

Our Unification Church Missionary Visits Schweitzer's Hospital

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Schweitzer's Hospital in Lambarene, Gabon

This letter is to serve as a report of my recent trip to Lambarene.

I went last week, taking 2-3 days off from work. Since the roads in Gabon are not reliable and we had barely finished the rainy season, I flew there, and spent most of the first day with the family of a Gabonese girl. It seemed as though the whole clan came to see me and welcome me, but they spoke most! Fang, a native dialect, so I didn't understand very much. Late that afternoon two teenage boys took me to Albert Schweitzer's Hospital. The hospital was built on an island in the middle of the Ogorie River, so one must go by pirogue (boat made from hollowed log, similar to our canoes), or by the newly built bridge. I took the pirogue. In Schweitzer's time there was no bridge.

At the hospital, I began by introducing myself to one of the old guides, who has been there since Schweitzer built the hospital. His son, whom I know from Libreville, is the director of one of the Catholic high schools here, and so I delivered a letter from him to his father. Then he gave me a tour of the hospital. However, it was late in the day, he was tired, and most of the areas were closed, so the tour was a bit sketchy. Also, very few patients are in the hospital now, as for a long time they had said the hospital would be closed January 1, 1976. So the people who would have come didn't, and the patients there were gradually returning to their villages.

Later that evening I met an old American couple who are the caretakers of the hospital, and they told me some of its history, and what was to become of it in the future. They shared of themselves and we became good friends. The hospital has always been a free service to the people, and therefore depends totally on donations.

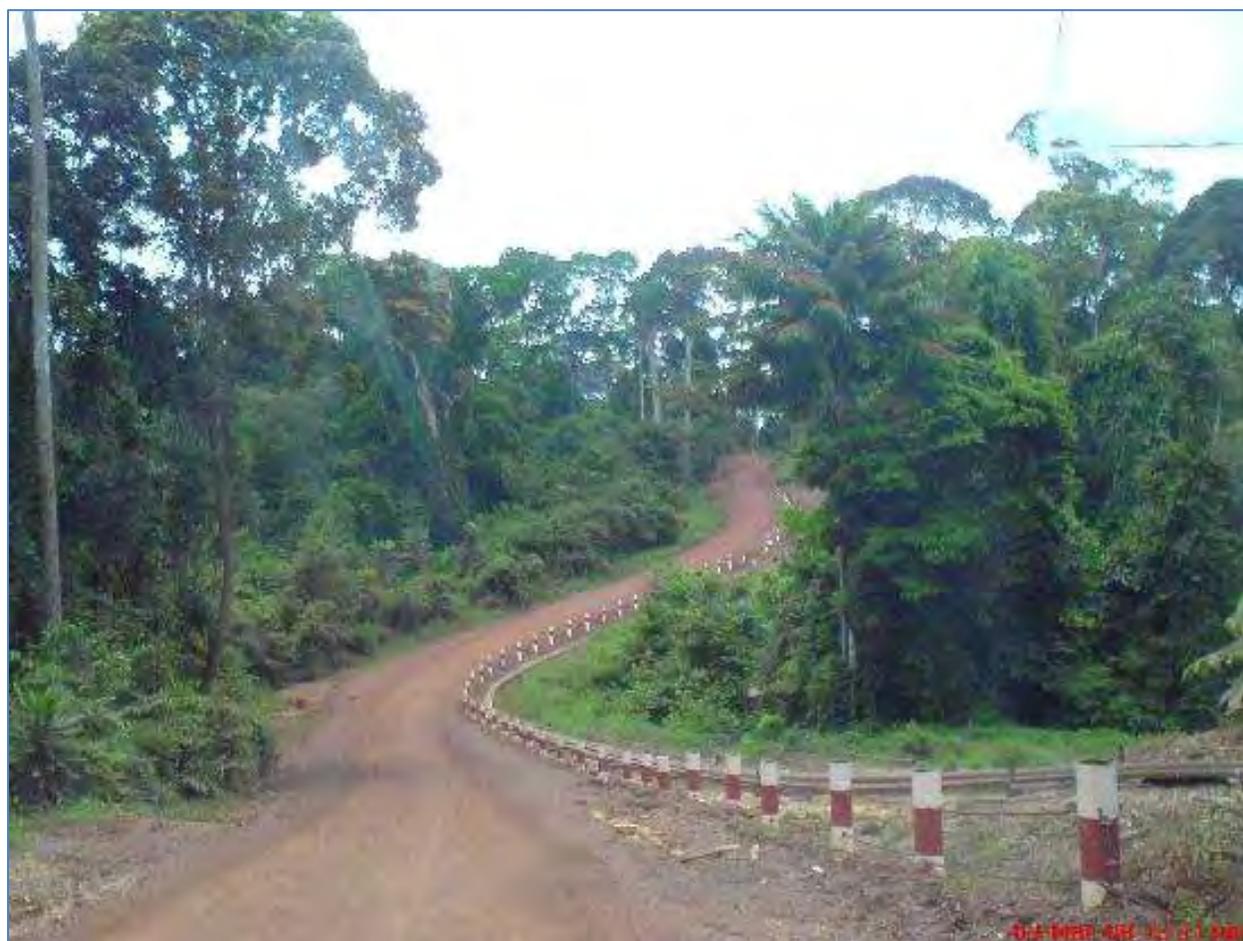
The person in charge of raising money for the support of the hospital, in soliciting donations asked that individuals, groups, or countries pay for one or more days of operation for 5 years. For example, an individual could donate enough money to operate the hospital for 5 days for 5 years, or \$1,500 x 5 x 5, or \$37,500. It was a good idea but he was able to solicit only enough to keep the hospital operating 244 days for 5 years, or 2/3 of the time. Because of that they decided that they had to close down the hospital; they couldn't just stop the operation for 1/3 of the year each year.

