

Reflections

**Jim Smith reflecting on what
Africa is and how we can help.**

The background – good and not so good!

I was in the middle of preaching in a medium size African church. It was hot, and sweat was running in a steady stream down my back, down my legs and into my shoes. I had been speaking for about 45 minutes, and was well into my stride. “There’s only one thing that we can do,” I remember saying, “and that is to live more for Jesus.”

It hardly seemed revolutionary to me, but it was like throwing petrol onto a fire. Immediately the whole place stood up, the band played, and we began to “live more like Jesus.” People were singing, dancing, waving their hankies, lifting their chairs above their heads, and beating drums and tambourines. There was no stopping them, and I didn’t try. It was an unrestricted, spontaneous and enthusiastic outpouring of what is at the heart of the African church - an unstoppable joy in their faith. It was truly beautiful. I have experienced many nights like this since, and I hope for many more!

We had been setting up a special women’s programme for nearly a year. I had a team of black and white women, and we were visiting churches to teach and encourage. There was one particular church I wanted the team to visit, where I had received a very warm welcome some months before and the Pastor was very keen to have our team visit. We fixed a date, hired a bus, and arrived after 3 hours of travel to find – an empty church. No one was expecting us. No one knew we were coming. No one particularly wanted us. The Pastor hadn’t even bothered to tell his women that we were coming - after all, they were only women. Months of time and lots of resource wasted.

This is Africa - or this is Ghana, where we have gained most of our understandings. The Ghanaian Christians can rise to sublime heights, and do things which still amaze me after all these years. But they can also be rude, ignorant and dismissive of me, driving me to levels of disappointment which make me feel like giving up. Africa is a land of fantastic opportunity for the Christian worker, and a land of intense frustration and disappointment. Anyone feeling that they want to establish a work there has to settle for the long haul, and little immediate return. But if we can last the course, it is rewarding beyond description.

Support for Africa has always been a priority in the U.K. churches. We were responsible for much of the initial church planting in Africa, and I think that deep within our consciousness in the U.K., we still feel our responsibility. Christians and non-Christians alike have a concern for Africa. We have never failed to be delighted

at this, because, as we say in Ghana, it is “a blessing!” But at the same time, I sense support for missionary work is at a low ebb in the U.K. Money is tight, and perhaps some people still have the picture of the white man in his pith helmet wandering around in the bush with a bible in his hand! But we have moved on from that. Today, we are co- partners with the African churches, helping them as friends and colleagues, as they develop their ministry. We cannot just abandon them - they are our spiritual great great grandchildren. They do a great job, but still value our help. I have had to do a lot of thinking about this over the years, and out of this have come the foundations for our work. I think this has helped some see more clearly what it is that the twenty first century Mission is trying to achieve, and the reality of the situation on the ground.

The foundations of our work

I am sitting on the veranda of our guest house. It's 2.15 pm, and the teaching meetings are already under way. Two African women try to slip past me and go to the meetings, but don't succeed. “Why are you still here?” I ask. “The meetings have started and you are late, so you cannot go.” “But papa, please, we want to go.” But we have strict rules about time on our base, in contrast to the general African habit of doing everything hours late. They can't believe that I would stop them going. They return to their room muttering that I have “Sacked” them! But I noticed that they were first to the meeting that night! This might look a small issue to Western eyes, but it is a big issue in Africa. So much precious time is lost because of a very loose attitude to time. If I don't take this kind of stand, no one arrives until 30 minutes after we have started - a terrible waste of everyone's time.

This kind of experience, plus twenty years in Africa, have helped us to work out a pattern of ministry within the environment in which we are working. With the help of our African friends, we have managed to establish our own framework, and here it is, in no particular order of importance.

*** Unpredictable**

As I got to know Africans as friends, I soon realised that they have to live their lives in a situation which is very unpredictable. Personal possessions are not abundant, and medicine is now free, but under great stress. No illness is trivial in the hot, humid and dusty climate of Africa, yet many endure illnesses of which we would expect to be cured. Money is not plentiful, and prices for basics - bread, fuel, transport and schooling are high compared to income. Corruption is something we all have to live with.

