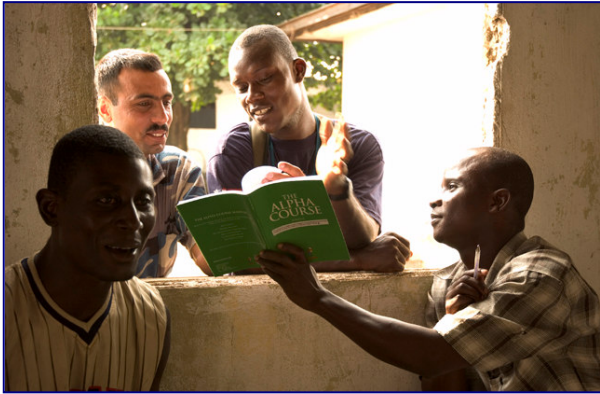


Ship Report

17 March 2006 | Monrovia, Liberia



Photos: Debra Bell, Mercy Ships International

Alpha course reaches out to Monrovia prisoners

Monrovia Central Prison, one of eight operating prisons in Liberia, is home to over 360 inmates. Formerly used for “high risk prisoners,” Monrovia Central is currently used to house prisoners accused of everything from misdemeanors to murder. Accused, but not convicted, as many of the prisoners have never had a hearing or seen a courtroom.

Central’s 15-foot walls, topped off with razor wire, ensure prisoners won’t be making unexpected departures, but they haven’t prevented the joint efforts of Prison Fellowship Liberia and Mercy Ships from bringing a unique style of sharing the message and nature of a loving God to inmates.

The two have partnered to introduce the Alpha Course for inmates at Monrovia Central. The specialized course began in 1995 and runs about ten weeks. Alpha reports the course is running in 85% of United Kingdom prisons, and also in the prisons of 40 countries worldwide.

Adi de Freitas, Alpha Coordinator, and several crew members, began Liberia’s first Alpha Course during the ship’s first field service in spring of 2005. The crew modeled the course to volunteers from five churches, with the

hope of developing a team of leaders and helpers to continue the course after the ship’s departure. De Freitas returned to Liberia in October with intentions of becoming more of a “coach” for local Alpha volunteers.

Just a few weeks later Reverend Francis Kollie, Executive Director of Prison Fellowship Liberia, asked de Freitas to investigate the possibility of running Alpha in the prisons. He agreed to do some research for Kollie, but felt his schedule wouldn’t allow for a full-scale course in the prisons. *“I went back and got some information for Francis, but then I visited the prison for myself. Then I actually felt like that’s what I should do, try to run the Alpha course in the prison.”*

The Alpha course aims to give an introduction to Christianity in a relaxed and friendly setting. Inmate Oliver Sayou, 29, who has been in prison since August 2003 with no trial as of yet, said, *“I came from a Christian family... but I did my own thing. The course led me to wonder who Jesus is and why did he have to die. How can I be sure of my faith? I’m learning how to read my Bible, how to pray... how to transform my life. My thinking, my talk, and my attitude are changing gradually.”*



“Traditionally the preacher preaches, the person agrees, and often there’s not a life change,” explained de Freitas. *“We’re simply trying to describe Christianity, give a clear idea of what Christianity is, so people have a*

more accurate picture. Alpha is exploring the meaning of life; it gives the inmates a place to do that, which they don't get normally."

Matthew Williams, one of the local volunteer speakers trained during the ship's first visit to Liberia, explained, *"This course leaves people with the freedom and choice to decide for themselves without any pressure. Alpha is also unique in that it presents people with considerations and not necessarily answers... it allows the opportunity for people to discover the meaning of life for themselves."*

Alpha is not only unique in its approach, it's also been transformational for the individuals of Central Prison. Kollie reported that 17 of their original participants, two entire small groups, were released after the group began praying about releases. Many of those inmates were released after they sought forgiveness from the individuals who had them detained.

"This never happened before," said Kollie. "A prisoner just told me today that the Alpha program has helped reduce fighting and violence in general for the prison. The participants are working with fellow prisoners, which are allowing further transformation. It's helping to develop the entire prison."

