

Ghana Outreach Programme



Exploration Report

A charitable partnership between
St Thomas of Canterbury Church supported by St John Fisher Catholic School
and the Damongo Diocese of Ghana

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Aim

The Ghana Outreach Programme is a venture led by St Thomas of Canterbury Church supported by St John Fisher Catholic School. The parish priest, Fr. Justin Danaah is Ghanaian and has links to the Damongo Diocese in the country. The aim of this project is to create a mutually beneficial partnership between St Thomas of Canterbury and the Damongo diocese, with UK based volunteers visiting Damongo to support and assist with the development of the area.

The exploratory visit conducted in August 2014 was to ascertain the challenges that a project of this nature may face and to determine the potential placements for volunteers. In addition, this trip would provide two members of the steering committee with cultural experiences and knowledge of Ghana so that volunteers can be appropriately prepared prior to their placement.

The journey

The journey from the UK to Accra involved a flight from Heathrow to Lisbon (2 hr 35 min) then from Lisbon to Accra (5 hr 35 min). There was a fairly long wait between flights. Upon arrival at Accra, we were greeted by James Jimah (manager of the Good Shepherd Guest House) who was able to change our currency from pounds sterling to the Ghanaian Cedi.

Travel to Damongo involved an internal flight from Accra to Tamale the day after our initial arrival. Travel to and from the airport was easy by road. The terminal used for internal flights is basic and functional. In addition, it is incredibly busy. The only real challenge for this portion of the journey was knowing which gate to go to as this had changed. However, the airport staff were very helpful and able to direct us accordingly. Once we had arrived in Tamale, we were greeted by Monsignor Augustine and a driver who took us to Damongo by road.

The road quality in Ghana is poor, particularly in more rural areas. We travelled exclusively by private car as public transport in Damongo is unreliable. Damongo itself is fairly accessible by car. The driving culture in Ghana is very different to that in the UK! Traffic lights and road signs are few and far between, with livestock sharing the road with vehicles (particularly in very rural areas). There is a speed limit but it isn't heavily enforced, in addition, mopeds and motorbikes are very popular but few people wear helmets and do overcrowd vehicles. It does take a couple of days to adjust to this. Ghanaians also use the horns in their vehicles more frequently than drivers in the UK however, this is not a sign of aggression (as is common in the UK) but notifying other road users. The biggest challenge whilst travelling in Damongo is the sheer scale of the area. Villages are very far apart and this is a large adjustment. In particular, the outstations near Daboya are particularly rural and during wet season can become cut off. Travel to this particular place was slow due to poor road quality.

Accommodation

The Catholic Church operates guest houses in all of its parishes. These are managed by local Ghanaians and provide basic yet comfortable facilities. These included shower and toilet facilities, air conditioning and a TV. There are communal reception areas where you can purchase beverages and these are areas where people gather and socialise. The Ghanaian power outlets are the same as UK power outlets. The accommodation is clean and well maintained. Each guest house has a cafeteria that is a short walk from the guest rooms.

Food

The food in Ghana relies heavily on carbohydrates and pasta, rice and noodles are common. Meals are often accompanied by chicken or fish. The chicken or fish is often fried. Banku is made from boiling and blending starchy crops such as yams. This is then dipped into a spicy soup (Kpakpo Shito) and eaten. Soups and stews (usually tomato based) are served alongside a starchy staple ingredient. Vegetables are not particularly common. In addition, the food tends to be spicy. In addition, yams and plantain are popular where available. The food is filling and nutritious. Breakfast tends to be bread served with tea. All dishes are served and diners help themselves. Eating with the hands is common. Street food is popular (barbequed corn was particularly tasty!). Sweet food is not as common as it is in the UK but fruit such as bananas and oranges are available.



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Security

There is a real sense of community in Ghana and as such we felt very safe. We were very well looked after by the Catholic community. In areas such as the market though, it is sensible to be cautious due to the large number of people around. Furthermore, it would be wise to take precautions that anyone would take when travelling and not carry large sums of cash or high value items.

Companionship

As mentioned, Ghanaians have a real sense of community and we were accompanied by members of the Catholic Church at all times. Our companions were very friendly and inquisitive about our lives and culture in the UK. They opened up their homes to us and were incredibly hospitable. The people that we were met were filled with life and had a good sense of humour. As such, we had some excellent social interactions and contact has continued after our return to the UK.

Culture

The culture in Ghana is vastly different from that in the UK with a far more collectivist community. The official language is English so communication is not a problem, however some people do still speak traditional languages exclusively. In addition, traditional chiefs still own a large proportion of the land, development of this land is negotiated by the church. Traditional housing still exists in some parts of the Damongo diocese. Western culture does appear to be influencing Ghanaian culture. This is particularly obvious in the media and fashion trends. The culture is vibrant and colourful. One striking aspect is the way that Ghanaians greet one another. Everyone shakes hands with one another and says, "You're welcome". This does take some getting used to. There are many cultural crafts such as weaving smocks in Daboya. It is commonplace to haggle for goods, which again, is a culture shock. Especially as Caucasians will often be charged "white man price".

Environment

The exploratory visit was conducted during wet season, however, it was one of the "drier" wet seasons with little rain and the weather was mostly overcast. When it did rain, this tended to be in the early hours of the morning and did lead to some pools of water, therefore, mosquitos seemed to be more of an issue around this time of day. Ghana has a varied environment with the North being more dry and dusty. There is a large network of rivers so there is lots of greenery around these areas. Damongo is also home to the Mole National Park which is bush land.

