

St George Foundation – Autumn 2018 Update

This report from Philip Dean (Carolynne Pyne's brother) the founder and coordinator of the UK work for St George Foundation in Sierra Leone. For a long time we at St John's have given support to this very good charity and it has been part of our current parish tithing.

Dear all

I made a trip to Sierra Leone earlier in the year and it was largely very positive..... and am finally getting around to the feedback. I had a guest (Mike Lamb) with me on the trip who happens to be a business consultant, so he naturally appraised St George and that was interesting. Never having been there and only hearing about St George from myself, he was amazed by the overall success and value of our work and the professionalism that comes across.

Full of praise for the quality and credibility of what is on the ground there he thought that we simply do not get that message across fully and that that is a missed opportunity. His opinion was that if we created a really good connection between enthusiastic supporters with the reality of a dedicated staff in Africa we could be achieving far more than we currently do, and there are real issues that we could deal with. An easy example is that we have had empty spaces in the home while children sleep in the streets and that certainly is not good. So that became the challenge of the trip really, and it was largely focusing on how we communicate and not how we do the job itself.

But let's look at what is there - St George site looked great. Everything was neat and tidy and all the buildings looked fresh from a recent painting (with the internals still to do).

The child residents were their usual delightful selves ranging from a teenage mum and baby to other babies and toddlers - with every age in between.

The staff at the centre come across as super and really down to earth straight forward people - no one not to like. During my visit, there was always a relaxed, calm and pleasant atmosphere not just between the staff and children but among the children themselves and it was just very pleasant to be there. After losing Eddie and Augustine during the Ebola crisis, we have two fairly new managers who run the home on a day to day basis. Aruna (male) and Yeama (female) and they are doing a fabulous job and both come across as kind, gentle and intelligent leaders for all at the centre. (since writing this letter, on October 26th Yeama tragically lost her own young son in a drowning accident when he fell into a well....Our hearts go out to her).

Looking at the wider picture, within Sierra Leone the profile of St George foundation as an organisation has risen immensely. For the first time ever, on this recent trip I did not have to explain what St George was once - from immigration staff at the airport, Police and army personnel at the many check points to even random people in the street. Everyone had heard of St George and all wished us well and were friendly and were aware and very encouraging about the work we do. All the beneficiaries and their families we met were positive, friendly and grateful too. Better than any inspection we can carry out, that to me reflects on just what a good job the staff are doing and how positively the local population are seeing us. I actually found it quite moving and thought about just how that has come about really thanks to our supporters who have given so generously and so consistently and helped create and sustain something really positive, so please do take something

from that. St George is very much the sum of all the individuals that choose to support and that really is where credit is deserved....so a huge thank you and well done!

What I heard several times and really setting St George apart is that we are the 'only credible' children's home in the area where a child can be taken in, be accepted, properly cared for and supported while their issues successfully resolved.

We are no strangers to positive feedback from people that have visited St George Foundation and in fact it is how Patrick John (an Army Colonel running the British Army Ebola response at the time) found us and eventually became a trustee. And it has just happened again. Toybox is a British charity supporting street children in many countries and are now planning to work in Sierra Leone. They visited the country over the summer looking for the best partner to work with, and looked at many organisations as well as us. Happily, they concluded that St George Foundation was the local charity to work with. As a result we have met in the UK and now they will be holding meetings with our team in Sierra Leone to work out exactly how the two organisations can work together and to be guided by our Freetown team on what is most needed in terms of support for marginalised children. This probably will be to expand on the outreach work within the community that we already do, where we support and offer advice for children that do not come into the centre on a residential basis.

In fact a lot of our work is done outside of the children's home itself in the form of short term interventions and educating families on how to look after their children properly. Things such as making sure children have birth certificates (so they officially exist), campaigning against child labour, encouraging school attendance, pushing back on child pregnancies and abuse, educating children on their rights. All of these things are happening in the background all the time and this is very much coming from the Sierra Leonean team and is in addition to just running a children's home. In fact they have been discussing for some time starting a talk radio station aimed at children to get messages out to the widest possible audience (if anyone reading this is experienced and passionate about radio and would like to support and help drive that feel free to get in touch as at the moment we have felt it is beyond what we can support).

I mentioned short term interventions and to expand a little on that I can think of best explaining with some actual examples.....so here are a few cases that demonstrate another side of the work we support.

While I was visiting, on the last few days a young girl came in. About ten years old she had been visiting Freetown with her parents but become lost and ended up wandering the streets for two days until she asked for help. The Police brought her to us and then it was our task to trace her family in their village and reunite them whilst providing a temporary place to stay safely. We can only imagine the anguish of the parents (although the girl seemed to be thoroughly enjoying joining in with life at St George).

