

Words TO CHANGE OUR World

By Norman C. Hill

President, Ghana Accra West Mission

*A district council
in Ghana
demonstrates
how counseling
together
and using
local resources
can create
opportunities
for personal
growth and
service to others.*

Sister Vida Osei of Ghana wanted to learn to read and write English. She had tried community programs a number of times but had become discouraged and quit within weeks. Then one Sunday while attending meetings at the Second Branch, she learned that the Asamankese District was sponsoring an English literacy program. She decided to take a chance and enroll.

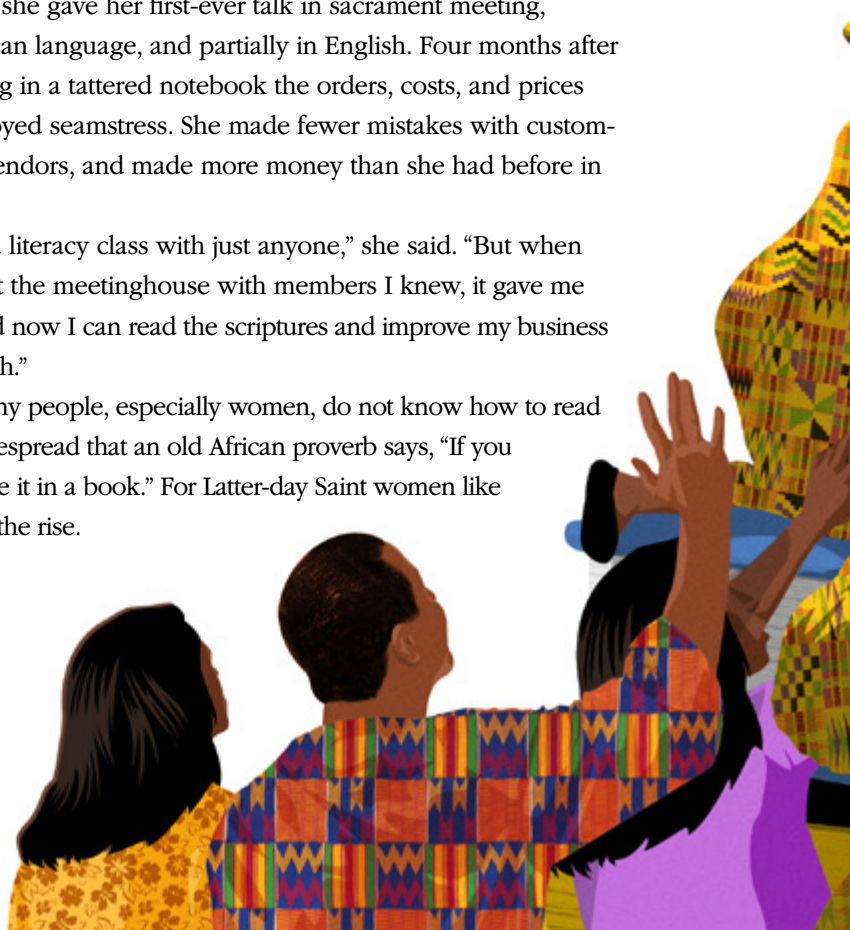
She soon found that this program was different. She would be able to attend with friends from church. Scriptures are used as study materials, so she would learn English and the gospel at the same time.

Two months after starting the class, Vida gave her first prayer in a class—ever. Three months after starting, she gave her first-ever talk in sacrament meeting, partially in Twi, a local African language, and partially in English. Four months after beginning, she began writing in a tattered notebook the orders, costs, and prices for her work as a self-employed seamstress. She made fewer mistakes with customers, got lower prices from vendors, and made more money than she had before in any previous month.

“I was too shy to attend a literacy class with just anyone,” she said. “But when the literacy class was held at the meetinghouse with members I knew, it gave me the courage to try again. And now I can read the scriptures and improve my business by reading and writing English.”

In sub-Saharan Africa, many people, especially women, do not know how to read and write. Illiteracy is so widespread that an old African proverb says, “If you want to hide something, write it in a book.” For Latter-day Saint women like Vida, however, literacy is on the rise.

ILLUSTRATION BY TAYLOR GALLERY







Participants, family members, and friends celebrate at graduation ceremonies for the district-sponsored literacy program.

Challenges to Overcome

Limited infrastructure and limited public education in most sub-Saharan countries means limited opportunities, especially for girls. Because of the high cost of schooling and girls' restricted status in society, to many people reading seems an unattainable skill. In Ghana, for example, although English is the official language, estimates say that less than half of adult women speak English. In rural Ghana, two-thirds of adult women are illiterate.

"Most adult women in our towns and villages do not speak English," says Seth Oppong, president of the Abomosu District in the Ghana Accra West Mission. "Our local language, Twi, has been a verbal language for centuries. Only recently has an alphabet for Twi been created, so few people read it, either."

