

Global Strategies for HIV Prevention

Liberia: Land of the Free



Newsletter

October, 2006

Liberia, "Land of the Free," was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. From the language to the constitution, the country was modeled after the United States.

After fourteen years of civil war, which ended in 2003, there are few comparisons that are easy to make. The average income is \$1,000 per year. Life expectancy is less than 40 years. There is no running water, no electricity, no garbage collection; little infrastructure of any type. Yet, nestled into this country of just over three million people, are many wonderfully dedicated Christians who believe in freedom and hope for a better future. They are surviving adversity.

A team of seven of us had the pleasure of journeying to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, where over half of the population resides, to conduct a workshop on Mother-to-Child HIV transmission and to see how we can be of help. Dan Clendenin, writer and author was with us. These are his reflections.

"We have a big problem with HIV-AIDS, and we have to talk about it. AIDS kills, this is no joke. I've been to the funerals, and not just those of kids but also those of government officials." The speaker was Liberia's Minister of Health, Walter Gwenigale, a general surgeon who did some of his training in California.

I was sitting in the lecture room at St. Joseph's Hospital in Monrovia, the capital of the country, along with 50 Liberian health care workers from across the city. Together we had come for Global Strategies's week long workshop on Women, Children, and HIV Prevention. What an honor for the Minister of Health to join us, and a ringing endorsement of Global Strategies's mission. After his sober statement about how crucial the epidemic of HIV-AIDS is in Liberia, he publicly thanked us for coming.

Our host for the week was one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. Dr. Lily Sanvee had attended Global Strategies's workshop at a

refugee camp in Ghana last year, and invited Global Strategies to her hospital to conduct a workshop on HIV-AIDS, with special focus on mother-to-child prevention. After six years of medical studies in Spain (she is fluent in Spanish), Lily is the only woman surgeon in her country of three million people. In addition to hosting us, performing surgeries, serving as Medical Director of the entire hospital, answering her two cell phones, fixing the generator so we could run the

fans, tracking down a blown fuse, chaperoning our team to and from the airport, and hauling kitchenware out of her apartment to serve tea and then lunch for fifty people amidst this flurry of activity Lily exudes a quiet confidence, attention to detail, patient kindness, and incredible resourcefulness.



Dr. Sanvee's hospital is the referral hospital for the entire country. Despite Liberia's anarchy and civil wars for more than twenty years, including a period when the hospital was ravaged and closed (including her own tiny apartment on the hospital grounds), Dr. Sanvee directs their seven doctors and 180 staff. St. Joseph's does 400 consults a day, about 5-6 admits a day, and 1,300 deliveries a year. Their biggest problem? Since the city has no water or electricity, they run a generator 18 hours a day, but the cost of fuel for the generator is exorbitant.

Each health care worker at the workshop received the best of scientific and medical training regarding HIV-AIDS. Each day we passed out a new book, CD, or resource that people could use later. The workshop ended with an exam to test what they had learned, then a commemorative tee shirt. Yes, we all loved the obligatory group photo!



In addition to the week long workshop, we made seven off-site visits to learn who was doing what about HIV in Liberia --- the Sisters of Charity, the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences, the Lutheran HIV-AIDS program, an orphanage program, the government's National AIDS Control Program, the Association of Evangelicals in Liberia, and Star of the Sea Catholic clinic in the slum of West Point (their clinic has electricity only 4 hours a day 3 days a week).

No one is sure what the prevalence of HIV is in Liberia. The official figure is 8%, but that estimate is more than three years old. Knowledgeable experts place the figure at 12%. There are some signs of progress in town that reminded us that HIV infection is not inevitable. Public health billboards encouraged people to get tested, discouraged domestic violence, and affirmed the dignity of women.

Minister of Health Walter Gwenigale was right. AIDS is no joke in a country like Liberia. Women and children remain especially vulnerable. With no vaccine against HIV on the horizon, and no cure once you become infected, I left the Global Strategies workshop reminded of the crucial importance of their mission of prevention through education, and thankful for all that they have done, not only in Liberia but also around the world.

What is the next step for Global Strategies for HIV Prevention?

We knew we would see desperate needs in Liberia and that they would encompass every aspect of daily living. But we also saw potential leaders and committed Christians, some of whom stayed behind during the terrible rebel activity. We will return to Monrovia to provide additional training in HIV, but we also want to return with others who have a vision to see that they can make a difference.

Pray that we will find partners to assist us financially and individuals willing to work alongside those in Liberia who labor under difficult circumstances to meet the needs of widows, orphans and the poor and suffering. We were touched and blessed by the people we encountered and their remarkable stories of faith, hope, and perseverance and we are thankful for the many of you who prayed for this journey."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Arthur J. Ammann". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Arthur J. Ammann MD, President

Note: Inserted in this mailing is a brochure for Hope Walks, a new program of Global Strategies. Visit the website at www.hopewalks.org. Our hope and prayer is that this will increase the awareness of children and their families in this country to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children around the world.