



The Transformative Power of Living in God's Grace

By Tom Smith, ITEM Executive Director

Last year, the plan was for me to go to Ethiopia to meet church leaders, check it out as a potential new field for ITEM and to teach one of our modules, Living In Grace. In February, the module was emailed to Rev. Fikadu Assefa, who translated it into the Amharic and Omoro languages. As he worked on it, Fikadu was profoundly touched by the subject.

Living In Grace is about living in light of the gospel and applying what the gospel teaches into every area of our lives. The module was originally developed by World Harvest Mission (now Serge). MTW missionaries in South Asia used it and passed it on to ITEM.

Once the Ethiopian government allowed schools and groups to begin meeting, Fikadu made plans to teach Living In Grace. He did not know when I might come and thought the material was too important to wait. Normally there are 50 to 55 village pastors who walk to Busa, a market town,

for monthly training with Fikadu and others. When Fikadu taught Living In Grace, 88 pastors showed up. Some walked up to nine hours so they could be present for the training. These men are bivocational pastor-farmers with congregations in their villages. All of them are first generation Christians.

A village pastor told Fikadu that although he had gone through many classes, after doing Living In Grace, he thinks that he has not fully grasped what he was taught and wants to start over again. Now, he says, he is looking through the lens of grace.

Another pastor at first was a little miffed at Fikadu for teaching this "simple" fundamental class. But when this seasoned pastor went home and sat under an acacia tree to do his homework, he broke down in tears as the reality of God's grace profoundly touched him. He came back the next month and apologized to Fikadu.

When God's grace is grasped, it is transformative. The Lord has been pleased to use an ITEM module to touch many lives of pastors who have already begun to explain God's grace to their people. We hope and pray even more believers can study God's grace and all its implications.

How to Contribute

In the U.S. send contributions to
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Zoom Teaching Isn't Ideal but It Beats not Teaching

By Tom Smith, ITEM Executive Director

On January 28, Dr. Fritz Harms began teaching Introduction to Reformation History via Zoom to students at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary in Riga, Tyumen Bible College in Siberia, and many other Russian-speaking students.

He counted the faces of 26 students in the class. A translator named Valeri in St. Petersburg did simultaneous translation so Fritz did not have to pause between sentences. Rev. Artis Celmins sat in with the students in Riga and translated their questions from Latvian into English to ask Fritz.

With a live online class, Fritz is able to see reactions on his students' faces. Their questions in real time help him clarify points and make other adjustments as needed to the lectures. It is almost as good as teaching in person.

But it is exhausting after a work day for the students to stare at a screen and passively listen to a lecture for two hours each night. Although Fritz begins his lectures at 9 a.m. in Colorado, because of the many time zones in between, it is 6 p.m. in Riga and 9 p.m. in Siberia.

Last year, Dr. Harms recorded the Living In Grace module. Students in India have been watching the lectures in small groups in different cities. On a Saturday in mid-January, one group had a live question-and-answer session with Fritz. The Indian facilitator had 11 questions prepared in advance. While one hour

had been planned, Fritz said he ended up needing two hours to answer all their questions.

He would have preferred to be in person for live interaction with the students, which would have been more meaningful for both them and him. They would have absorbed more of the material in person and had more questions on the spot, which would have been cleared up immediately.

But Fritz sees how hungry the students are to learn, so that even though classes online are not ideal, it is better than not having classes at all. This brings to mind the situation in Busa, a small village in Ethiopia. Pastors walk miles to take the classes. They bring along tents to sleep in. It's not ideal. But it's better than nothing.

Just like living in a tent is not the same as dwelling in a house, teaching via video is not the same as teaching in person. Nonetheless, we thank God for the modern technology that makes learning online possible. If you would like to watch Fritz or other ITEM professors, you can go to www.item.org and click on the link to our YouTube channel.

Prayer Requests

1. Pray for Jobje Lammers, wife of ITEM board member Dr. Warren Lammers. She is dealing with pancreatic cancer.
2. Pray for Debbie Richards, wife of ITEM Board member Dr. Jeff Richards. She has Parkinson's disease.
3. Pray for Bob Clark and Jim Roszell as they travel to Kenya in February to teach Christ and Salvation and Church Creeds and Confessions.
4. Pray for Dr. Fritz Harms as he teaches Reformation History every Thursday morning online to students in Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Siberia.
5. Pray for the Presbyterian Church of Belize so it can have a good strategic planning meeting on Feb.13 to discuss theological training and raising up new leaders.