

Rotifunk Hospital Re-Opens



Bishop John K. Yambasu, The United Methodist Church of Sierra Leone, during the opening ceremony where he presented the keys and dedicated the re-opened hospital.

By Julia Frisbie*

June 19, 2014—On May 24 in Rotifunk, Sierra Leone, thousands of young people spilled into the main streets cheering for the United Methodist Hatfield Archer Memorial Hospital. They held banners and signs aloft as they crowded around the renovated building. “It was very moving,” says Ted Warnock, representative for the [United Methodist Committee on Relief \(UMCOR\)](#) at the joyful event. “This hospital will provide services to one of the poorest regions in Sierra Leone.”

A trailblazing history

Front entrance to Rotifunk Hospital.
Photo: Ted Warnock

Rotifunk is in the Moyamba District in southern Sierra Leone. We often say that our United Methodist health facilities can be found in remote places, at the end of the road; in this case, the hospital is beyond where the road ends. It can only be reached by ferry. Yet, this hospital has existed for just over a century.



It was started by a United Brethren of Christ missionary from Ohio, Dr. Marietta Hatfield. She applied to the Women's Missionary Association while still in medical school and became its first dedicated medical missionary when she traveled alone to Rotifunk in 1891. She started a health clinic, and in her first year of mission she singlehandedly treated more than 1,600 patients on an operating budget of only \$30 per month (from *Mission Work in Sierra Leone, West Africa*, by Job Smith Mill, 1898).

Dr. Hatfield became the hospital's namesake, along with Dr. Mary C. Archer, who joined her in Rotifunk three years later. Both these courageous women were killed in the 1898 uprising against the British. But the mission agency sent more staff and rebuilt the clinic, gradually expanding it into a full-fledged hospital treating more than 66,000 patients each year. Its [missionary doctors](#) began training local women to be midwives as early as 1953.

In 1968, when the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged, the Rotifunk hospital became a United Methodist mission. During the 1992-2002 civil uprising in Sierra Leone, the hospital was burned down. Most of the staff fled. The hospital's charred and empty shell was used as a primitive clinic.

Building bridges across continents

A new maternity unit in the Rotifunk hospital will support maternal and child health care needs. Photo: Ted Warnock



Dr. Martin Thormodsen is a United Methodist in Haugesund, on Norway's western coast. He is struck by the similarities and differences of

Norway and Sierra Leone. "We both have high mountains and a lot of rivers, the coastlines are rich with fish, and the populations are both around 5 million. But then," he writes, "the similarity stops. Sierra Leone has 100 medical doctors, Norway has over 25,000. Under-five mortality in Sierra Leone is 15 percent; in Norway it is 0.2 percent. Average life expectancy in Sierra Leone is between 40 and 50 years; in Norway it is over 80 years. Illiteracy is abundant in Sierra Leone. In Norway it is practically non-existent."

In 2004, Dr. Thormodsen visited Sierra Leone with a suitcase full of clothes, outgrown by his own children, to give away. When he saw an emaciated girl named Mayenni wearing his own daughter's sweater, he was overcome. "I could not forget this little girl," he wrote in an email to UMCOR Global Health Director Shannon Trilli. "I felt responsible for her." When he returned to

Norway, he wrote a touching ballad about Mayenni and [started fundraising](#) for the Rotifunk hospital. Since then, the [United Methodist Church in Norway](#) has provided funding and expertise to completely renovate the hospital.

[Wrightsville Beach United Methodist Church](#) in North Carolina has also been touched by the story of Rotifunk. They've sent three mission teams to Sierra Leone over the past decade to help improve infrastructure and build a potable water system. "This hospital will impact hundreds of thousands of people," said Rev. Eddie Gleaves, one of Wrightsville UMC's pastors. "To be an instrument of Christ's love and healing that way is a tremendous blessing for us."

UMCOR has supported the work in Rotifunk with a grant of \$180,000 over three years to provide salaries for a staff of 27. The government in Sierra Leone is also a critical partner. Rotifunk will serve as a distribution hub for bed nets in the area, along with other lifesaving medical supplies from the Sierra Leonian Health Department.

Celebrating a new start

The hospital operating room in Rotifunk. Photo: Ted Warnock

Construction on the new hospital is finished, staff members have been hired, and two weeks ago the hospital opened its doors for business. It has electricity, running water and can now provide lab testing, surgery and dentistry. Maternal and child health is a big emphasis.



Sierra Leone's president, [Dr. Ernest Bai Korona](#), was slated to speak at the opening ceremony. Although he was unable to attend, both President Korona and the First Lady have been huge supporters of United Methodist health work in the country.

Representatives from Norway and North Carolina were present. "It was a wonderful experience," says UMCOR's Warnock.

After Bishop John K. Yambasu presented the keys and dedicated the hospital, cheers from more than a thousand people rose on the air and made this rural setting seem like an amphitheater. When the cheering died down, the singing began. "Now thank we all our God," they rang out, "with heart and hands and voices!"