

A Good News Story from Sierra Leone

For over ten years St Mary's Parish has been assisting the parish community at Sacred Heart Parish, Serabu in Sierra Leone, one of the poorest countries in western Africa. Our contact is Fr Peter Konteh, the Director of Caritas in Sierra Leone.

Fr Peter was recently honoured in the *2019 Sierra Ovation Awards* as one of the 100 most outstanding Sierra Leoneans. The award recognises inspiring and influential young leaders in Sierra Leone.



Fr Peter Konteh is a Catholic priest who was ordained on 9th April 1996 at the peak of the ten year brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Fr Peter, as he is fondly called, began social work over 30 years ago; well before his ordination to the priesthood and has since maintained a remarkable balance between social and pastoral work.

Growing up in a devout Catholic family, Fr Peter demonstrated remarkable passion for service; first among the street children in the congested squatters and slums of Freetown. He went on to support in various ways the Catholic priests and the local community in the service of the people of God.

He decided that he was being called to a life of dedicated service to God as a Catholic priest. He entered the college seminary for priestly formation and completed academic

degrees in Philosophy and Humanities. He also continued his professional training and hands-on experience in various aspects of pastoral, humanitarian and relief work.

During the civil war, he joined like-minded colleagues to establish the Inter-Religious Council and they grew into an integral part of the peace process that facilitated the dialogue between the Government of Sierra Leone and the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

When he was not in Church or out in the field, he could be heard on BBC reporting on the ravages of the war, to make up for the absence of journalists who had fled the country or had been forced to close down their business.

During the civil war, he also worked in the management of camps (for both refugees and internally displaced persons) and with the resettlement of refugees. His successes were duly acknowledged by UNHCR as an outstanding example of remarkable integrity in Camp Management.

His passion for humanity energized him to support war affected and suffering people irrespective of their faith or nationality. He coordinated food and non-food items for refugees in Guinea, while at the same time pushing for the respect of the rights of refugees.

Extending his pastoral and social work, he continued to focus on the need for child protection, and in 1997 established the St Mary's Children's Home in Bo. The home provided care for war orphans whose parents had been killed, or maimed and disabled, and therefore unable to care for their children. St Mary's Children's Home has thrived over the years and many of the children have gone on to complete university studies.

After the war, he supervised the reconstruction of the Catholic Hospital at Serabu, in partnership with the European Union. As director of the diocesan development offices of the Archdioceses of Freetown and Bo, he implemented wide ranging socio-economic projects.

In 2013 as news of an Ebola outbreak spread in neighboring Guinea, there was initial denial by local authorities. Caritas, under Fr. Peter's leadership, is credited with leading a long campaign to raise awareness and mobilize a response. Other interventions undertaken during the two year campaign included the training of response teams, supply of sanitary kits to vulnerable populations, house-to-house campaigns and safe and dignified burials.

As Ebola spread, Fr Peter worked to raise awareness at the international community level; notably through his presentation to US Senate in September 2014. Fr. Peter made a similar presentation in the UK House of Commons.

In his quest to support humanity, Fr. Peter has established links and partnerships with various agencies including the Desert Flower Foundation, a Vienna based organization, campaigning against Female Genital mutilation. The Desert Flower Foundation, within its human rights program, supports an education program for over 500 girls. Fr Peter is a board member and heads the organization in Sierra Leone.

Further acknowledgement of his outstanding service and leadership in the Church and development work are summarized as follows:

The Confraternity of Priests in Sierra Leone have chosen Rev Fr. Peter Konteh to lead the confraternity as President of the Confraternity of Priests in Sierra Leone.

Fr. Peter is the Chairman and Technical supervisor in Sierra Leone for the Healey International Relief Foundation an American (New Jersey-based) humanitarian organization that works on Child protection, education, health and social services in Sierra Leone.

He is also a board member and technical advisor for The Fig Tree Children Foundation, a Brisbane Australian based organisation that raises awareness and funding to help support Caritas Freetown and AFEWY to provide for children (especially orphaned and vulnerable children) in Sierra Leone.

Fr. Peter is the focal person on child protection within the Catholic Church of Sierra Leone and also a member of the International Catholic Child Protection Committee based in Rome, Italy.

Fr. Peter drew a lot of strength and direction from his pastoral duties as Parish Priest in both rural and urban communities in the Catholic dioceses of Bo and Freetown. He has shown a willingness to take on tasks and his often innovative approach leads to results. His appetite to serve is duly reflected in his outstanding leadership in the Church and development work.

Father Peter Konteh leads the development arm of the Catholic dioceses of Freetown. His commitment to continue his pastoral duties, support for the work of the Church and care for others is manifested in his drive to raise funds and seek sustainable development interventions at both community and national levels, in and out of the church. He continues as the Executive Director of the Archdiocesan Development Office/ Caritas Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Source: Caritas, Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa