

Ship Report

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Photo: Debra Bell, Mercy Ships International

Educating Liberia's youth

Ask a Liberian child what AIDS stands for and you may hear, “America’s Idea to Discourage Sex [in Africa].” People know of the disease, but many don’t believe AIDS exists. The Mercy Ships Church Empowerment office is helping to change this answer through three programs that partner with local churches and schools: Training of Trainers (TOT) workshops, HIV/AIDS presentations, and the Worth Waiting For (WWF) pledge.

The TOT workshops equip local pastors and school leaders to teach others about HIV/AIDS information and prevention. Upon completion of the two or four-day training, participants know how to teach about the HIV/AIDS crisis using lessons designed for people who may not read or write. Participants also interact with an HIV-positive person through the Light Association, a local AIDS support organization, which deconstructs the perception that HIV/AIDS is a myth. Three TOTs occurred this field service in Liberia with 43 trainers completing the course. During follow-up sessions 27 trainers reported the extraordinary news that they had collectively shared the information with more than 2500 people. The goal is to exponentially increase the number of people learning the facts about the disease and protecting themselves from it.

The HIV/AIDS presentations in local classrooms educate pre-teens and teenagers about the dangers of contracting HIV/AIDS and how to protect against it. Through two visits each week to new classrooms, HIV/AIDS Education co-leader Eunok Lee emphasizes the need for students to protect themselves from the virus in order to stay physically and emotionally healthy. This initiative partners with the local organization Better Society Foundation to provide follow-up with the classroom. “*The demand [for AIDS training] is through the roof, but we don’t have enough time to go to all the places,*” says HIV/AIDS co-leader Al Schirduan. Despite the overwhelming need for HIV/AIDS educators, the team is educating many young Liberians about the deadly disease.

The Worth Waiting For program recognizes that young adults need outside support to remain sexually pure, especially in Liberia where four out of five girls are sexually abused. Teenage boys and girls attend a two-hour presentation on God’s definition of a successful sexual life. One week later the boys and girls return to sign a commitment to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. Signers are paired with local churches or other existing support systems to keep them accountable to their pledge; they are also recognized in a church ceremony. Participants are taught that true success means living by God’s plan for the mind, body, soul, emotions, and relationships and that there is true safety in following that plan. Al Schirduan summarizes the team’s philosophy: “*Education is an important part [of sexual purity]; education informs the mind, but only Jesus can change the heart.*”



Rural Liberian communities receive health training

“People have changed,” says Siaffa Folley, a 28-year-old resident of Blagai Town village in Bomi County.

Siaffa and two other residents of the Blagai Town community were chosen by their neighbors to take part in a Mercy Ships Community Health Education (CHE) course, joining about 20 others from five other villages. Since the class began in January, Siaffa and his classmates have learned about a wide range of health topics and have been implementing improvements in their communities: *“We are teaching the community how to take care of the environment and how to take care of safe drinking water,”* Folley said.

This class, held in the village of Saymabu, is one of three the CHE team is currently facilitating in Bomi County. Registered dietician Jennifer Gerson and Nurse Heike Wheeler lead the Basic Health classes, which reach approximately 100 students.

The team also provides training for Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs). Midwife Elizabeth Hunter teaches two classes in Bomi County. Hunter leads both of the classes twice a week, instructing about 25 students in delivering babies and checking for and responding to problems.

The team looks forward to the far-reaching impact these courses will have. Gerson says, *“It’s not just one class. Whatever this generation learns is multiplied for generations to come, to their town, their families, and their friends.”*



Photos: Debra Bell, Mercy Ships International