

UK ASSOCIATION FOR THE MILTON MARGAI SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND IN SIERRA LEONE

Chairman's Report to the 2010 Annual General Meeting

I welcome everyone to this our 6th AGM since the UKA was first established in 2004.

In last year's report I referred to the various ongoing problems at the school. Sadly I have to report that many of these problems persist. There has been some improvement in the payment of the grant by the Sierra Leone government to meet the running costs of the school but it is often late and usually with a significant shortfall to meet all the demands.

More disturbingly the problems resulting from the allegations made against the running of the school by some of the former pupils and their attempts to remove the incumbent acting headmaster, Albert Sandy, have still not been resolved. The report instigated by the President and carried out by the Ministry of Education was completed over a year ago but it is still languishing in the Minister's Office notwithstanding the promises by the Minister to me that its findings would be published. I again brought this to the attention of the President when I called upon him during my visit with Ibrahim Suma in February/March this year. I pointed out to President Koroma that because of these allegations we had been unable to transfer any funding to the school for the past year and that if nothing happened the UKA would have to consider its options at our AGM. The President was concerned and promised action but none has been forthcoming.

Notwithstanding these problems, the school continues to function. There are 35 primary, 29 secondary, 5 tertiary and 8 teachers at the school – a total of 77 living on campus. Morale is low and educational standards, with a few notable exceptions, appear to be dropping, in keeping with most schools in Sierra Leone. The choir is not functioning although a group of the secondary boys have recently shown some enterprise in resurrecting a small ensemble to be named "Rhythmic Harmony". Regrettably the vocational skills unit has not got underway and therefore the "See Here" kiosk which we built with UKA funds is not being used by the blind school although it is being put to good use by the deaf school where it is sited.

The school's Committee of Management has been generally inactive despite some efforts by its chairman, the energetic octogenarian Rev Henry Samuels. It has still failed to recruit a matron to replace "Auntie Rose" who died 16 months ago. This has contributed to the burdens of Albert Sandy who has been the victim of much malicious slander by the ex pupils and who also sadly lost his mother and nephew at the end of the year. Our condolences go to him.

The programme with the Commonwealth Countries' League Education Fund (CCLEF) ran into further difficulties. You will recall that three of the original six secondary girls who obtained scholarships dropped out in 2008, two of them falling pregnant. A further two

dropped out in 2009 leaving just one girl, Kadie Sesay, being sponsored – not a very good record. On a more positive note the CCLEF agreed to sponsor two of the girls at the Bo blind school, Christiana Kanu and Mariama Sumaila. A group of “friends of Sierra Leone” in the United States contacted us about providing scholarships for two of the primary pupils and they are pursuing this directly with the school.

The visit by a group from the Wells Cathedral school in October, led by Roland Ladley, of which we were the major funder, regrettably was unable to do anything at the school because it remained closed. Instead the group helped another primary school in Freetown during the visit as well as pursuing their existing links with the Balanta Music Academy and its director, Dr Kitty Fadlu-Deen, a member of our Liaison Committee.

In contrast to the problems at the school, our fundraising for the UKA here has gone fairly well. Richard will be reporting in more detail in his Treasurer’s report but I mention in particular the generous support we have received from Toyota Gibraltar, Vision Charity, Trinity church Sutton, St Martin in the Fields, and St Helen’s church Abingdon which included a sponsored walk by the babies and toddlers of the church. There have been a number of notable individual donations such as Christine Taylor, Lesley Milne and Dorothy Flegelskamp. Gershon Ward-Anderson launched his CD of gospel songs and donated some of the proceeds to the UKA. We are very grateful to all our supporters and benefactors, and at this point I would like to record the sad loss in December at the grand age of 94 of Mary Hovenden. Mary had helped us when the choir stayed at Gordonstoun during the 2003 tour and remained a staunch supporter. I sent condolences to her family on behalf of the school and the UKA.

Apart from our contribution to the Wells Cathedral school visit, the only other outlay in the past year has been our continued financial support to Barbara Davidson. It has not been easy for her as she strives valiantly to support Albert Sandy in the midst of all the difficulties.

During our visit from 27 February to 19 March Ibrahim Suma and I spent many hours discussing all the problems with Albert Sandy, Barbara Davidson and a host of others. This included attending a meeting of the UKA’s Liaison Committee chaired by Alhaji Jawad. We remain very grateful to this committee for continuing to monitor and offer advice on events on our behalf.

We visited the blind schools in Bo and Makeni. Both these schools appear to be running well even though they have few resources. They were especially grateful for the provision of vehicles by the United Nations which we had helped to obtain and the school in Bo, under Mohammed Conteh’s headmastership, is still hoping to see the building project by Joanna Richards and her group get underway later in the year. We have told Mohammed that he must be more realistic in his ambitions for what can be achieved. Joanna had visited the school last year and then organised a very successful fundraiser at the Royal Geographic Society which included the participation of her father, General Sir David Richards.

There has been some progress with the proposed disability legislation. The government has now taken this over from the private member's bill proposed by the Hon Julius Cuffie. A draft bill has gone through cabinet and is now sitting in the Attorney-General's Office in preparation for submitting to Parliament.

Also during our visit we met with the Dorothy Springer Trust, run by Dr Abdullahai Dumbuya, which is providing advanced computer skills training for the disabled, the Vocational Skills training Centre for the Blind run by ex Milton Margai pupil, Thomas Allieu and the Recording Studio run by John Koroma, another ex pupil.

All these organisations could benefit significantly with our assistance, as indeed could the blind schools in Bo and Makeni, and those in Kabala and Kenema. At present the UKA's ability to offer any assistance is constrained by the terms of our constitution. Members will recall that at last year's AGM the incoming Executive Committee was asked to consider amending the constitution to broaden our objectives in order to offer assistance more widely. Hence a resolution amending the constitution will be put before this AGM shortly. As is necessary, I have informed the Charity Commission of England and Wales of these proposed changes.

We will also be electing our new Executive Committee. As you know, I have served as Chairman since the UKA's inception and, as forewarned last year, I have decided to step down this year. I am very pleased to note that our Vice-Chairman, Richard Stowell, is prepared to take over and I wish him and the new Committee well. They will continue to have my full support

Thankyou.

Peter Penfold
Chairman