Finally, President Bongo intervened, saying it would be scandalous if Gabon allowed this famous hospital to close. He and the minister of public health and a few others drew up plans which include completely modernizing the hospital and making it a research center for tropical diseases. The government will be

responsible for the funds, and therefore it will be able to continue its great work. However, because it will now be run by the government, it can lose the spirit with which it was founded: none of the staff were paid salaries, only living expenses, and when the sick were cured they would stay on and work for the hospital a, their contribution.

People all worked there with a true spirit of Christian sacrifice, following the example of Albert Schweitzer, curing people more by love, sometimes, than by medicine. I felt that if our members were working there the spirit of Schweitzer could continue -- that by example they could influence the other staff members and the government which is now responsible for the total operation of the hospital.

I decided to risk taking the bus back to Libreville, as many people told me the roads were now clear. I got the bus at 8:00 a.m. even though it was raining heavily, feeling that if the bus driver was brave enough to start, he must be confident he could get through. However, within 10 miles of Lambarene we were stopped by a barricade in the road, only wide enough for smaller cars and buses to go through, which meant the roads were unsafe for anything larger. We waited there an hour, discussing what to do, and then a smaller bus decided it could make it, and took all of us on. So we all squeezed in and began again, this time 20 of us in a bus made for 12.



A Gabonese road

Nothing new for me, actually, and I knew I was at the start of an adventure, thanking Heavenly Father for the experience. The journey went well for about half the distance, although often the mud on the road required that we get out and push occasionally. However, after the mid-way point, we got stuck in a deep mud puddle, and in spite of everyone's hopeful and tireless efforts, after 2½ hours, the van was still stuck.

Finally, a large truck came from ahead of us, and after 25 minutes of tugging freed our van. But the damage had been done, the battery was wet and weak. A little further along, and the van had no power or traction to make it up a long slippery incline. It stalled, and the driver had to call it quits for the night. We were really in the bush, no telephones or electricity for at least 20 miles. There were a few little bark and wood houses not far from the road. Members from one tribe left the van to stay in one of the houses.

