by the amputation of an extremity during the recent civil war. Similar to many of the meetings that I attend, we opened with prayer. Unlike most, however, this small community opened in prayer from both the Muslim and Christian traditions. Everyone was quiet and respectful. At the group's direction, the meeting was opened with a Muslim prayer, and immediately thereafter a Christian prayer was offered and closed with the group saying the Lord's Prayer. For a brief few moments all I could do was reflect upon how peaceful and in harmony was this group of people, missing arms and legs, and how they used the moment of silence to embrace us all. This display of community has reminded me of our mission to serve everyone with an emphasis on listening.

I will confess that as I looked across the table they placed before me, I began to see individuals. I noticed a person with one arm waiving it to emphasize a point. To his right a woman with no arms below the elbow was leaning against a pillar. To her right a woman was sitting on the edge of the rotunda with her artificial left leg extending into the center of the group. To my right were still more people standing or leaning without legs or on artificial limbs we, through UMCOR, have provided. This is a faith community brought together by the indiscriminate use of landmines and war.



Amara Lappia, Manager of the Artificial Limb Program, talks with a community member who needs an adjustment on her artificial limb. Photo by Ted Warnock

This meeting was unlike many I have attended in other ways. The group did not ask for personal assistance. Rather, they asked for what we might be able to do to assist their community. They asked how we might be able to provide seeds to community garden plots of land. They asked if we could help them fix a plow to allow them to prepare more land. They asked if we might be able to assist in leasing more land to sow larger crops to feed more people as well as sell for income. They asked if we could provide assistance in finding ways to get their crops to the market for sale. Only once was a request made to inquire into the status of remote operated arms. We have been seeking to find a viable way to incorporate these arms into the prosthesis program. This village has truly found community.

As we neared the end of the meeting, several of the younger men asked me if I would join them later in the week when they had a practice football (soccer) scrimmage scheduled. You must forget all your preconceived thoughts about "how could these people missing arms and legs play football". I said I would love to attend and after more photos the meeting ended with me wondering why anyone would want to play football without arms and legs. And, how does playing football "fit" into this community?

Saturday morning came quickly and I again saw faith and their community in the form of a football game. The members were about to begin their scrimmage and were huddled around their football. I stopped, knelt down and took this photo while they were in prayer and reflection. As they prayed, I looked into the center of this group and “clearly” saw their football through missing legs.



*Matru on Rail Football Club and their members are part of a Sierra Leone Country-wide League of Amputees.
Photos by Ted Warnock*



With many villagers watching, their team began their warm-up with running in track-like fashion on crutches. It was not an idle walk; they were running. Lap after lap they ran until I was sure that they must now have fulfilled their coach’s expectations. I was wrong. Next came sprints across the field. Forward, and then back again. This time – no crutches. And, just to make sure they were truly ready, final preparation included laying their crutches before them and jumping side to side and back again.

The team selected the persons without an arm to be the goalies and then the game began. The volume intensified as the kicking of the ball moved from end to end. Arms and leg extended as they moved the ball around the field with an intensity that I seldom see in competitive play. They were engaged and this was serious sports at its best. With a swift kick of the ball and seeing a one armed goalie catch it and kick it back into play, the community spectators cheered. For a while I forgot they were playing without arms and legs. I again reflected – this is a community of strong and faithful people. Even though they were severely traumatized by an internal war, they demonstrate fortitude and creativity to meet great challenges and be productive citizens.



Follow-up. Yes, we will be working with this community and have already started the process of seeking resources to help them meet their community goals. Program manager, Amara Lappia, works in partnership with the United Methodist Church and UMCOR.

If you are interested in becoming a partner with this program, you may direct your gifts through the General Health and Ministry Programs, Advance #982580.

*Note: Their regional president – far right and standing is standing on two artificial legs provided through this program.
Photo by Ted Warnock*

For full size Photos (and a few more) as well as a few select video clips, click: [Matru on Rail](#)

Respectfully submitted by Theodore R. Warnock, United Methodist Missionary for Special Projects – UMCOR Global Health - 4 June 2013