

The Providence Pilgrim.

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Captain's Corner Nathaniel Koliyah

A few years ago I attended Gabriel Wehjala's graduation reception. He had just received his Juris Doctorate, JD, from Roger Williams School of Law. For me, I had just gone to grab a bite. When I had gone half way into my plate, Gabriel patted me on the shoulder and asked if I could be the master of ceremony. I turned and said, "I thought we were just here to eat." He said "yeah, but just to say a few words to family members and friends, nothing serious." I hesitated. Then he said, "okay NBK, could you just introduce me?" I had eaten too much of his food, so I obliged.

To introduce Gabriel, I recounted my acquaintance with the many struggles he encountered while in pursuit of higher education. Based on where he comes from, I touched on the meaning and significance of his successful completion of law school. One being that fresh out of a college in a third world country, Ghana, he went straight to a law school in an advanced society, the US, and successfully completed it. I then argued that it could serve as an example and inspiration for graduate students directly out of Liberia and maybe other African countries. I was not suggesting that Gabriel's was the only success story. I was only acknowledging that studies in fields such as law could prove intimidating to many, especially students from less developed societies. I don't remember everything I said, introducing Gabriel, since my remarks were impromptu. Most importantly, I don't know how well I showed my profound respect for the occasion. Anyway, Gabriel's daughter, Edwina, interrupted me, proudly saying, "that's my dad!" So I hope I did some good.

However, as we all went our separate ways, I was not sure if I had adequately revealed my innermost thoughts to describe what Gabriel's story means to me, and possibly for others. Therefore, many days I pondered as to how best I could have adequately introduced

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Gabriel and his success story. Then it hit me. The meaning of my dear friend's story is no less important to me than of a sermon that continues to have profound influence on me since I heard it about ten years ago. Oh, how I wish I had ascribe Gabriel's story to the teachings of this sermon to the audience at the reception. For in fact, to me, nothing more practically defines the true meanings of the sermon.

The sermon was based on John 9:1-7. As you may recall it speaks about Jesus and His disciples meeting a man who was blind from birth. Assuming that the man was blind because of sin, Jesus' disciples asked who sinned. Jesus said that the man was blind, not because of sin, rather "...so that the work of God might be displayed in His life." I was blessed to have heard this sermon. I heard it just weeks after my arrival in the US. It helped me immensely. I was hurting at the time, perhaps traumatized from the devastating effects of the civil war in Liberia. The sermon not only helped me, it shapes me, changes my views on life. I believe that the 'work of God is also displayed in Gabriel's educational success.

You see Gabriel was very close to graduation at the University of Liberia when rebels overran the school during the Liberian Civil War thereby erasing years of his hard work. He and I became well acquainted in Sierra Leone where we all sought refuge. We attempted to enroll at the University of Sierra Leone; but we did not succeed. Then a civil war also engulfed Sierra Leone and he fled with his family to a number of West African countries. Even though he was running for his life from country to country and well penniless, Gabriel never lost his desire and quest for higher education. He managed to enroll in the University of Ghana. When it was time to march during graduation, his transition to the US did not permit him. Here in the US, he headed straight to law school, which he completed. Rev. Melvin Sensenig described him as a man "with a long journey behind him." A few days before his graduation,

Gabriel and I visited Rev. Sensenig, who had just undergone surgery. When Gabriel informed Rev. Sensenig about his scheduled graduation ceremony, the Reverend remarked, "Gabriel, you have a long road behind you." Rev. Sensenig captures it all too well. Truly, despite overwhelming difficulties, Gabriel did not give up. He endured through much suffering, and I praise God in seeing His work displayed in Gabriel's life.



I find Gabriel's story inspiring and I believe some people, especially Liberians will agree. Many Liberians must have asked why so much suffering has befallen us in the past years and if at all we could recover and return to normal life. Learning from Gabriel's story we can't become despondent. Rather, we must keep enduring. This has been the prayer. While I pray that our FATHER'S will be done in Liberia, I pray with faith that through it all Liberia and Liberians may recognize and glorify God for His work displayed in and through difficult times. Amen.



LIBERIA, WHICH WAY NOW? Gabriel Wehjala



The hopes and aspirations of many Liberians for enjoying a period of real peace and tranquility after more than two and a half decades of war and chaos were pinned on the outcome of the recent

Liberian general (presidential and parliamentary) elections. Liberians had hope the elections will provide a real alternative to war. When the Liberian National Elections Commission (NEC) finally announced the official results of the general elections on November 23, 2005 Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a 66 year old wealthy widow, was declared the winner of the presidential elections. Will the long awaited dreams of many Liberians be realized under Madam Johnson-Sirleaf?

Certainly, history was made with the election of Liberia and Africa's first female President. The new commander in chief also holds an impressive academic and professional resume. In the ordinary scheme of things, the country could not have hoped for any better choice. However, the Liberian saga has been anything but ordinary. And, the new face on the block does bring unenviable baggage with her to the country's highest office. If one subscribes to the philosophy that one's past deeds indicates how a particular individual is likely to behave in the future, then one can understand why a number of Liberians and some observers of Liberian politics were circumspect about the election of the "Iron Lady". To understand why some have decided to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, it is helpful to take a brief look as to how and why Africa's oldest independent republic, Liberia, got into the mess in the first place.

Liberia was "founded" in 1821 by the American Colonization Society (ACS) for the purpose of resettling freed slaves (also referred to as Americo-Liberians) from the United States of America (USA) into Africa. The country gained its "independence" from the ACS in 1847 with the ACS handing power over to the freed slaves. However, prior to the coming of the freed slaves, the area now known as Liberia was inhabited by the indigenous people who today make up about 95% of the total population with the descendants of the ex-slaves making up about 5%. The freed slaves ruled in a class system whereby the indigenous people were regarded as second class citizens. Ironically, these freed slaves began to practice the very things their former slave masters did to them. These ex-slaves and their descendants engaged in slave trade by selling the indigenous into slavery. A system of segregation was set up and the indigenous were not allowed to attend certain schools which

were reserved for the children of the ex-slaves (high schools such as , the College of West Africa (CWA), a United Methodist Church run school). The government would spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to educate a few privileged children in western universities while the nations only public university, the University of Liberia, remained neglected by being under staffed, under funded ill equipped and overpopulated.

However, on April 12, 1980 a group of enlisted men under the leadership of the then Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe stormed the Executive Mansion (the presidential palace) and successfully staged a revolution by toppling the regime of President Richard R. Tolbert and thereby bringing an end to 133 years of corruption, nepotism and segregation of Americo-Liberian rule. In the months and years following the revolution the indigenous, for the first, time realized that an aborigine could actually occupy the seat of the nation's highest office. Fortunately also, the 1980 revolution came just in time to save the lives of 14 indigenous and well educated Liberians including G. Bachus Matthews, Oscar Quiah and Dr. Togba Nah Tipoteh (a former presidential aspirant in the recent general elections) who were scheduled to be executed by hanging on the morning of April 14, 1980. Their only crime was that they staged a demonstration in which they called on the Tolbert government not to increase the price of government subsidized rice imported from the USA. Rice happens to be Liberia's staple food and most Liberians would not have been able to afford the price increment. Interestingly enough, the demonstration made the government to back down from the price increment, but the organizers of the demonstration were to pay the ultimate price for daring to express their constitutional rights of freedom of expression as guaranteed by the Liberian constitution. Following the overthrow of the Tolbert government, 13 former government officials were tried by a military tribunal and later executed by firing squad for their part in political corruption, misuse and abuse of power. The life of Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and who was at the time the Finance Minister (Secretary of Finance) was spared by President Doe through the issuance of an executive pardon. President Doe indicated that his pardon for Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf was due to a kind gesture the latter's mother had extended him while he was still an

enlisted man in the Liberian Army. In the months following the revolution, President Doe attempted to reconcile the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous. He offered Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf a number of positions and she did in fact serve in his government in various capacities. Notwithstanding this attempt at reconciliation, Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf was to later embark on a deadly crusade to have President Doe removed from power through unconstitutional means.

In a series of armed rebellion with the sponsorship of Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberia was to be plunged into a path of chaos and destruction, the likes of which the country has never seen before, and the likes of which it is hoped will not be repeated in the history of the country with the population of about 3 million. She convinced one of President Doe's able lieutenants - General Thomas G. Quiwonkpa to stage an armed rebellion. In 1983, General Quiwonkpa launched a failed armed invasion (dubbed the Nimba Raid). General Quiwonkpa later fled the country. Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf again sponsored the general in 1985 following the general elections which Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf's party at the time -- The Liberian Action Party (LAP)-- lost to President Doe's National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL). General Quiwonkpa did not survive this second attempt (dubbed the November 12 abortive invasion).

Finally, Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf later sponsored Charles Taylor to lead an armed rebellion to overthrow President Doe. Charles Taylor, although an Americo-Liberian was a government official in the Doe government. As a member of government Taylor embezzled about 1 million dollars from the Liberian government. He was arrested and detained at a prison in Plymouth, Massachusetts. In what many regard as "mysterious circumstances" Taylor was said to have "broken out of his jail cell." Soon thereafter Taylor made his appearance leading an armed rebellion against President Doe. Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf contributed to Mr. Taylor's war effort , while she was living peacefully in the USA, untouched by the devastation of her orchestrated wars.

