

Vicky Lavy talks to three CMF members playing key roles at home and away

David\* (7) and Mamie\* (4) sit on a bench outside their grandparent's house. Their parents died after contracting Ebola (EVD virus). Save the Children is supporting children and families affected by the Ebola crisis in West Africa. (\*names changed to protect identity)

# CHRISTIAN DOCTORS ON THE FRONT LINE

Photo courtesy of Save the Children/Andrew Mada

## key points

- Ebola has triggered a unique crisis: an escalating epidemic of a disease with no known treatment or vaccine.
- It has already taken a toll among health workers. At the time of writing, WHO estimates that 546 health workers have been infected and 310 have died.
- The epidemic is an enormous opportunity for Christian service and Christian ministry and to create links with humanitarian workers of other faiths and none.

**E**bola is unique. We have seen some terrible disasters in the past ten years; the Tsunami in 2004, Myanmar's Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Each saw hundreds of thousands of lives lost to extreme weather conditions and the devastation that followed. This current emergency is a different beast – a rapidly escalating epidemic of a disease with no known treatment or vaccine. In March 2014 the WHO reported a rash of 86 cases of Ebola in Guinea, the first ever seen in West Africa. From then until the start of November, the number has risen to 10,000 cases. But the epidemic's exponential growth means we may be seeing 10,000 new cases every week by the end of the year.<sup>1</sup> The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) launched an appeal on 30 October 2014 – the first time in its 50-year history that it has done so for a disease outbreak. It seems we are in uncharted territory.

### Healthcare workers in the front line

WHO has declared the crisis a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and health workers are in the front line. They are paying a high price – some are unable to go home because their communities are afraid they may bring the disease with them. Many have paid with their lives. At the time of writing, WHO estimates that 546 health workers have been infected and 310 have died.

Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf paid tribute to them, saying 'they were trained to preserve life, and they gave life.'<sup>2</sup> The three countries affected are some of the poorest in the world that can ill afford to lose health workers. Liberia has only one doctor for every 100,000 people. Sierra Leone's population of six million is served by about 100 doctors, but a number of them have died of Ebola, including the only haemorrhagic fever specialist.

The international community has been slow to respond, but health professionals are now going in greater numbers to help. I interviewed three CMF members who are playing key roles.

### Sam: Setting out to serve



I spoke to Sam Dunnet just before she set out for Sierra Leone in early November to work as Staff Health Manager for Save the Children. 'I'll be responsible for the healthcare of all those sent out by the British

Government and all the national staff working with Save the Children, and their families. It's probably the biggest job I've ever had in terms of responsibility.'

Sam is no stranger to Africa, having worked in six African countries over the past ten years. She was not planning to return for a while and has been doing a course in cross-cultural mission at Redcliffe

College. 'I saw the advert for the Save the Children job on the CMF International Facebook group and made enquiries. I decided not to go, but the thought kept coming back to me. I was reading through the life of David and was struck by the phrase "At the time when kings go off to war... David remained in Jerusalem."<sup>3</sup> Was I staying at home when I should be going to the battlefield? I was challenged by the story of Abigail, whose brave and timely action averted a disaster.<sup>4</sup> Was God trying to tell me something?'

I asked Sam how she felt about stepping into an epidemic of a deadly disease. 'I'm a bit daunted by the work and responsibility, but I'm not fearful. It says in Psalm 139 "all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." God knows when I will die. Whether it's there or here, my life is in his hands. His purpose for our lives is not to be safe, but to glorify him and share his love with a hurting world.'

**Ibrat: Behind the scenes**



Ibrat Djabbarov works for Save the Children as a Humanitarian Health Advisor. He has been responsible for recruitment of medical staff for the Ebola crisis. Save the Children received over 750 direct applications in less than two months in response to adverts to work in the Ebola Treatment Centre. 'It's a good response, though it's a huge job to process all the applications! CMF has been very supportive – several members are helping with reading CVs and doing interviews. The calibre of applicants has been very high. Nearly 100 doctors and nurses were already approved by early November and are ready to go some time in the next few months. Our treatment centre has just opened, so we are just getting started with clinical care.'

'It's not been easy as this is a new situation that no one was prepared for; we've had to think creatively and adapt. Even seasoned humanitarian workers say this crisis is unique, with its rapid growth, late response and the risk to personnel. Health systems on the ground have collapsed and we are doing everything we can to ensure our staff's safety while being deployed. Getting good information is difficult – we're learning as we go.'

**Simon: Serving those who serve**



Simon Clift is the Director of Health Services at InterHealth, a Christian charity providing specialist travel and occupational health services to mission and humanitarian aid agencies.

'We have previously provided services on request to people going out to earthquakes, floods and typhoons. But the health risks of Ebola mean that agencies are coming to us for guidance and training; "What must we do for our staff? What do we need?" We also have a role

working with Public Health England to ensure public safety when aid workers return to UK.'

'Little did I know when I took up this post at Easter that Ebola would soon fill my waking (and some of my sleeping) moments. But this is such an opportunity for us to serve not only those in Christian ministry, but also humanitarian workers of other faiths and none. I am passionate about safeguarding InterHealth's Christian identity. As we pray "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven," we seek to make God and his values visible in the world.'

**What can we do?**

What about the rest of us? What can we do? It's likely that only a few of us will go, but the rest of us can support others, give and pray.

There will be a need for doctors on the ground for months and years to come. While the countries' health systems are collapsing under the strain of the epidemic, babies are still being born, children are still dying of malaria and people are still suffering with TB and other infections. The UK International Emergency Medical Register (UKIEMR) is coordinating volunteers from the NHS and agencies such as Save the Children will be sending staff over the coming months. Those remaining here can support by covering duties and arranging rotas to release others to go. Interhealth needs doctors with overseas experience to support those going, both in their London clinic and working remotely by phone and email.

We can all give – a number of organisations are running appeals. And we can all pray for these nations living in grief and fear, for the health workers battling against the odds, for the thousands of orphans left behind and for our brothers and sisters in the church.

**The hope of the gospel**

What can the church do? Do Christians have a unique contribution to make? We certainly don't have a monopoly on compassion or courage. Medecins San Frontiers (MSF), a secular relief agency, has been at the forefront of the battle since it began. National churches are playing a vital role in community mobilisation, being present even in remote places, and having leaders who are trusted and respected. More than this, Christians have the hope of the gospel. We know that this life is not all there is, that death is not the end and that our lives are in God's hands. We look forward to the new heaven and earth of Revelation 21,<sup>5</sup> but we also know that God is even now at work restoring our fallen world. We can be co-workers with him as we strive both to fight disease and to hold out the word of life. One day there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.<sup>6</sup> There will be no more Ebola. But until then, we must play our part in the fight.

*Vicky Lavy is CMF Head of International Ministries.*



Sensitisation teams go out into villages and towns to warn people of the threat of Ebola, how to spot someone with the virus, and how to prevent its spread.

I'm a bit daunted by the work and responsibility, but I'm not fearful...God knows when I will die. Whether it's there or here, my life is in his hands.

**references**

1. WHO warns 10,000 new cases of Ebola a week are possible. *Guardian*, 14 October 2014 [bit.ly/1tZnpDD](http://bit.ly/1tZnpDD)
2. Ebola outbreak: UN 'lacks resources' to fight deadly virus. *BBC News*, 6 November 2014 [bbc.in/1z1Nro](http://bbc.in/1z1Nro)
3. 2 Samuel 11:1
4. 1 Samuel 25:1-44
5. Revelation 21:1-3
6. Revelation 21:4