

## West African Methodists in U.S. mourn relatives dead from Ebola

by [Kathy L. Gilbert](#) and [Sam Hodges](#)

This article appears in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue.



Eric Pratt (left), lay leader of the Heart of Africa Fellowship in Dallas, and Jacob Keega, the fellowship's pastor, confer after October 19 worship. They have worked on the church's response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Photo by Sam Hodges, [United Methodist News Service](#)

At Spencer Memorial United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, nearly nine out of ten members are Liberian; another 10 percent are from Sierra Leone. Since the Ebola outbreak began, every Sunday one or more members of the congregation reports the death of another family member in the two West African countries hit hardest by the deadly virus.

"We come in expecting a celebration, a day of worship, but it always turns into a funeral," said Emmanuel Shanka Morris, the pastor, who is Liberian.

The church observed five days of praying and fasting in the month of October. Using 2 Chronicles 7:11-22 and Ezra 8:23 as guiding scriptures, each Wednesday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. people of the congregation interceded for the people of Liberia, Sierra

Leone, and Guinea.

Across the United States, United Methodist churches with Liberians and Sierra Leoneans are telling similar stories of grief and suffering, while trying to rally support for medical relief.

Albert B. Travell, a member of First United Methodist Church in Arlington, Texas, had seven family members die from Ebola in July. His nieces prepared the body of a sister for her funeral, thinking she died from malaria.

“We have a tradition in Liberia when someone passes away, family members stick around so many days before burial and after burial they cook and everyone eats from the same bowl,” he said.

His nieces started getting sick and dying one after another. Now the remaining family is having trouble getting food.

“I am trying to send them some money so they can buy food,” Travell said. “I am praying by the grace of God, everything will be all right soon.”

Many Liberians living in the United States are stepping up contributions to family members and friends because so many people are unable to work and are not getting paid, said Richard L. Stryker, a United Methodist pastor and executive director of ethnic ministries for the North Alabama Conference. He is originally from Liberia.

“My wife has lost an aunt, although not to Ebola,” Stryker said. “We wonder what role the strain on the already degraded health system played in her death from sickness.”

His wife also lost a high school classmate to Ebola. Four out of eight people in her classmate’s family died after waiting days for an ambulance to take them to the hospital.

“Sanitation, communication, [and] lack of facilities remain major problems for the prevention of this disease,” he said. “I believe people from the West that are going to help assume a certain level of basic care that is nonexistent.”

Lovers Lane United Methodist Church in Dallas has long supported a hospital in Liberia founded by two of its members, Betty and Peter Weato. Now, because of

Ebola, the church is raising funds for medical supplies for Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The church's Heart of Africa Fellowship includes members from ten African countries, including Liberia and Sierra Leone. Dallas became a focus of news coverage when a hospital there made the first diagnosis of Ebola in the United States. The death of the man, who was Liberian, the infection of two nurses who cared for him, and the quarantining of people who had contact with him all raised anxiety in the city, said Stan Copeland, Lovers Lane's senior pastor.

African people have faced increased prejudice during the Ebola scare, said Eric Pratt, lay leader of the Heart of Africa Fellowship and a native of Sierra Leone.

"Even your neighbors that you used to play and laugh with, they start to shun you," said Pratt, who has lived in the Dallas area for 29 years.



**Beatrice Gbanga (right) leads a prayer at the opening of a panel discussion on Ebola at the United Methodist Church's Mercy Hospital in Bo, Sierra Leone. Photo by Mike DuBose, [United Methodist News Service](#)**

Beatrice Gbanga, a missionary and medical coordinator for the United Methodist Sierra Leone Conference, served as an expert witness on the Ebola epidemic for some 50 clergy and laity meeting in Plano, Texas, in early October.

"The disease not only affected the fabric of our humanness, it has affected the economy of the country," she said. "The health systems have all broken down.

Markets cannot meet. So people are not raising the basic monies that they are used to for their survival.”

Another obstacle is that the symptoms of Ebola are similar to malaria.

“We lost a lot of health workers because they have been treating Ebola patients for malaria,” she said. “And in the process they got themselves infected.”

Watching local television when she was in the Dallas area, she noted the disparities between the response to the Ebola case there—such as quarantining the family and providing a cleaning company—and that in West Africa.

“If we in Sierra Leone and in Liberia had a third of those facilities,” she said, “I am sure we would have controlled Ebola by now.” —United Methodist News Service

*This article was edited November 11, 2014.*