



### Exploring Need for ITEM in Liberia, West Africa

*Rob Toornstra and Bill Wilton recently completed an exploratory trip to Liberia. Toornstra spoke with ITEM newsletter editor Matt Crossman about it.*

ITEM: Why Liberia?

Toornstra: Our connection with the churches in Liberia started through a Facebook connection that a man named Solomon Davis made with my church here in Oregon. He started following our church on Facebook, watching our sermons and videos, friending people from our church, and communicating with me. And at first I was a little leery. Those kinds of connections are not always legit. But Solomon, who is a leader in the Christian Reformed Church of Liberia, engaged with us and said he needed help. That's when Tom Smith and I arranged a conference call with him. That was late 2019 or early 2020. Then the pandemic hit, and everything was put on hold. In mid-2021, we renewed the idea again, and since ITEM had never been to Liberia, we viewed it as an exploratory trip.

ITEM: What were you exploring?

Toornstra: We wanted to see what the needs are, and how ITEM might partner with others to meet those needs. We asked a lot of questions about the Christian Reformed Church of Liberia and the various ministries and the needs for teaching and training. We were trying to see if ITEM could be of service, long term, in West Africa.

We focused on Liberia, because that's where we were invited to go. But we also explored the possibility of working in other parts of that region. Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone were raised as possibilities as well.

ITEM: What did your exploration find?

Toornstra: The No. 1 need ITEM can fill is training for the pastors. We found Liberia is a very spiritual country. There's a lot of attention to God and Jesus. We saw a store called Blessed Overcomers Autoparts. There are stores with biblical allusions and themes and references all over the place.

And so Liberia is not a place where there's an absence of an awareness of God. But the depth is fairly weak. People tend to be superstitious, or their theology is very closely tied to health, wealth and prosperity. We found a group of pastors who really wanted to learn about Reformed theology. They've had some training in it, but not a ton. And so they were excited for the opportunity to gain an awareness and familiarity with Reformed theology. ITEM can meet that need.

ITEM: Sometimes it's easier to teach somebody who is starting at zero, rather than having to correct misconceptions. What's the balance there between having some spiritual background and it being really wrong?

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communicate in a language where there has to be a translator because in Liberia, their accent to us, and ours to them, sounded very strong. We couldn't always understand what they were saying, and they couldn't understand us.

Toornstra: That's a great question. I can answer that only on a limited basis. Our experience was very positive in the sense that they were eager to learn. They were hungry to discover Reformed theology, and they really soaked up what we were communicating. I've been in other contexts where there's more skepticism. I didn't sense that skepticism here. But again, we were only there one time.

ITEM: Where is the line between bad theology and "it's a big tent"?

Toornstra: We live with that on a daily basis, don't we? That's not just a question about a mission to Liberia or a mission to Ukraine or Romania, or Indonesia or India or wherever. I hold to my convictions. I think all of my convictions are right or I would change them. We have to always be challenging ourselves to show our work—to show where are you getting that from the Bible? How do you understand it from the Bible? Or is this just tradition speaking? We always have to be wrestling with that.

ITEM: Did you see any unique or interesting challenges that you'll face?

Toornstra: Yes. The first challenge that comes to my mind is a financial one. The Liberians use American currency. When the exchange rate changes, it has a pretty drastic effect. Stuff is pretty expensive in Liberia, compared to Ukraine, for example.

Another challenge is language. They speak English. But we almost felt it's easier to

ITEM: What's the next step?

Toornstra: The next step at this point is for Bill Wilton and I to put together a proposal for a three-year plan that will go to ITEM's Executive Committee and then on to the Board for approval. We need to know how many instructors we need to recruit, how much funding we need to secure. What can we help them with in the course of the next three years? What kind of training do they need? What can we realistically financially provide for?

## Prayer Requests

*Please pray about these issues.*

1. John Irwin will teach New Testament history and theology at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary in Latvia.
2. The good beginning of training 50 pastors in Orissa state of India.
3. Saphira Torrens, the daughter of Alister Torrens, president of Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine, is scheduled to have oft-delayed surgery on her hand this month in Northern Ireland. Pray that it happens, without more delays and with smooth travel and no COVID quarantines.
4. Instructor and module planning for 2022 in the midst of further uncertainty due to COVID restrictions.
5. Jobje Lammers is battling cancer, and Debbie Richards is fighting Parkinsons. Jobje is married to Warren, a current board member, and Debbie is married to Jeff, a former board member.

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