

Liberian Baptist leader returns home after delay due to Ebola

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RICHMOND, Va. (BNG)—When Liberian Baptist leader Emile Sam-Peal traveled to the United States in July to touch base with American mission partners, he expected to stay six weeks. Instead, as flights to the Ebola-ravaged country were cancelled, Sam-Peal and his family found themselves stranded five months.

They finally are returning home, having secured tickets on one of the few carriers still flying to the West African nation.

☒ Emile Sam-Peal “I’m thankful that we have been safe while here, and it is now time to return home and back to ministering, providing leadership, assistance and hope to folks who are going through a very, very difficult experience resulting from this Ebola crisis,” said Sam-Peal, superintendent and principal of the [Lott Carey Mission School in Monrovia](#), the country’s capital.

Sam-Peal, his wife and two daughters were scheduled to return in August. But as concerns about the spread of the deadly disease grew, airlines from the United States and Europe suspended service to affected counties, including Liberia. Sam-Peal’s airline told him it could not extend a refund for at least three months because of a heavy backlog of stranded passengers.

Since then, the family lived in Richmond, Va., a city familiar to Sam-Peal, who graduated from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in 2000. He also maintains ties with churches of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, which works closely with Baptists in Liberia.

Although he remained in Richmond as the disease spread in Liberia, Sam-Peal wasn't unscathed by the crisis. A pastor and close friend of Sam-Peal's died, along with the pastor's daughter, who was caring for him, and the pastor's physician. In addition, one Lott Carey student and one graduate also died from Ebola.

What's more, Sam-Peal's 17-year-old son remained in Liberia—something never far from the father's mind. The two spoke almost every day.

Liberia facing long recovery

Liberia faces a long haul in recovering from the impact of Ebola, Sam-Peal warned.

"The Ebola outbreak initially started as a health crisis but quickly escalated into a social and economic crisis with some political fallouts," he said. "Many families have lost jobs and income over the last six months. Many businesses have been closed or drastically scaled back operations. Some of these businesses that have closed down will not be able to start up again."

Schools, including Lott Carey, also suspended classes, he said.

"All schools in Liberia are closed, and students have been home now for about four months, creating an academic vacuum in the country. Students are yearning for schools to reopen soon."

Sam-Peal cited a recent U.N. report that up to 50 percent of people employed before the outbreak now are out of work.

"The economic impact will be felt for a long time. Families have been devastated, children losing their parents and caregivers, and thus a new generation of orphans has been left to fend for themselves.

"There is much recovery work to be done to help families back on their feet, work on upgrading our health care delivery system, getting the

educational sector back up and running."

Raising awareness of Liberia's plight

Sam-Peal put his time in the United States to good use, visiting classes at BTSR and speaking at churches, both to raise awareness of his country's plight and to generate financial support.

He also worked closely with the Washington-based [Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention](#), which founded his school in 1908. Today, the school educates about 700 children from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade.

Recently, the Lott Carey convention joined other Baptist denominations in the United States to raise funds to combat the Ebola outbreak. The African-American Baptist Mission Collaboration—which also includes the National Baptist Convention, USA, the National Baptist Convention of America, the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America and the Progressive National Baptist Convention—announced in November it will launch a series of financial and spiritual initiatives to battle the deadly virus in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.