We have had to learn to flow with all of this, as our African friends have to, while at the same time trying to be effective in our ministry. This is the reality:-

Power on. Power off. Water on. Water off. Transport arrives. Transport does not arrive. Key leaders turn up. Key leaders don't turn up. Pastors remember that we are coming. Pastors forget we are coming. Doctor is in the hospital. Doctor is not in the hospital. Medicine is available. Medicine is not available. Diesel is in the pumps. Diesel is not in the pumps. Rains come. Rains don't come.

One visitor asked me, "How do you stand all this?" The answer is simple - God has called me to work in Ghana, and the call sustains me. But I'm not going to pretend that there haven't been occasions when I've felt like throwing in the towel, or even throwing it at someone!

*** Family is a top priority.**

"This is my mother." No problem there then, except the person doing the introducing is about ten years older than "mother!" "Mother" is probably a widow who has been taken into the extended family, and so becomes "mother." It takes a few years to get hold of the complex family relationships, and I'm getting better at it, but not there yet.

Family is the top priority - both the small family in which we all live, and the extended family of aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, and family friends which is all around us, even if not with us, every day. Social occasions are very important, especially funerals, which have a call of allegiance unknown in the West. But this family priority can also impose great burdens. Someone who has "got on" will find children of other family members left with them - nephews and nieces expecting school and college fees to be paid, and possessions provided. Family hierarchy can also place heavy burdens on its family members, which make it hard to be flexible, or think and act freely. Age is respected in a way unknown in many western countries. Older people are especially respected, and widows are taken into the family group, to be cared for.

*** Life can be very tough.**

On our base, 200 building blocks, each weighing a considerable amount, were dropped about a kilometre from the base, because the lorry couldn't get through the flooded roads. Our workers pushed them, ten at a time in the wheel barrow, over streams, muddy rutted roads and through thick bush to get them to the base. Over and over they returned, until all the blocks were in the base. They were

sweating, tired, but content. They had done the task – and one that would have seriously weakened me. I bought them lunch and paid them extra that day.

Women will sell water in the blazing sun all day for a very small return, or carry very heavy loads for merchants and traders, again at very low pay, and have to carry their babies on their backs at the same time. But it's not all like this. Market traders, service industries, education, government and private enterprise all provide work which, while not highly paid does give a regular income. Some are very wealthy, and achieve a very high standard of living. Africans have a very positive attitude to life, which is always a challenge to me. They are very resourceful, and find ways of fixing problems which would never have occurred to me. The exhaust on our car disappeared years ago, under the countless patches which our drivers keep welding on. But get a new one – “Why? This one is still working fine. Let’s not waste money!!”

*** It is not all poverty**

I was speaking in a conference in Kumasi and my theme was the good things Africa has, and the good things it can bring to the world. The conference was broadcast, and a few weeks later, I was stopped in a village one hundred and fifty kilometres away from Kumasi. A Pastor came up to me and said “I heard what you said about Africa. I feel so much better now!” I was sad that he felt bad in the first place.

I share the frustration of many in Africa, who feel that the Western media always portray the poverty, without showing those millions who are keen to make a go of things, and want Ghana to go forward. African society functions in its way, and while there is poverty, there is also a very genuine and attractive culture, which it is a joy to experience and be part of. Most Westerners only see the surface, but even that can be rewarding. But those privileged to go deeper find it very competent at dealing with what is thrown at it. I have never failed to be astonished at the general good temper with which African men, women, children and families face the vagaries of life, and overcome the most difficult situations. Africa is beautiful, and has the potential to contribute massively to the world. Sometimes, I don't think Africans themselves believe this, and part of my work has been to help them see that the black culture has value in itself, and Africa can be proud to bring all that it is within the international family.

* Different patterns

I decided to wave to an African child who was standing behind me, but I didn't want to make a big thing of it, so instead of the usual wave, I put my hand behind my back, and waved "upside down." He ran away, and my friend, Bishop Ofori said to me "You just sent him away. The "upside down" wave here in Ghana doesn't mean "hello", it means "Move on, go away!" Lots still to learn then, and this applies to all our international relationships.

