

As Christmas approaches we bring you greetings from Ghana and an update on all the work that you have helped to support during 2003!

The value of that work at Ahotokurom was really brought home on a recent visit to Ghana.

Out and about in the capital city – Accra – we were looking to get quotes for a disabled accessible minibus for the project.

Outside the Mercedes garage we came across the body of young man, almost naked save for a loincloth, lying face down, dead, in the gutter.

It was a busy sunny day; people went about their business walking by as if there was nothing strange or unusual. We asked the security guard at the garage if he was aware there was a dead man at the entrance. “He’s a lunatic” came the response. Not quite understanding the inference, we replied “yes, but he’s dead”. Surprised at the level of interest the guard explained incredulously “**yes, we know but he’s just a lunatic**”, as if we should understand that this man had no worth and no value and was claimed by no one.

The Ghanaian people live life communally. Strong family bonds dictate that each takes care and responsibility for their brother or sister. Without that network of support – in a country with no welfare system – people could not survive. But sometimes it breaks down – and especially when there is a family member who suffers from physical or mental disability.

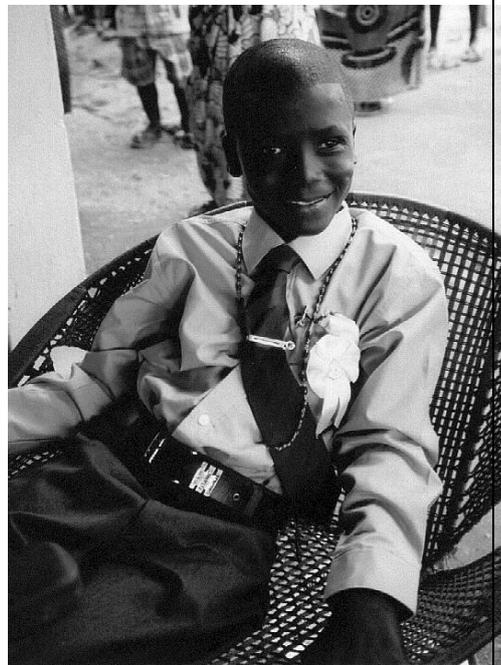
There are real choices to be made when it comes to the number of mouths to be fed in a family and the number of people contributing something to the household. On top of that, sick and disabled people often need medical care, an added financial burden which stretches people beyond their means. It is easy to see how sometimes the weak and the disabled are rejected.

So it shouldn’t be a shock that a human being could be left to die alone, nameless and in such

degradation simply because of mental health problems. And it shouldn’t be a shock that nobody dare touch the body for fear they would have to meet the cost of the inquest and the burial.

Somehow that experience reinforced all that Ahotokurom stands for: A place where those rejected and feared because of their illness or disability are loved and respected. A place where people are given care and space to heal. A place where the broken can live with dignity, learn to love themselves and through helping each other become more whole. A place where the dependant and the independent- become interdependent and in doing so make God’s love real and tangible. **Surely that is what the real meaning of Christmas is about!**

And we too are part of this circle of interdependence. As we each support the work of Ahotokurom, we are not only helping the individual people who pass through – we are also helping Ahotokurom to be a sign – of hope and love and healing - in a broken world.



Kojo Patrick on his special day!

Kojo is one of the joys of childcare – always into mischief – but a wonderful sense of humour!

Nobody really knows his age – he’s probably around 9 or 10 years old. He

was admitted to childcare after some healthcare workers had found him in a village. He was badly neglected, malnourished, mistreated and full of worms from crawling around in the dirt. He was about five years old then - his mother was completely unable to cope.

He is disabled through a degenerative muscle wasting disease – nobody knows what - because there isn’t the facility to diagnose these things. Now he can hardly walk but he is determined to get around so he pulls himself along on an old cut down walking frame!

He has a learning disability too but through attending special unit he has learnt to speak, to sing, to draw and even write his name. His social skills have developed too and he’s become quite a confident boy! So it was no surprise when he decided he wanted to be baptised and make his first communion like the other children too!

He kept on and onand on and on!

It is unusual in a society where the stigma of a disability still very much exists. Nobody was really quite sure how to respond! A child with learning disabilities – did he know what he was doing? But Kojo knew - and so he was supported in making his preparation – and then came the big day!

Well he could have been in heaven, the excitement was huge! And what was so special was the way the people responded. Each and everyone present: the older people disabled by leprosy, the children in Childcare who live with Kojo as a family, the local villagers who are used to seeing Kojo about, but don’t really include him in normal day to day activity. All of them, were so proud and joyful, it was plain to see.

What a big statement it made. Kojo was loved and valued and included as he is - with his disability. We are all equal in Gods eyes!

