

Promoting Peace Through Forgiveness in Civil War Refugees of Sierra Leone, Africa

Proposal Submitted by:

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Learning to forgive those who have wronged us is the first step we can take towards healing our traumatised nation.

Bishop Joseph Christian Humper
Chairman, Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone

Project Description

This project is designed to promote peace and reduce violence through forgiveness education in one of the most war-torn and devastated parts of the world, Sierra Leone, West Africa. In 1991, rebel forces initiated their first power grab in eastern Sierra Leone. The country had a moment of hope in 1996 when popular former UN diplomat Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected president. In the year that followed, the rebels maintained power in the villages and countryside in Sierra Leone and threatened the stability of the capitol city of Freetown. In 1997, the rebels overthrew the president and ruled the country for ten months through violence and brutality. The ensuing three years were witness to power struggles between the rebels and the former government of President Kabbah, with the people experiencing much carnage, horror and community disruption. Many civilians and soldiers joined the rebels while others were recruited against their will. An appalling number of children were recruited by force and used as child soldiers (see <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/14/america/web.0113soldier.nytmag.php> for a recent New York Times story). In May 2000, British troops were sent to Sierra Leone to stabilize the country that led on January 18, 2002 to President Kabbah's declaration that the civil war was officially over.

While there may be current political stability much turmoil and dislocation still exists in Sierra Leone. Warfare and rebel raids left towns, families, and lives in ruin. Towns and businesses were looted. Civilians were the victims of abduction, amputation, and slaughter. Homes were burned with their inhabitants inside. Poverty, unemployment, and corruption continue to plague the country's 5.3 million people. Current life expectancy is approximately 40 years, there is the highest age five or less mortality rate in the world, and a literacy rate of barely 30%. Many war victims and former combatants are still seeking employment and a chance to reenter society. Clearly this is a country besieged with problems and enormous suffering.

The purpose of this project is to help promote a more peaceful future for the war-affected children of Sierra Leone. Many of these children have experienced unthinkable atrocities and are faced with futures that will likely involve feelings of hatred, anger, vengeance, and revenge. Though these feelings are common in survivors of an experience such as civil war, these responses, collectively referred to as unforgiveness, too often lead to a perpetuation of violence and retaliatory acts. Examples of this endless cycle of violence are plentiful across the globe; it is our hope that teaching these children forgiveness can be a cornerstone of a more hopeful future.

Dr. Frederic Luskin of Stanford University has utilized forgiveness interventions to promote peace and healing in relatives of murder victims from Northern Ireland (please see <http://www.learningtoforgive.com>). In two separate endeavors, Dr. Luskin has shown that after only one week of forgiveness training individuals showed positive changes in degree of hurt experienced, anger, depression, stress, forgiveness, and optimism. In short, forgiveness interventions can be successful in bringing about healing and fostering peace.

Our project will adapt Dr. Luskin's forgiveness intervention so that it can be integrated as part of a standard curriculum in a school in Sierra Leone. We will develop a curriculum content area on forgiveness education and training that will be part of the new Sierra Leone National Early Childhood

Curriculum. This curriculum will be unveiled at a new school in Sierra Leone sponsored by the LemonAid Fund (www.lemonaidfund.org). We will conduct this project collaboratively with Dr. Nancy Peddle, the LemonAid Fund's founder and have discussed this project with her at some length. Dr. Peddle is enthusiastic about this work and has offered her full support. College students have volunteered at Dr. Peddle's school in the past couple of years and have found the experience to be quite valuable. Dr. Peddle is willing to be integrally involved in the development of this project and has provided budget estimates and given us an outline of her thoughts. Most importantly, Dr. Peddle has emphasized that she wants this project to be the beginning of important and continuing work that focuses on promoting peace through forgiveness education.

To insure the sustainability of the work that we begin, Dr. Peddle has asked that the forgiveness intervention and curriculum be developed and implemented with specific teachers and school counselors. Hence, our goal is not only to effect positive change toward peace through forgiveness in children, but also to train teachers to continue incorporating these aspects of the curriculum into their ongoing instructional efforts. One student will stay beyond 10 days to help facilitate this as well as evaluation. Dr. Peddle has also emphasized the importance of a science-based approach to the intervention and evaluation of outcomes. To this end, our curriculum is based on Dr. Luskin's scientifically proven week-long intervention and his work as Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects. We also intend to use first-rate evaluation tools; conducting baseline assessments of forgiveness, stress, depression, optimism, etc., post-intervention assessments, and longer-term follow-up (e.g., 3-6 months). We will then evaluate changes in forgiveness and other quality of life indicators using appropriate statistical analyses.

We feel confident of our ability to successfully complete this project for four reasons. First and foremost we have the full support of Dr. Peddle, who herself has expertise in forgiveness and early childhood education. Secondly we have retained an expert on forgiveness education and interventions. Dr. Luskin is Co-Director of the Stanford-Northern Ireland HOPE Project, Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, and a Senior Fellow at the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation. Dr. Luskin has offered to donate his expertise and consultation on this project. We will look to Dr. Luskin to assist us in developing the most effective, socially and culturally relevant forgiveness curriculum. Dr. Luskin has also offered to donate copies of his book, *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*. This book serves as a guide and foundation upon which to develop a forgiveness curriculum and will make a very nice addition to the school's small but growing library. Third we have invited Cathy DeMartis the assistant principal at Somers Intermediate School in Somers Central School District, Somers, New York to provide consultation on age-appropriate curriculums for forgiveness education and to offer assistance in developing the curriculum. Fourth we have Dr. Toussaint of the Luther psychology department to provide overall project leadership. Dr. Toussaint has conceptualized the project and identified and contacted the consultants. Dr. Toussaint will serve as primary advisor on all issues pertaining to this project and will help facilitate communication between all parties involved. Additionally, one of the students involved in the project, Anthony Sellu, is originally from Sierra Leone. His perspective is invaluable. As college students we are eager to impact the world in a positive way but realize that we will need much good assistance and guidance to have the most effect. To that end, we feel we have brought together a strong team of experts to collaborate with us on this project and look forward to its development and implementation.