Problems come when the culture of Africa and that of the West come together. This is, of course, the most fruitful hinterland, where both cultures have to be flexible, and can learn from each other. But Africa often finds this a difficult area. Africa often feels like the supplicant at the rich man's table. Perhaps we have been, in part responsible for this - a heritage from our colonial days? I don't think we think it now, but Africa has found it hard to shake off its past patterns of thinking.

And Africa marches to a different drum! Time is ultimately flexible, in a way that it is not with the West. I sat next to one very disillusioned western businessman on the plane home once. I asked him what was troubling him. "Africans!" he replied. When I talked with him further, the story emerged. He had come to Ghana to set up a business, and made appointments to meet African businessmen at his hotel. None of them turned up, and he was so angry, that he was going to take his business elsewhere. "I know it is frustrating" I said to him, "but Africa is very unpredictable. Any one of a number of things might have happened - an illness, a funeral, no money for a taxi, apprehensive at coming to a big hotel – give Africa a chance." But he didn't, and I appreciate his feelings. He and the Africans who did not turn up were victims of a different understanding of time.

Expectations can be very different in both cultures, without any awareness that this is the case. One church I know gave money to an African to drill a well in his village. Sounds fine from our point of view, but they failed to understand the temptation which money is to some Africans. The person in Africa responsible for the well gave some of the money for the well to his family - only natural from their perspective, but not from ours. The result of this mis-cultural understanding is that, to date, there is no well, and I suspect, now no money left.

I have many times had to explain to Africans the cost of electricity to us compared with them, and tried to help them see why we need so much more finance. But they see us as rich, and want a share of our pie, without appreciating the work involved to even get the pie in the first place.

We have also been guilty of robbing them of resources, of tying them into high levels of debt, and of giving them handouts which have robbed them of their dignity. These days, we have a very different attitude - at least most of us do. We want Africa to take responsibility for itself. We are happy to help out, but not to hand out. It was good to see that the USA, with its millennium challenge account, set hard criteria for Governments who wanted to receive money. There are thousands of initiatives, from governments to individuals, all trying to give Africa the chance to be itself - a beautiful continent, full of potential - even if the present reality is far from that yet.

Breaking the “hand out” culture is hard, and requires us to be very firm. In Ghana, we are having new motorways built. The money is coming from the West, and I asked an African, “Why don’t you stop asking us to build roads, pay your taxes and build your own. That would be much better.” “But why?” came back the reply. “If we pay our taxes, it all gets stolen. Better you do this for us.” My hope is that the younger generation of Ghanaians will start to see things differently.

*** Essentials go missing**

I am writing this material in the dark. It wasn’t dark when I started, but the power has gone off, come on and one off again. No matter what enquiries we make, we cannot find out why this is happening. It happens all the time, and no one knows why. Last week, there was no diesel in Accra. We had to drive nearly forty kilometres to a garage that had some, and we had to do plenty of “negotiating” to get the fuel. Today, there is plenty of diesel at the pumps. What happened? No one knows. We have two huge water storage tanks in our house, but during the spring, they ran dry, because the water supply just stopped in Accra. We had to go out and try to buy water. Now it is back on, but for how long? Nobody knows.

Food, fuel, energy and water are key resources. Guaranteeing a good food supply at a price the citizens can afford is a priority of any government. In Africa, women can suddenly find that essentials are missing from the market – no yam, no cassava, little bread. This is uncomfortable, but we have to get used to it. The Government does the best they can for water, but drilling resources, pumping stations and pipes are high maintenance, and there is not always the money, the parts or the technical help available. Energy usage has shot up everywhere, but supplying it can be costly. Africa is not immune from fuel price rises, but its citizens can seldom afford to pay very much more. Increases have provoked civil unrest in a number of countries. Governments subsidise the fuel price, but at a cost to schools, hospitals and other needed resources.

Lacking key resources can unsettle a nation. When there was no diesel, it wasn't long before the rumours started - the government has not paid the refinery for the fuel, or hasn't paid the tankers that bring the crude, and so on. The truth is hard to find - just like the diesel. But this kind of thing destabilises a country.