Evidence that Taylor was an Agent of Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf was clearly indicated when during a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interview she instructed Mr. Taylor to "level Monrovia and we will rebuild it." For some Liberians such remark left an

indelible imprint on their minds that such a reckless statement reflects a person with depraved heart and unparalleled indifference to the plight and suffering others. Mr. Taylor went on to hurl missiles and rocket propelled grenades indiscriminately, sometimes inflicting huge casualties on densely populated areas. As a result of such mass scale destruction of human lives, over 200,000 people, many of them women, children and the elderly lost their lives.

International pressure removed Charles Taylor from office, and Taylor was a wanted man by a special War Crimes Court set up in Sierra Leone by the United Nations. As President , Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf initially resisted seeking prosecution of Mr. Taylor. Nonetheless, thanks to the pressure from the US and European counterparts, Taylor is now behind bars in spite of President Johnson Sirleaf's initial reluctance to honor the mandate of the United Nations, and in spite of Nigeria's minimal cooperation in the justice efforts.

OPPORTUNITY FOR REDEMPTION

In her recent address to the US 109th Congress, [the text of her speech can be found at www.providencepilgrim.org] the President said: "...Liberia is now only emerging from two decades of turmoil that has destroyed everything we managed to build in a century and a half of independence." What the self-styled "Iron Lady" conspicuously failed to mention to the August Body is that she was involved in every major armed conflict during the same time period, and that she also personally instructed Taylor, to "level Liberia and we will rebuild it." Whatever the depth of Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf's involvement in the years of mayhem, Ellen now has a chance to make an atonement for her actions. She may not be able to totally rebuild the damaged infrastructure as she had earlier said she would: "level Liberia and we will rebuild it"; she may not be able to completely repair Liberia's image as a pariah nation that has over the decades held mercenaries for her hire; and, she definitely is unable to bring back to life those 200,000 plus souls whose lives were destroyed, but she now has a chance to help heal some of the wounds and devastation of the war.

What concrete efforts could president Sirleaf-Johnson initiate? Examples include: 1) institution of viable and

sustainable programs for the thousands of orphans and child soldiers, to provide some form of education, preferably vocational training. This for a generation of kids robbed of the much needed formal education and normal childhood development (from 1989-2005); 2) establish sound economic policies to help revamp the Liberian economy etc... But, equally important, 3) she must reach out to others whom she alienated with her "foolish and callous" remarks, (to borrow her on words). For by so doing she will be able to demonstrate that she truly seeks peace and reconciliation. and not just rhetoric to win the hearts of donor countries and agencies.

In order for the country to move forward a joint and concerted effort of all Liberians is paramount and the way to achieve success is to first seek peace, unity and reconciliation. The leadership must take steps to bridge the Americo-Liberian - Indigenous divide. The much abhorred and evil class system that once permeated the core fabric of the Liberian society must be abolished for only then can we talk of true reconciliation.

PRAYER FOR LIBERIA

As the country embarks on another attempt to put the war behind her, it will be naïve, and perhaps foolish to think that human effort alone, no matter how gloriously portrayed, will be sufficient to lift the people out of their predicament. How can a leader, no matter whether a philosopher queen or king "rebuild" these shattered lives and make these people whole again? How can one expect that things will be normal, unless, of course, the Lord Almighty is with them.

I entreat all Christians the world over to continue to pray for Liberia for when the cameras are turned off, the lives of those of our brothers and sisters are not simply rosy. As much as some people would wish the past into oblivion, there are some real issues that have to be addressed, some issues that cannot simply be swept under the rug. And, the holding of elections does not mean that all is now well.

If Liberia ever did need prayer before, it needs it even more so now. We must rest our hope in the Lord and we as Christians must stand on the promises of God, and not man. For, the latter is bound to fail, but the former lasts to eternity.

Election Outcome: Memorable March for Liberia?

5 March 2006... President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf sends a letter to Nigerian President Obasanjo requesting to be granted custody of former President Charles Taylor.

15 March 2006... Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf delivers a speech to a joint session of US Congress, one of a few women to have done so. Congress approved an additional \$50 million in economic aid. [The complete text of the speech is available on www.providencepilgrim.org]

19 March 2006... President Johnson-Sirleaf visits Providence Rhode Island, meets political leaders, and greets a crowd of local Liberians.

22 March 2006... President Johnson-Sirleaf visits President Bush at the White House. Calls for Charles Taylor's day in court. Also expresses confidence that the Bush administration will help to have the U.N. sanctions lifted.

