**Harvest 2024 – ‘*I was a beggar, but now I am a giver.’***

This year, for harvest, the charity *All We Can* (formerly the *Methodist Relief and Development Fund*) is focusing upon Liberia. Within this we are introduced to Cynthia and *SHIFSD* (Self-Help Initiative for Sustainable Development, pronounced ‘shift’), a partner of *All We Can*.

Liberia is a country on the [West African](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Africa) coast (population around 5.5 million). The official language is English but [20 indigenous languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Liberia) are spoken, reflecting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. Recent history includes two civil wars (1989-1997 and 1998-2003). These resulted in the deaths of a quarter of a million people and the displacement of many more, with Liberia's economy shrinking by 90%. Democratic elections took place in 2005 and the country has remained relatively stable since then.

As Liberia imports 90% of its rice, a staple food, it is extremely vulnerable to food shortages. In 2007, 20% of children under the age of five were malnourished. Cynthia says, “I was already giving up. I had my children and was telling them, ‘no food to eat.’ So, the best thing that I could do is die because I was tired of my children. Everybody was looking up to me and they were not getting anything.”

Cynthia wanted to go to school but she was told it was not for women and that, even if it was, the family did not have the means to send her. Her father had died, there was tension all around, and so Cynthia left home to live on the streets.

In 2017, the literacy rate of Liberia was estimated at 48% (63% for males, 34% for females). Jeremiah Burgess, a Director of *SHIFSD*, comments: “In the context of Liberia, the majority of our people are illiterate. After the civil war, a whole generation missed out on education. Mothers around here are single mothers, bringing up a child, just by themselves. When you can’t read and write, you’re almost in the dark.”

Cynthia heard about a school run by *SHIFSD*. When she went they said, “Let’s start with adult literacy so you’re able to write your name.” She says, “For a woman to get literary skills, it’s important. Like me now. I am able to write my name. It’s good to know what you want to be and what you want to do. It’s good for women to learn to read and write.”

Jeremiah explains, “Literacy is the bedrock of our organisation. I see adult literacy as the thread that holds everything together. It helps them to be able to find something to do, maybe a job. It builds self-confidence and self-esteem. For those who can’t read or write, some of them have very brilliant ideas but they do not see themselves as people who are worthy of any contribution. They don’t think that they have anything to offer. And then when people are making decisions, they don’t count on them. So, most of the benefits that they should have gotten [don’t] reach them…Most of what we are hearing from the learners that are finishing is that to read and to write is good, but after that, what next? We are led by the community and the issues impacting them. They have more ideas, better than us. They know exactly their issues…You just need someone to help them to see clearly what they have and how best to value what they have and make use of it… they quickly become independent, generating some funding to help themselves.”

Cynthia graduated from the school in 2017 and explains what came next: “I got a sewing machine. I started practising on my own. I started getting customers, little by little. I started getting stronger. The tailoring job means a lot to me, because now I’m able to feed myself, help my children with their schooling, you can see me now. I can sew my own clothes. I had one plaid skirt, one white blouse with some shower slippers. And I wore this to church for three years. People who saw it on me felt it was a uniform, not knowing it was the only clothes that I had to wear. And today, I can change clothes any hour, any time.”

Jeremiah reflects on the significance of the partnership with *All We Can*: “One of the good things is they said to us, we’re not here to tell you ‘do this’ or ‘do that’. We see them as a true partner.”

A last word from Cynthia: “*SHIFSD* has caused me to be able to stand. I was a beggar, but now I am a giver because I’m not only feeding myself, I’m also able to help others.”

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