*** Corruption**

Corruption is, sadly, a fact of life for all who work in Africa. A group of U.K. churches sent sheets for a state run nursery, but the nursery manager could not get the sheets out of the Customs shed. Apparently, the right forms were not available because "the photo copier is broken". When I heard this, my heart sank. I gave the nursery manager a sum of money, and said "Don't tell me. Just get the sheets." I don't like telling such a story against a country I love, and many customs officials are caring and honest. But we have to be realistic. I have learnt to live with it, as all Africans have to do. We might like to point the finger, but we are hardly lily white ourselves. It's a fallen world. We just have to accept this and get on and do what we can. Perhaps this looks defeatist, but like many before me, I have to live and work in the reality of this fallen world. Other Westerners have criticised me for not taking a stand. But I have other battles to fight, and this one, for now, is not winnable.

*** Spirituality**

"Prophet Jim" said a very worried looking Pastor, "I have something to confess." I gritted my teeth - I never know what is coming when I hear this. "We have only managed forty days of prayer and fasting in preparation for your coming. We are so embarrassed." Only forty days? In the West I'm lucky to get forty minutes! Spirituality is central to African life, and this can be quite a shock to Westerners. I was waiting in the car once, when a trader came up to me to try and sell clothes. "I don't have any money" I said, "but there is something I can do - can I pray for you?" "Yes" he said, "my wife is sick." So I prayed for him. Ten minutes later he brought another trader over, and said to me "His baby is sick. Will you pray for him as well?"

All who work in Africa will tell such stories because spiritual issues are high in the hearts and minds of African people. Almost everyone is aware of, and accepts, the reality of the spiritual world. Prayer has a high priority, and is believed by all to be very effective. The Black Stars, Ghana's national football team, said recently when entering a big tournament "We work together and we pray together. We will win together." Anyone who has worked in Africa will recognise such a statement, and, as a matter of fact, I agree with them! It's so refreshing to live and be in such an environment.

The Christian church is huge, but fragmented. There are denominations, and many move in the charismatic stream. Then there are literally thousands of small independent churches, some in groupings, some just working on their own. Working together is not a priority! Pastors are frightened that if they work with other churches, those Pastors from other churches will steal their sheep. This fear is not without foundation. I am writing this from a West African perspective. Things might be better elsewhere – I hope so! Recently, Mary and the team were refused a chance to work with the women of one church, because, the Pastor said, in public, “You will steal my sheep.” What he failed to recognise is that far from stealing them, we feed them for him and with him.

Training of Pastors is uneven. Some are very well trained, knowing Greek and Hebrew, and study good theology. Others have great enthusiasm, but their training is not so thorough. Books are not plentiful, although the internet has helped many Pastors to improve their knowledge. Church life revolves around Sunday, where services are long, loud and very enthusiastic. Mid-week meetings are usually for prayer, healing or deliverance. Churches have regular and long programmes. Prayer and fasting programmes can easily last for a month. Regular “revivals” are held for specific groups – women, children, and the youth. Evangelism and healing take a high priority. Prosperity teaching is very common. Big conferences by visiting speakers are popular, but Pastors in the villages and small towns often find these are too expensive, or too far away.

Pastors can be very grasping. “Can you give me a guitar, a sound system, a car, money, a visa”, and so on. Western visitors fall for this much of the time, and frankly, it does not help Africa take responsibility for itself. My reply is always the same: “If the Lord wants you to have a guitar, then pray and sacrifice, and it will come.” One denominational leader, in the early days of the African Church, refused all western money. He said “If God asks us to do something, the resources to do it are here in Africa.” There are many like him, solid in their faith and their morality, and deeply caring for their people. They would rather starve than ask me for food. These are the men we look for, and train.

*** It’s not easy for women in the churches.**

“I never realised I had any gifts to offer God.” If we have heard this from one woman, we have heard it from thousands. “A very common attitude,” as one very experienced Pastor said to me, “is that women are there to fill the seats and provide the money!” We have also found that many Pastors do not know how to use their women. Consequently, African women do not find it easy to exercise their ministries.

This is one of the areas where our mission is constantly working. We have to respect the culture, which is male led, but we have helped many churches recognise the value of women's ministry. This is a sensitive area, and we have learnt to be very sensitive. Changes can come, but only if we take the utmost care to respect what is there, and work in it and from it. This is key to our approach, and why we are called the “serving” Africa Mission.

