

PURE RELIGION

“So Glad We Are Saving Lives”

During a hygiene lesson in the village of Lowama, Amarachi Cobinah asks a participant to put a small amount of cooking oil on his hands. She invites him to shake hands with one of his neighbors, then that person to shake hands with his neighbor, and so on until the oil is passed to several people.

“Can we see the oil on our hands?” Amarachi asks.

“No,” the villagers respond, and an enthusiastic discussion begins on how germs are unknowingly passed from one person to another.

“This training to promote good health along with a clean water well is the first of its kind in the history of Sierra Leone,” Amarachi says. “One will not fully comprehend the effects this training has on these communities unless you have a picture of these people—they are people with little or no idea about hygiene or the common things they can do to prevent sickness.”

Amarachi is a returned missionary who oversees hygiene training for nearly 100 villages. She trains team leaders who in turn train volunteer facilitators in villages served by new wells. Months in advance of digging a new well, the Church forms water committees and trains families about hygiene. This ensures that wells are properly maintained and that recipients receive the full benefit of having a clean water source.

Whenever possible, the Church contracts with local returned missionaries to serve as hygiene supervisors and team leaders for the duration of the project. The teaching and leadership skills they gained as missionaries helps increase their effectiveness as trainers. In addition, they gain valuable work experience which can give them a

competitive edge for future employment.

The training the Church has implemented is based on a program known as PHAST—Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation Transformation. This method was developed by the World Health Organization and is utilized by organizations around the world. It involves using local trainers who understand the culture and dialects of the community. With pictures and planned activities they help local citizens discover the problems and find solutions for themselves.

Lessons include such topics as health in our families, forming a water committee, creating a hand washing station, and the safe water circle—practicing good water fetching and storage behaviors.

Amarachi explains that it isn't easy for the people to understand that some of the things they do would cause sickness, because it has been their way of life. But, says Amarachi, “With the use of pictures to create a story they see reasons why they always fall sick. And because they think about those ideas themselves, it has great impact on them.”

Simple concepts that were not part of their way of life now become important keys to preventing disease and giving these villagers a better quality of life.

Seeing the people's happy faces when a new well is turned over to their community, Amarachi becomes emotional. “They know they can keep themselves from falling sick by practicing what they are taught. Because of the training they come to appreciate and own the well and follow rules to keep the surrounding area clean. The people are happy over our contribution to their homes. I am so glad that we are saving lives here in Sierra Leone.”





Amarachi Cobinah (left), hygiene supervisor in Sierra Leone, meets with a volunteer facilitator (center) and a team leader (right) to provide training in the Participatory Hygiene and Sanitation Transformation (PHAST) program.