

Dearest Friends and Family,

Sorry it has taken us so long to write. If you follow our blog (www.reedsinliberia.blogspot.com), you know that we lost our computer hard drive in August, and one of the pieces of data not backed up was our Outlook Express email address book. So, we lost any way of sending you updates. It has taken this long to reconstruct the address book. Even now, we don't know who we might be missing, and some of you may be receiving this for the first time. If so, welcome to our world, and sorry it took us two years to find you. As always, if you do not want to get occasional emails from us, let us know and we'll take you off our list. We know what its like to get unsolicited mail.

So much has happened since we returned from our June in the States, it's hard to begin. If you are a regular Reed blog reader, you know the following:

- July 24 marked the beginning of our third year in Liberia. Renita and I continue to divide our work into three categories-- 1) her work with the new Liberian organization LEAD, which provides the unique combination of business training with microloans, from a Christian perspective. LEAD has partnerships with Partners World Wide and Madison Square Church's own Nehemiah Liberia Group. 2) Renita and I work in tandem with a new community development organization in our area, called FACT-- for Foster Town Association for Community Transformation. 3) My primary work is as a program consultant with the Catholic owned Mother Patern College of Health Sciences, on a project that has as partners Kuyper College and the Calvin College Social Work Department. Regarding these three areas, here is what's happened over the last three months

- Liberia now has its first professional social work program! The Mother Patern College launched the Bachelor of Social Work program on September 10. There are about 25 students in the program. Calvin and Kuyper Colleges were instrumental in helping us develop the curriculum and we are planning ways to continue the collaboration. Students will be specifically trained for working in this post-war environment, with classes emphasizing conflict resolution, and working with people and communities affected by war trauma, HIV-AIDS, and gender-based violence.

- LEAD has two contracts with UN organizations (the World Food Programme to help women with HIV/AIDS start businesses, and the International Labour Organization to start 40 waste management businesses over the next two years) to create more employment opportunities for Liberians, as well as it's regular work, this time with two classes running simultaneously, one in Monrovia and on it its new Bassa County office, 80 miles-- or 3 and a half hours on terrible roads-- down the beach in Buchanan. This activity keeps her hopping.

- In July, FACT completed several major community projects. Working with the Reeds and US friends, FACT open a large community market, where 180 local women have signed up to come and daily sell their goods, and working with Lifewater Liberia and Water of Life, FACT has provided five new drilled wells with three more in the works.

- Through the Herculean efforts of Renita's mom and dad, and others, hundreds of boxes schoolbooks are being loaded onto a forty foot container to be shipped to us by ActiveKids, enough to fill five elementary school libraries, which ActiveKids also helped build. Keep in mind that the school situation is just now restarting after being decimated for over a decade by the wars, and that most schools operate without books of any kind-- including textbooks.

Besides this, we are mediating a number of family and church related disputes, are co-homeschooling Hannah and Noah, building a new driveway to our home in swampland, and moving our gate from one wall to another.

For those of you who have been part of this work, you likely feel honored and humbled like we do at the thought of being used in this war ravaged place. We-- you and those of us here who act as your hands and feet-- have seen remarkable fruit from our efforts to date. People have jobs who did not before; businesses have grown, some a little, some dramatically; professional community and mental health workers are being trained for the first time in Liberia's history; hundreds of women in our community are living life a bit easier thanks to a closer place to shop, hundreds more are drinking safe, clean water. If you have joined us in this leg of the journey, through prayer, visits, gifts, listening to us, offering wisdom or questions, this is all work you have made possible.

And the work continues. The social work program is in its infancy, and needs text books and further development. LEAD wants to open up a branch in all 15 counties, and seeks to operate a truly national program. FACT envisions more community-based activities. The area still has too few wells. Around us, children still sell goods on the street instead of going to school. Orphanages and private schools still operate as fronts for fund raising businesses-- the orphanages use children who are not orphans to fill their facilities with brown-eyed waifs, and schools are loaded with teachers who are untrained and occasionally abusive.

How are the four of us doing? Since we've returned there have been some adjustment challenges for each of us. One thing that Renita and I have begun to find increasingly difficult is some of the culturally normed behavior of many of the Liberians with whom we live and work. I think of two examples: one has to do with the tendency of Liberians to accommodate, cooperate and acquiesce to the point where it's hard for us to know what they are really thinking. Liberians tend to say what they think we want to hear; so it's impossible to know if we are genuinely collaborating with these incredibly 'cooperative' people or if they are saying what they are saying to receive aid, resources or help. The other example has to do with some difficulties we are running into with the churches. We don't believe that we are telling a secret, it's something we hear all the time from Liberians. We are discovering that infidelity in marriages, while not acceptable, seemed to be acknowledged as an inevitable "way things are--" especially for men. We have found this to be the case in the churches with whom we are working most closely. Everyone acknowledges that it is wrong, and those who have even preached against it have fallen into these sexual sins themselves. As always we do not pretend that marital infidelity does not exist in the United States - we know it is a factor in North American life as well. Here it seems a normal but disruptive part of culture and we are working with the church to figure out how to express the voice of Christ in this. Please pray for us as we look for direction.

As to Hannah and Noah, they've each had their own readjustment journeys. Noah at first missed his best friends in the United States (Matt, Sam and Ben Steenwyk), and was fairly grumpy for a few weeks, but now has reacquainted himself with Trokon and Eastman and seems to be back to Noah normal. Hannah is dealing with loneliness. Due to the building of a wall by our neighbors to the north, the main neighborhood kid hangout areas is gone. Many of Hannah's friends have gone elsewhere - they have scattered. So Hannah does battle with feelings of sadness and boredom. We admire the way she continues to address the loneliness in light of what God has for her in this, but it takes a toll. We talk about it with her daily. She says that not fighting negative thoughts and attitudes really brings her down, but remaining vigilant to keep things as positive as possible is tiring. We ask for your prayers for her during this lonely time. With your prayers, His plan and all of us sticking together, we'll figure something out.

Ok, enough bearing of soul for one email. Good work sometimes takes a temporary toll on heart and mind. We so deeply value your love and support, and even on lonely days, we know many of you keep us in your prayers and thoughts. It is easy to keep track of us on the blog-- we publish at least weekly and usually include pictures. When you get to www.reedsinliberia.blogspot.com, just bookmark the site and join us regularly. We'll appreciate the company.

Bob, Renita, Hannah and Noah

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