Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the place of forgiveness in the reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Children were recruited, either forcibly or as volunteers, into the civil war in Sierra Leone that began in March 1991 and ended, officially, in January 2002. They served in combat as well as non-combat capacities. During the final years of the war, the disarmament and demobilization process began, followed by reintegration. Reintegration for some former child soldiers was through formal programmes, while for others it was spontaneous. Reintegration into families and communities of origin was not always an option for various reasons. This thesis examines the place that forgiveness has in facilitating their reintegration or integration into society. As well, it concerns the recovery of former child soldiers. The nature of childhood is examined, with a specific focus on resilience, and its relation to reintegration and forgiveness.

In order to consider the place of forgiveness in former child soldier reintegration, programmes and practices in Sierra Leone that contributed to reintegration are evaluated. Discourse from children and adults is examined, to assist in understanding the cultural perceptions and practices of forgiveness. Unilateral and bilateral forgiveness practices are considered in the context of recovery for former child soldiers. It is argued that the primary vehicle for forgiveness to be expressed is through family, community and deity, supporting and validating the practice of forgiveness in the reintegration of former child soldiers. While forgiveness is revealed as a unilateral process, the fullness of forgiveness is expressed in a bilateral way, as a social relationship, consisting of an interpersonal exchange between two or more. The practice of forgiveness is affirmed as beneficial to recovery for former child soldiers, as it restores relationships significant to the child and others, and as it makes way for a different and hopeful future for those concerned.