25 March 2006... Nigeria: "President Olusegun Obasanjo has today ... informed President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf that the government of Liberia is free to take former President Charles Taylor into its custody," the Nigerian government said in a statement.

Twenty members of Taylor's family reported to have left the Taylor villa in Calabar with "an unusually large amount of luggage".

28 March 2006..... Taylor is reported missing from his guarded villa in Calabar, Nigeria. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo expresses surprise that Taylor has disappeared...

29 March 2006... Charles Taylor is apprehended in the Nigerian town of on the Cameroon border. And in a brief fulfillment of Charles Taylor's parting words to Liberians in 2003- "...I will be back...", Taylor was flown to Monrovia for a brief "visit". He was transferred to a prison in Sierra Leone by nightfall.

30 March 2006... Plans announced to move the trial of Charles Taylor to the Hague (Netherlands). The UN Special Court in Sierra Leone will maintain jurisdiction for the trial. The government of Sierra Leone was one party that requested a transfer of the trial out of Sierra Leone.

31 March 2006... Emmanuel Taylor arrested in Miami FL, traveling with a fraudulently obtained passport. Emmanuel or "Chucky" Taylor led his fathers security units in Liberia until he left Liberia in 2003. He has been in exile in Trinidad from that time until his arrival in Miami.

President Johnson-Sirleaf, in a speech to her country, announces the legacy left her by previous administrations- a debt of \$3.6 billion dollars...

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Film Review : Liberia: The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here!!!
of a film by by G.K. Barclay



"Liberia. An Uncivil War" was a documentary filmed in the midst of the Liberian

civil war, particularly in the latter days of the Taylor regime. Excerpts of that film were shown at the Liberian Dinner in October, 2005. Within days of that dinner at Trinity last year, a new film was premiered in Rhode Island- "Liberia : The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here". This film is less about the civil war, and more about one man's journey to examine his homeland- where it has been, and where he envisions that it can go.

In the film G.K. Barclay interviews a number of different participants in the war. Among these participants is the man once known as "General Butt-Naked", now evangelist Joshua Blahyi. A man that Diana Smith introduced to us in the winter edition of The Providence Pilgrim. In two separate segments of the film Barclay talks with Joshua. He has some skepticism about Blahyi, about his former life as a "witch doctor", as well as about his faith convictions. Yet Barclay indicates that he was impressed by Joshua's sincerity. Apparently Barclay was also impressed by Joshua's assessment of the Liberian "warlords", and what Liberians

need to do to leave the warring response in their past, and build for the future.

This film does sketch an outline of recent Liberian history. However, I found perspectives of individual Liberians, both in Liberia and the USA more out of the ordinary. The cinematography has an "indie" feel, at times I was distracted by film angles and zooms. Nonetheless, it offers perspectives that I have not found expressed in other information sources (such as internet, news media, film). You can access this film and form your own views- it will be available for check-out from the Trinity Presbyterian Church library.

And, oh - a word of caution with regard to bonus material. Some may agree with a few of the lyrics from Bea Barclay's "Remember" music video- "How you read, how you read? It Wicked. It wicked." with regard to suggestive dance in this music video. In contrast, the "Bue Wani" (Open Your Eyes) music video, by Fru Atanga, may cause a bit of discomfort with some of the dark facts about Africa. However, the imagery on "Bue Wani" is not threatening, and the instruments and rhythms are enjoyable.

"Liberia: The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here" on dvd in the Trinity library- check it out...
- Sam Clark -

Godspell the Play, Our Lady of Fatima School Warren, RI



Unexpectedly, the recent performance of Godspell jerked me back to the years surrounding my conversion. How riveted I was years ago, as a young believer, to experience the

sights and sounds of this carnival-like performance, which portrayed the Wisdom of the Ages so vividly and bolstered my young faith. As I watched the cast from my new (older!) perspective, I was not only blessed by the memories of my own entrance into the Kingdom, but I also was touched and delighted by the performance of Vicki Wehjala, a senior at Fatima who also attends Trinity with her family.

Vicki's bright personality fit well with the concept of Godspell: The entire cast was dressed so colorfully that even in the dark auditorium, it seemed to be a beautiful spring day. Vicki's expression and creative apparel contributed to the overall effect. Her singing was invigorating, with no hint of shyness in her performance, and her sultry, naughty-at-times expression was convincing.

What a delight to see such a mix of ages and cultures, joining together to present the Gospel. What harmony and enthusiasm ran through the whole performance! It was a joy to sit in the audience with Vicki's parents and siblings and enjoy her celebration of life in Christ. -Beth Clark-

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