There were basically two tribes in the van, Fang and Bapounou, and even though they could unite in pushing the van, I found they neither ate together (fear of poisoning) nor stayed the night together (fear of death by knifing). I settled into the corner of the seat, but the driver noticed I was still there and asked if I didn't want to sleep in a bed. He knew of one, and led up the hill to another gathering of houses. Sure enough, there was a nice double bed, complete with mosquito net. For a small sum it would be mine for the night. I agreed and the driver returned to the van, leaving me in the darkness with the old couple whose house it was. The man entertained me by playing a native sitar and talking a bit, but I could tell he really wanted me to go to bed so he could go to bed, so I gave in -- it was 7:30 p.m.

After tucking myself in, the night began. First, "papa" started shaking a rattle and reciting some kind of prayer to his ancestors. They went on for almost an hour, and I couldn't help remembering the words of a girl in the van, who was from another tribe, say that this tribe kills and eats people. But I refused to be seriously frightened. The rattle and the chanting stopped and silence set in for 5 minutes. Then he started discussing something with his wife. The Gabonese love to discuss, palavering it's called and can go on for hours. Anyway, after what indeed seemed like hours, all was quiet once more, with the exception of a beastly (mouse, lizard?) who seemed to like running overhead.

Before too long, however, the man started arguing with his neighbor. I finally decided that the Gabonese simply don't sleep at night, or else his chanting hadn't worked this night in driving away any bothersome spirits. Whatever the reason, I didn't sleep very much that night, and got up when they got up, at the crack of dawn. I sat around awhile, waiting for something to happen, because I knew we probably would not go anywhere until the sun had dried up the road, and until a car came along who could push the van into position to jump the clutch and start the battery again.

The old "papa," my serenader of words and music the night before, came to me with a live chicken, which he gave me as a New Year's present. Then the others in the van came along, saying they were going to look for some palm wine (a native drink), and pointed me in the direction of the house where the two women from the other tribe had stayed. I joined them for some hot sugary milk and some stale bread, shared with the old lady of the house, and then a little later they gave me some manioc and sardines. I was thankful for the food and drink, thankful that they shared what little they had with me, a stranger.

We all regathered back at the other house, and I was offered more food by members of the other tribe. Then, we all settled into waiting. Two or three hours later -- noon -- a truck came along, gave us the needed push and said the roads were dry, and we began again, all in good spirits, I with my chicken and the feeling that these were indeed my brothers and sisters. We had a few more difficulties along the way, but we made it to Libreville by sundown, hot, tired, terribly thirsty, and thankful to return to all that was familiar, all that was "home."

I learned much about the Gabonese during that little journey. I learned that most of them live literally off the ground, eating, cooking, sleeping on the ground, and getting what food they can find from the bush -- leaves, roots, whatever little beasties they can capture. All they have in the way of physical belongings is very primitive, and similar in nature to those utensils of the American Indians at the time of the Pilgrims. Most houses have no windows, in order to keep out the evil spirits. Most are made of tree bark, palm leaves or mud dabbed in between woven sticks.

The most important thing I realized was that even though Gabon has been a nation for 15 years it really isn't a nation internally, as there is still no unity between the tribes, no reliable roads that connect the whole country, and most of the people not living in Libreville (population 120,000) -- that is, 400,000 -- still live a very primitive existence, staying within a few miles of their village for their whole life, perhaps. The tropical rain forest has prevented civilization from developing too far beyond that of an extended family or clan, so there are many, many tribes (each really a large family) and many dialects. I felt that with a few strong and respected leaders from each tribe, however, centered on the Divine Principle, the country could be united.

The other important thing I observed was that the people live with a strong belief in the spirit world; too strong, because not only do they have a daily life relationship with their ancestors, but they are controlled by spirit world and practice what is black magic. For the 400,000 people in the bush, virtually untouched by civilization and Christianity, and for who knows how many Christians who still carry on their ancestor worship and magic practices, Satan has a stronghold. Only the Divine Principle can break that power which Satan has over the people.