

Ship Report

3 March 2006 | Monrovia, Liberia



Photos: Richard Brewster, Mercy Ships International

Mercy Ships continues partnership with local churches to raise literacy rate

In spring 2005, during Mercy Ships first field service in Liberia, the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program partnered with three local churches to work towards overcoming Liberia's 70% illiteracy rate. Already, the benefits of this initiative are spreading. The joint venture trained seven Liberian facilitators in teaching reading and writing. Currently, five are teaching intermediate classes for participants who completed the beginner level; another is training six new facilitators in two additional villages.

Back in Liberia for a second field service, the ABE staff expanded the program by training an additional twenty-one facilitators in 36 hours of instruction and in-class teaching practice. When classes start, the Liberian facilitators are paired with ABE trainers who incrementally hand over teaching responsibility to the facilitators. Nine of those facilitators took over new classes in February. In March and April the remaining facilitators are starting classes outside of Monrovia, plus one inside Monrovia's prison in partnership with the Prison Fellowship Ministry.

In the February classes, approximately 50 participants, mostly women, meet three times per week to learn to read and write and to learn analytical skills by discussing Bible texts on related community life principles. ABE program coordinator Veronique Biville describes the program's teaching philosophy: "*Enabling the participants to think for themselves, plan ahead and become independent with literacy skills.*" The participants' motivation comes from learning to write their own names, detecting a cheating merchant, and helping their children with homework. Reading allows them to take control of their lives.

Each student contributes about 25 Liberian Dollars (approximately \$0.50 US) per week for the year-long classes. The payment gives them ownership of their education, provides a nominal payment for the facilitators, and creates a mechanism for classes to continue without outside support.

But the participants learn more than how to write their own names. Biville pantomimes the rusty cogs of a machine unaccustomed to turning to emphasize her hope that "*the participants grasp how to think for themselves because they are often discouraged from independent thought.*" Through dialogue she coaxes their mental gears to turn freely without reprisal. The class goal for Biville, her co-teachers, and the facilitators is that participants will not only be able to write their own names and read simple sentences, but that they will feel empowered to think for themselves and take initiative to improve their lives and communities.