

Mussa Conteh

Jane Knight, May 2009

I have known Mussa Conteh since almost the first day I ever arrived in Bo in 1981. He was due to sing with his deep voice in a Methodist Church service. I was staying with Neil Turner, who was a Methodist missionary related to a member of Dale St. Methodist Church in Leamington. Throughout those first few weeks in Bo, Mussa discussed with me the various issues around the possibilities of setting up a friendship link between our two communities. He introduced me during that stay to Johannes Mallah who has done so much to make the link work.

In September that year Mussa came to the UK (Theale near Reading) with his young family, to study for a Masters in rural agriculture at Reading University and they all spent many days with us in Leamington and elsewhere (the first UKOWLA meeting in Oxford) promoting the link, but also urging caution and sensitivity.

When Mussa was a teacher at CKC (Christ the King College) in Bo he put out headlines from the BBC World news on a blackboard every day,. He wanted the pupils to be aware of the wider world in which they lived. So the idea of an international link to raise awareness appealed to him.

In 1982, while the Contehs were still in the UK, Mussa arranged for me to take an audio tape to his village in Golahun Varma. Sitting in their house listening to his reassuring tones in Mende and seeing their tears because they were missing him so much, was a poignant experience. This week 28 years later I saw tears in the same eyes of those brothers and sisters as they attended his last days.

It has been a great privilege to know such a visionary man with a heart of gold. He taught me so much about his culture and reflected endlessly on the injustices which held back his country doing whatever he could to change things. Without him the link would not have had such a thoughtful and careful start.

Mussa worked hard for many years in the UK for Christian Aid and was a perfect ambassador for his people making African life come alive to many church groups. Later after the war he returned to Sierra Leone to spend the rest of his life trying to build up sports activities to rescue young people from the trauma of war. He was elected MP in the election which followed the end of the war. In 2004, he took me round his rural (Kenema District) constituency and it was fascinating to witness his reception and the way he urged the villagers to vote in the 2004 local elections.

One World Link had hoped that Mussa would be able to run the OWL resource centre in Bo as he was eminently qualified for the job. But sadly this was not to be. Prostate cancer took a hold and was not caught in time so that in the last year or so it gradually spread all over his body. Mussa fought to the bitter end telling well wishers he was fine when in fact his life was ebbing away. Typical of his caring nature, his last whispered words to me were "How are You?"

Mussa had so much to give to us all. He was very clever, thoughtful kind and affectionate towards everyone. I miss him so much.