A special day of celebration followed – Kojo played the host perfectly. Posh shirt and tie on, handkerchief in his top pocket, he was as proud as punch, one of the ‘big boys’ now!

The Special Education Unit.....

In 1996 Ahotokurom began to offer the opportunity for children with disabilities to go to school – what started with a volunteer ‘teacher’ and 2 or 3 children has now grown into the only special unit in the region!

There are around 20 children in the school and 33 on the waiting list – but the classroom was too small and the facilities very basic!

Nobody could have envisaged that a very sad event here in the UK would enable this whole project to take off.

In March 2002 young Jamie Hills died suddenly from a brain haemorrhage.

The tragic loss of a 10-year-old, so full of life and with such a future ahead of him is hard to comprehend. The whole community of Rainham grieved with Jamie’s family.

His family were determined to do something positive in his memory and collected donations to undertake projects in his name. Some of the funds raised enabled the refurbishment of an area in the school at Ahotokurom to create and fit out a new special unit and to create disabled access around the whole school.

A team of workers (many of them disabled themselves) worked throughout the summer break to create ‘Little Jamie’s room’. It was all hands on deck as the children in Childcare (the children’s home) helped with the painting and finishing touches!

What a delight to hear 16 year old Matthew (one of the Rainham scholars) directing the other children in how to paint to his standards! After all it was going to be for some of their ‘brothers and sisters’ from Childcare!!!

Nothing can really describe the joy on the children’s faces as they danced their way into class for the first time at the opening ceremony!

Nothing either can compensate for the tragic loss of Jamie. But out of this pain has come new life and new hope, in little Jamie’s memory.

Preparing for Christmas....

In stark contrast to the rampant commercialism we are currently experiencing here – our friends in Ghana are preparing too – but in a completely different atmosphere.

Advent there is a time of waiting and preparation. People fast, not to lose weight so that they can binge later (!), but to prepare themselves to celebrate new life and hope in the birth of Jesus.

The fasting has a practical purpose too – to save money in expectation of a special celebration at Christmas and maybe even to be able to afford a chicken (three days wages for a labourer) with their rice or perhaps even a loaf of bread (half a day’s wages).

So if you deliberate over which of the fancy wrapped coloured bottles of bath oil to purchase for the friend who has everything. Or if your mouth waters at the confusing array of chocolate goodies in every shape and size – try to keep a perspective on the world!

The reality for 20% of the world’s population is that they live on **less** than one dollar a day. So spare them a thought this Christmas and try to make the connection between our actions here in the west – and the impact on the developing world.

The inequality of a trade system that adds to world poverty was brought home by some recent action in Ghana!

America subsidises rice production to keep its farmers in work and ensure a good rice supply. Then they export the surplus and flood the market in Ghana with cheap subsidised rice. A major TV campaign encouraged Ghanaians to buy ‘American Rice’ and all their ‘worries will be over’!

So people stopped buying the locally grown rice and Ghanaian farmers started to suffer.

The Ghanaian government hoped to stop this flood of imports by increasing

the import tariffs on imported rice. The tariff increases were announced to the Ghanaian parliament in the annual budget but they were never implemented. Why? Because within days the IMF (International Monetary Fund) had put pressure on the Ghanaian government and the plans were shelved. The IMF used conditions attached to loans and debt cancellation to dictate the Ghanaian trade policy.

Poverty can’t just be helped by charity.

As part of your preparation for Christmas this year, please try to find 3 minutes to download a ready made letter to Gordon Brown (our representative on the IMF) to make your voice heard!

www.christianaid.org.uk/campaign/letters

Or pick up a copy available at the back of many churches (or contact us at the address below)

All you have to do is sign!

And don’t forget to find time this Christmas to celebrate all the good things that you have helped to happen at Ahotokurom this year.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS! And EVERY BLESSING FOR 2004

Special thanks go to all the parishes, schools, youth groups and individuals who have supported the work of Ahotokurom this year. There are too many people to mention here. **Know that you are in the thoughts and prayers of the people there. Every day they give thanks that people like you care about people like them!**

Great news and very special thanks to an anonymous donor who has given match funding of £10,000 to help the efforts to raise funds for a disabled accessible minibus!!! For every pound raised – there’s a pound in the kitty to be claimed! What a challenge!

To make a donation to Friends of Ahotokurom please send cheques/postal orders made payable to:
‘DMJ Friends of Ahotokurom’

The Treasurer, 2, Century Road, Rainham, Gillingham, Kent ME8 0BG

For further information on any of our activities please write to:
Friends of Ahotokurom, 5, Latham Close, Dartford, DA2 6NS

www.ahotokurom.org

The work of this group is undertaken entirely voluntarily and every penny donated goes directly to support the work in Ghana