

African Couple Leads Ministry for Sierra Leone's Child Soldiers

Richard and Yeakah Cole reach out to ex-combatants who fought in the nation's civil war, which lasted a decade

Richard Cole is no stranger to terror. He has been kidnapped and beaten, tortured and marked for assassination by rebel troops in Sierra Leone. But instead of taking cover, Cole developed a ministry to reach out to those who abused him.

With their work now dubbed the Nehemiah Project, Cole and his wife, Yeakah, care for orphaned children who had been recruited as soldiers by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh, in their war with the Sierra Leone government. The decade-long civil war to gain control of the nation's rich diamond mines displaced more than 2 million people—well over a third of the population—leaving thousands more dead or dismembered, as rebel troops were known to hack off limbs with their machetes.

Thousands of children were taught to maim and murder. One 12-year-old boy known as Civilian was abducted at age 4, his parents murdered by the rebels. RUF soldiers rubbed crack cocaine into an incision on the boy's temple, and he quickly became addicted. Trained to kill, the child murdered his own grandparents and callously chopped off limbs.

When asked how many people he had killed, he replied: "I don't know the number of people I've killed, but I remember killing many times, and cutting off hands many times. I once had 51 hands I carried in my sack."

Today Civilian is one of the Nehemiah Project's success stories. He is described as a gentle young man who learned carpentry and attended school through the ministry.

"If one man can bring great evil, then one man can bring greater good," said Cole, a Sierra Leone native who sold drugs during his youth before accepting Christ and becoming a missionary in Liberia, then in his hometown of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

At the height of the conflict, the Coles began rescuing children from rebel hands. They started their mission informally in 1991 when they took in two boys. The number soon grew to 45 ex-soldiers living in their two-room home.

In 1996, the Sierra Leone government asked the Coles to establish a rehabilitation program, which became the Nehemiah Project. The outreach is now home to 140 ex-soldiers, and includes a community school; business and computer schools; tailoring, carpentry and soap-making shops; and the beginnings of a health clinic.

In 2000, the ministry was given seven acres of land, which serve as an agricultural training institute. The coffee, peppers, cassava and rice grown there are used as food, and the remainder is sold to raise funds for the ministry. The schools educate almost 1,000 children from the community and rehabilitation home.

Richard Cole said many of the youth who came to Nehemiah had been "dehumanized" by the RUF. "As we loved them, however, we helped them to realize that they were human, and their conscience began to awaken," he told Charisma, noting that

many wept bitterly when they remembered what they had done.

One of the boys in the Coles' care had murdered Richard's grandfather years before. The couple ministered to him as they did all the others. "We gave them truth," Richard Cole said. "You don't help people with emotion or sentiment, you help them with truth."

The project also has opened a home for girls who had been sexually abused by the rebels. The girls are taught skills they can use to earn a living and become independent.

Though the Nehemiah Project partially maintains itself, the students sell the goods they make within the community. The ministry gets its financial support from several British grants and from churches such as Grace Outreach, a charismatic ministry in New Hampshire. But Cole hopes that in time the ministry, which costs \$267,682 annually to maintain, will be self-supporting.

Cole hopes the Nehemiah Project will serve as a model to many African nations that have experienced similar atrocities. Currently, he is consulting with ministers in Rwanda about starting a home there.

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