Schools

On the visit to Damongo, we visited the three Catholic secondary schools. This included (St Ann's girls' school), St Cyprian Minor Seminary Senior High School (boys' school) and vocational school. The students board at these schools and these institutions are popular. The schools have basic accommodation and facilities, but the students are proud of their schools and their achievements. Once again, we were greeted with friendly faces and lots of excitement! Many villages are far away from the Government run schools and as such it is not always practical for students to attend just during the day. This also has implications for the care of younger siblings, as such, there is a high level of student dropout, particularly during the secondary phase of education. Therefore, one of the key areas of priority for Bishop Peter Paul is education. The Catholic schools are inclusive of all faiths and many parents select Catholic schools due to their comparatively better performance. The vocational school in Bole, offers practical courses such as construction, electrics and carpentry alongside English and mathematics. The girls' school and boys' school offer a more academic based curriculum. All the schools have the desire to implement ICT suites however, progress on this can be slow due to lack of funding and practical resources. The students were amazed by the variety of education pathways available in the UK and the scale of our schools. The dormitories are overcrowded and the common theme seems to be the need for more facilities. Many of the students started their education late (as the schools simply did not exist or were oversubscribed) and as such, some won't finish their secondary education until age 20.



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Health

Whilst in Ghana, there was a lot of media coverage on the Ebola epidemic with a real public campaign related to personal hygiene. When visiting the boys' school in Sawla, all of the students were attending a talk about the prevention of Ebola and the prevention of Hepatitis B. We visited a health clinic in Bole. This clinic is run by a nun. The clinic is basic but has a fairly well stocked dispensary. The hope is for this clinic to be open 24 hours a day however at the moment there aren't enough staff to make this possible. Unfortunately, when young people do qualify in the medical field, they often do not want to stay and work in these clinics but tend to migrate to larger hospitals and clinics. Judging from the health promotion campaigns advertised in the clinic and hospital, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are still heavily stigmatised. Tuberculosis, for example, is still viewed as a "curse" in some communities. However, it seems that Ghanaians are working together to eradicate this. There is a second clinic in Bole (which we didn't visit) and this has a focus on women's health and preventing unsafe abortions is a priority.

Church/Religious Practice

Damongo has strong links with the UK and Germany. The hospital in Damongo was initially run by the Sisters of St Anne, Wimbledon while the clinic in Bole was started and is supported by a German Parish. The Church has been vital in the development of Damongo thus far. When a Catholic church is built, typically a school and a guest house are built as well. Local people flock around the Church and develop business and housing around it. Even though the Catholic population is growing, Islam and traditional African religions are also prevalent. Women and the youth appear to be more committed to Catholicism. This may well be because in the more rural areas (where more traditional practices are observed) polygamy is encouraged.

Religious practice is vibrant and colourful. Mass was completely different to that in the UK with lots of singing and dancing – a **real celebration** of faith! For those who are Catholic, it is embedded in their everyday lives and routine. Attending church is a social event and a chance for people to come together.

In addition, the priests and Bishop are completely involved in their communities and have a strong rapport with the people that they serve.

Historical/Tourism

Damongo is home to the Mole National Park which is a large tourist attraction as it is home to elephants, bok, antelope and baboons. This is an incredible experience! In addition, Ghana has a rich history. In the Cape Coast (South Ghana) there is Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle. These castles are now big tourist attractions as they were used as depots where slaves were held and then sold to Portuguese traders in exchange for goods. Due to the short length of our trip, we did not get to see many of the tourist attractions, however there are beach resorts and other attractions that volunteers would be able to access on day trips for example.

Experiences

During the visit, we had some wonderful social experiences. There is a culture for socialising in the evenings and as such, we met a range of people. Everyone that we met was friendly and welcoming. In addition, they were keen to build links with the UK. Ghanaians are making the most of technological advances and as such, we have stayed in touch with some of the people that we met via the messaging application, "Whatsapp". This is incredible! The biggest shock was the amazement that many Ghanaians seemed to express at seeing white people. We were frequently called "Oburoni" which means "white man". This is not an insult but an observation. People were genuinely excited to see us. The other biggest shock was how involved the priests are with their parishioners – they are like minor celebrities. However, this is because of the sheer amount of work that they put into their parishes.

The biggest shock however, was being given a live chicken by Fr Paul who is based in a parish outside of Daboya. This was not expected and we gave it to our driver as a thank you. However, this is a gesture that shows the generosity that was extended to us despite the poverty that many of the people face.



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Expression of Interest

After speaking to Bishop Peter Paul at the end of our trip, we felt that the key area of mutual interest is the schools. This could involve actively teaching (particularly core subjects) or the development of facilities. However, depending on the skill set of the volunteers, the medical and agricultural sectors would also be viable options. In addition, volunteers could be placed in other industries such as mining, research, conservation, hospitality and intermediate technology.

Moving Forward

The priority now has to be promoting the project and ensuring that appropriate paperwork is finalised so that volunteers can start travelling to Ghana. A comprehensive preparation schedule also needs to be prepared to ensure that volunteers are well informed prior to travel. Volunteers travelling to teach in the schools will need to be provided with all the resources that they will need as the facilities to create or copy resources are minimal. Alongside this though, an enrichment club will be set up at St John Fisher School to promote fundraising so that resources can be purchased and distributed to the schools in Damongo. A secondary idea that can also run alongside the volunteer programme is a "pen pal" scheme. The students at the Ghanaian secondary schools were very keen to correspond with their UK counterparts. This would also be a fantastic opportunity to promote literacy and cultural awareness for all involved.

Conclusion

The visit to Ghana exceeded expectations. It provided a life changing experience, an alternative perspective and has left a lasting impression. There is so much scope to support the community in Damongo with developing the area and this is something that the community seem receptive to. This is a wonderful opportunity to foster mutually beneficial long lasting links between Rainham and Damongo. In addition, it will make a genuine difference to a number of people and drastically improve the life chances and opportunities available in the area.

To enquire about the opportunity to volunteer for the programme please contact us.

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