In another case, two toddlers were found living totally on the pavement with their mother who was suffering from a mental health issue. Our staff took the children into St George for their own immediate safety and were able to contact relatives. An uncle is now caring for the children while the mother is unwell.

In another case a twelve year old girl stole the equivalent of 50p from her grandmother and was so scared she fled in her school uniform and was wandering the streets for several days (extremely dangerous for a young girl). Our staff found her and brought her in while we contacted, talked to and then reunited her with her very relieved Grandmother.

The last one I will mention is a 9 year old boy who decided to leave his village for an adventure in Freetown. We were informed about him living rough with older street children and intervened and traced his parents. They were reported to have been literally jumping for joy having had the entire village out searching the local area assuming he has suffered some dreadful accident.

In all these cases having an organisation such as St George that can intervene to protect children ensures their safety and reduces their potential suffering and we can all imagine the stress the parents suffer when their children disappear.

Doing good works though doesn't exclude us from being the victims of idiots and in the summer the children's home suffered a late night armed robbery. Our security officer and staff present were powerless to resist while three men (with a pistol) emptied our stores of food, clothing, toys and entertainment equipment and stole their personal phones. Most of the children slept through the actual event so it was the staff that felt the full effect but it did seriously frighten everyone afterwards and we had armed Police officers stationed with us for a while. We are now using private a security company and pretty confident that we just came across as a soft target. We have never had an experience like that before and hopefully we won't again.

Other things don't go quite to plan either and our sponsorship of individual children has proved troublesome. Feedback of that has proved much harder than expected and although I have personally met nearly all the recipients and their families and I know the support is happening. Cathie Salter (a UK volunteer) is tackling that issue and I am happy to say has been making steady progress.

One of the really great things about St George Foundation is that we have so many regular donors and we are fairly certain that we know over any given period roughly what our income will be. As you know, none of us in the UK are paid and we ensure everything we raise is spent on the core activity as much as humanly possible. However one of the disturbances to that are unexpected events or extra activities which can dig into the planned expenditure. If there is anyone who would like to focus and raise money for a particular issue this would be very welcomed. What that in addition would do is allow us to focus the core money raised on the core activity of running the home and enable us then to take some extra children in - at the moment we are looking after about half the children than we could (which means the other half are still in the street).

FOR EXAMPLE.....Having my own six year old I can compare how well she can read to children in the centre and realised a huge gulf exists. Thankfully it looks like three enthusiastic teachers are going to tackle this already. In the year that children do live with us, we feel that we could really tackle their reading ability and send them off in the world with really good reading skills that will transform their future opportunities. They hopefully will be able to find the funding required.

Another issue is that during the mud slide response one of the children we brought in for emergency care, Cecelia has a severe spinal defect that we have been advised will severely damage her life

chances and expectancy. Cecelia is a very bright, enthusiastic scholar but her treatment will cost in the region of £10,000. Although it is not urgent, funding that is simply not in our budget but it would be wonderful to help her if anyone would volunteer to take a lead on fundraising for her?

On the whole, much of St George Foundation on my last trip was very good. There is a lot of development happening with roads and the growth of Freetown city, but some of the effects are sad and alarming. Deforestation is shocking and no more obvious than at our own site which was about 4/5ths impregnable virgin rain forest. The night we arrived we could see flames coming from behind the buildings and in the morning I was sickened to see the entire section of forest gone and the ground smouldering where it had been burned. Clearing and burning tropical forests accounts for up to 25% of global Greenhouse Gas emissions and whilst China and the US are the world's number two emitters, the next two countries are Indonesia and Brazil through deforestation. Pollution in the streets from vehicle fumes, dumped waste and plastics in the sea is very visible too and I have in the past watched fishermen bringing in their nets with probably 90% of the catch being rubbish of various forms which is routinely and deliberately dumped into the sea. The ecological damage and climatic impacts we now realise are not localised and plastic is now reaching the North Pole.....it is a catastrophe! Seeing destruction with my own eyes has led me to become very worried and I cannot see that we can sit back and do nothing knowing what we now know. Many of us in the Western world have been informed by amazing films by the BBC on plastic pollution particularly and we have in the past weeks seen the world's leading climate scientists give just 12 years before we reach the 1.5 degree rise that is assumed safe. We all just sat through a very unusual summer and now ever stronger storms around the world (it was largely storm damage that ended our own experiment with rice farming).

What has this got to do with St George you may ask? Well, knowledge I see is the key and I think St George needs to put some focus on this issue, exactly what we can do is unclear to me still as the problem is so vast and the more I read up the bigger the problem seems – but I am sure doing nothing is not an option and St George Foundation must be able to play a role somewhere.

On that cheery note.

Many thanks as always for your amazing support.

God Bless and best wishes

Philip Dean