"Sisters must rely on others—mostly their husbands if they are married, or on word of mouth from friends if they are not married—to understand gospel principles and Church policies," explains Georgina Amoaka, the district Relief Society president. "Many have great desires to serve, but they cannot read manuals or magazines so their opportunities to participate at church are limited."

Counsel from the Council

Since women do not speak English in their homes or at the market, Church participation provides their main incentive to learn the language. Yet both long-time members and new converts may encounter family resistance concerning literacy programs. The district council discussed this concern, and then President Oppong spoke to priesthood and auxiliary leaders in each branch about a district-wide approach to literacy training. While open to all women in the community, the program would focus on women in the Church. Rather than inviting individuals separately, invitations would be extended to attend in groups—for example, Relief Society and Primary

presidencies would attend together so they could support each other.

Based on discussions with the branches, district leadership decided to hold literacy classes at each branch on Sundays as well as twice during the week. After a concentrated six-month effort, certificates of completion would be awarded to those who attended regularly and completed required homework.

Resources Adapted to Needs

"One of the challenges was to find a way to teach reading and writing to people who have only a spoken language," explains Elder Jim Dalton, a senior missionary serving in the district. "Because of Twi's long tradition as a spoken-but-not-written language, most people who speak it don't know how to write it, so we had to start with learning to write."

Ransford Darkwah of the Abomosu District high council worked with two returned missionaries, Francis Ansah and Cecelia Amankwah, to use a locally produced manual. Participants were shown pictures and asked to write about what they saw. This helped them develop basic writing skills while learning to think in English. Once some basic abilities were in place, more advanced learning resources could then be used.

Preparation and Innovation

Before the program began, literacy specialists trained instructors not only in learning methods but also in how to teach practical hygiene and family life skills. But even the best training couldn't have foreseen some of challenges encountered once classes began: frequent power outages in the area made evening classes difficult to conduct, rumors that unruly gold miners were roaming the streets at night created anxiety, and occasionally those with keys were unable to arrive on time to open church buildings.

Once again, the district council discussed what needed

to be done. In response to their counsel, groups of participants began coming to class together. They were given flashlights to help them safely walk along footpaths. Local leaders authorized use of generators to power lights at church buildings at night. Well-trusted members who lived near buildings were entrusted with keys so they could open buildings on time.

Presentations at Graduation

Sixty-one members and investigators began the program. Forty-three completed all of the sessions and homework. At graduation, they were invited to give short presentations.

“Before the literacy program began, I could not read at all,” said Sandra Obeng Amoh of the Sankubenase Branch. “When my husband traveled for work, I never had family home evening. Some weeks ago when he was gone, my oldest son helped me read the manual and I gave a lesson in English to my children. Since then I have done so every week that my husband is not at home.”

Prosper Gyekete, who despite limited English skills has remained a faithful member in the Abomosu Second Branch, read a three-sentence testimony he wrote himself. He said he could not read or write before the class but now he can help his young children with their homework. “Thanks to what I have learned,” he said, “I can be a better father.”

“Now I can read the scriptures by myself,” said Kwaku Sasu of the Kwabeng Branch. “Before, I knew the Book of Mormon was true even though I could not read it. Now I

know it is true *as* I read it. My testimony is growing and growing.”

The members of the Asunafo Branch Relief Society presidency said they dedicated each Thursday to speaking to each other only in English. “It made some conversations longer that day because we could not think of the right words to say to each other,” said Evelyn Agyeiwaa, Relief Society president. “But we soon began translating for each other, finding the right words to say. Because we were learning together, none of us were embarrassed or afraid to say the wrong words. We simply helped each other.”

Benefits Abound

Women who completed the Abomosu District literacy program said they felt better about themselves and were more likely to participate in church. They became more willing to accept callings, read the scriptures, and teach both at church and at home. Some men also completed the program. Mostly subsistence farmers, they said they are now better able to calculate costs and sales of their produce, help children with their homework, and read the scriptures on their own and with their families.

Encouraged by the success in Abomosu, the neighboring Asamankese District has launched its own literacy program.

“Being able to read and write is changing our lives and the lives of our children,” said Gladis Aseidu of the Sankubenase Branch. “Words are changing our world, and we thank our Father in Heaven.” ■



INSPIRED SELF-RELIANCE

“There is no one-size-fits-all answer in Church welfare. It is a self-help program where individuals are responsible for personal self-reliance. Our resources include personal prayer, our own God-given talents and abilities, the assets available to us through our own families and extended family members, various community resources, and of course the caring support of priesthood quorums and the Relief Society. . . .

“In the end you must do in your area what disciples of Christ have done in every dispensation: counsel together, use all resources available, seek the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, ask the Lord for His confirmation, and then roll up your sleeves and go to work.”

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, “Providing in the Lord’s Way,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 53–56.