

Goll Farm Elementary School Report September 30, 2016

by E. Christopher Cone

Goll Farm Elementary School Opens for Its Third Full Year

Starting its third full year, the Goll Farm Elementary School in Liberia has 250 children enrolled! The school has an excellent reputation, not only locally but among educators nationally. This fine reputation has been earned by a combination of thrifty management, honest treatment of the faculty, the imagination to see what the school could be, and hard work to fulfill that vision.

The school started with no more than a gift of some land, and the desire of Fr. Prince Wreh and his wife, Relhetta, to create an elementary school of the highest quality. Fr. Wreh is a true visionary who sees possibilities in the future and has supported education as the path to independence all of his adult life. Relhetta took on the role of the construction manager and built a school campus out of nothing. She later became the administrator of the school. This perfect combination of abilities has resulted in the creation of a school that has been applauded as an example of meeting a great need for Liberia's future.

Although in the United States we might take a weekly or monthly payroll as a routine matter, in Liberia even teachers in government schools must often wait several months to get their paychecks, and then they may get less than expected. Fr. Wreh has a different attitude, feeling that if a teacher is trusted to show up to teach classes on time, then the pay must also come on time. With the respect earned by that policy, he and Relhetta can be selective about hiring only top-quality faculty members. Just like anywhere in the world, top faculty has attracted bright students. It's an upward spiral, building success upon success, and accounting for the increasing number of students in the school. With enrollment increasing, there was a great need for more classroom chairs. The Rotary Club in the nearby town of Gbarnga, and one member of the club took on the project as his personal commitment to the school and its goals.

Local sawyers and carpenters turned rain forest hardwood logs into 100 sturdy school chairs. As part of the overall plan they made only the frames – the most complex part of the chairs. As a

vocational education project, students are making and attaching the seats and the arm tablets for the chairs.

Making the seats is a relatively simple project, but it's much more than just learning about woodworking. This project gives the young people practical experience in working together on a joint project, and also a real sense of direct participation in the growth and the furnishing of the school. While providing needed classroom furniture at affordable cost, this project also gives the participating pupils a feeling that "this is *my* school." This ownership and pride in the school is an essential part of the overall educational plan, with particular benefits for those children whose families are living in poverty.



The school is located in an area where one of the few means of earning cash income is as a rubber tree tapper. This relatively skilled labor in big rubber tree plantations involves very carefully cutting into the outer layers of the trees to let some of the white sap trickle into collecting bowls on the tree trunks. This sap will be processed into latex rubber for sale on the international market. But rubber plantation work is less lucrative than it had been because of the falling price of latex rubber. With so many local families living in poverty, Fr. Wreh reported that scholarship assistance for the students is essential, and there are about 50 children whose families cannot afford any outlay for tuition at all. But it is his firm belief that education should not be based on financial ability. A little child from an impoverished family may be the brightest student in a class.

As the school moves steadily toward a self-sustaining financial plan, some students are able to

pay at least a part of the \$126 annual tuition. The tuition includes the school uniform, shoes, a T-shirt for physical education classes, and participation in the school's feeding program. Each of these components is a carefully considered part of the educational experience at Goll Farm School. The uniforms create a school identity, and serve to reduce the separation between students whose families have no money at all and those who come from relatively well-off families. The meal program offers supplemental feeding in a rural area where most families have only one meal per day. The result is improved health and physical ability for the students, and the ability to concentrate on studies rather than hunger.

If you could help to provide scholarship assistance to students at Goll Farm Elementary School, please write a tax-deductible check to St. Christopher's Church, add on memo line, TWA. Mail the check to St. Christopher's Church, 625 Main Street, Chatham MA. 02633 Thank you!

Goll Farm School Has Been Selected A National "Liberia Reads" Center

One measure of the great success of the Goll Farm Elementary School is the "Liberia Reads" program that was conducted during the recent academic vacation - - what we in the United States would call Summer Vacation. "Liberia Reads," as the name indicates, is a reading literacy program, founded by two former Peace Corps volunteers, Bob and Geri Melosh. Their interest was driven by the total disruption of education in Liberia caused by the civil war and the more recent ebola epidemic.

More than 4,800 Liberians died in that epidemic. Schools were closed, and some authorities have estimated that the loss to the nation's economy, and especially to the continuity of education in the country's schools, was worse than that caused by the 14-year civil war. Liberia had not recovered from the war when the ebola epidemic struck. The epidemic disrupted the usual school calendar, which follows the U.S. academic pattern of September to June.

All schools were closed by the government to reduce chances for the spread of the ebola virus. In the process, the educational teaching/learning pattern was disrupted. During the ebola crisis, when normal school classes were not permitted, Goll Farm School was used as a training site for volunteers who went into nearby villages to teach basic sanitation and ways to avoid getting the virus.

When schools were re-opened after the virus had been contained, it was evident that many Liberian children were reading very far below their expected level. Many children had been unable to go to school during the civil war, and many more lost out on school as a result of the ebola epidemic. They had lost the continuity of education that is important to the formation of young minds. As a result of the war and ebola, many Liberian children were unable to attend school over an extended period. Even for those who could go to school, the reading level of most students was severely compromised.

Recognizing this tremendous need, Bob and Geri Melosh travel at their own expense from their home in Florida to Liberia every summer to conduct classes for people who will be classroom reading teachers. Based on the school's strong leadership, excellent academic reputation, central location in the country, and fine physical plant, Goll Farm School has been selected as one of the national centers for the annual Liberia Reads program.



Above, Bob Melosh is joined by Old Man Sakou, a community elder and leader who is the senior advisor to the school's Parent-Teacher Association, in presenting a certificate of completion to one of the Liberia Reads students.