*** Marriage**

A friend of mine announced that his and his fiancée's family had come to an agreement about their marriage. Next thing I knew they are sleeping together. I couldn't understand this, as both people were very devout Christians. An older African friend had to explain to me that once the families have “agreed”, the couple are, in effect, married.

Marriage is a big expectation, and so is having children, especially a son. While marriages are not formally arranged, the family plays a big part in what we might term the marriage contract. Couples can and do choose their relationships, but senior family members play a big part in the process. Working out the remuneration for a bride can be a long and delicate process. Somehow it seems to work, and every culture has its different ways. But the problems come when the children do not arrive. Barrenness is common, and a very great sorrow - a very very great sorrow, not only for the women, but for the consequences for the marriage. “Bagging out” is the Ghanaian euphemism for driving the wife from the home, especially when she fails to produce children. Or possibly she is allowed to stay, to bring up the children fathered by her husband with another woman.

Violence against women in marriage is more common than we like to admit, and as yet is not solvable, although progress is being made. We are very involved with this issue, and as well as building a hostel for victims of domestic violence, we are beginning to teach women and Pastors about this issue. There's a long way to go. In the meantime, life within the marriage can be good, and it can also be very tough.

*** Marrying a westerner**

A friend came up to me at a meeting and said “Guess what. I am getting married. I met this African woman while I was on holiday, and now we are to marry.” My heart sank, because I know the problems which can come from such marriages. In his case they all came, and some years later he was an older, wiser and much poorer man.

Many African women dream of scooping a western male, and many lonely western males succumb, but they are often unaware of the consequences, as the woman's family begins to trawl the gold stream. Many African men dream of getting a western wife, but sadly it is often as much for the E.U. passport as it is for the woman concerned. This looks harsh through western eyes, but Africans see things against a background of family need –the wider family needs and expectations. I don't think it is quite so mercenary as it seems in print, but perhaps I am being too kind. Being a cross cultural worker, I am not in any way against love finding its course, regardless of background or culture. But I have seen at first hand the devastating consequences for western men and women caught up in this. Of course it can all be worked out, and when it does it is wonderful, but in my experience it can also end in tears.

*** Africans and money**

I was running a small conference in Ghana, and at the advice of a very experienced Pastor, I entrusted a relatively small sum to one of his assistants, to pay for transport and accommodation. When I arrived, the assistant had absconded with the money. On another occasion someone working for us collected money to pay for transport, and when we turned up for the transport, there was none, because the Company had not been paid. We never saw this money again.

Money is a difficult area, and I've already referred to it. As a friend of mine said, "It's not just a question of who you can trust, but how long you can trust them for." We, even with a lot of experience and help on the ground, have been tricked and cheated. All missionaries will tell the same story. But see it from the African perspective. They are poor, often very needy, with big family demands, and they see us as rich. Many westerners, and especially churches, don't help in this area. They give, often generously, without realising that they might just be reinforcing the stereotype. Of course we must give, but we need to keep that giving within the cultural norms. I spoke to one western man in Ghana, who was about to tip his taxi driver with the equivalent to one week's wages. I asked him if he would tip a taxi driver 500.00 (GBP) in the U.K., and he was shocked. "Well," I said, "that is just what you have done!" Churches, keen to help, send sums which, while small to us, dazzle the receivers. Churches also give without being sure there is any control of the money given. My experience is that money given to Africa has to be carefully placed, and carefully watched. We, as a Mission, give small sums to women to buy clothes for their children. We insist that they bring the clothes they have bought for us to see, and they delight in this. All mothers like to show off their children in new clothes! We delight with them, but it is also our way of keeping a careful eye on the finance. I love African people, and because I do, this is why I am so careful with the

money I give them. I don't want in any way to restrict what they get, but nor do I want to lead them into temptation. Not all Africans are poor with money, but we have to recognise that some, may be many, are!

*** Respect**

An angry discussion broke out in front of me, as I waited to check in at Kotoko airport in Accra for my flight home. A western family were getting very angry at something, and shouted at the check-in staff, and then at the supervisor. Eventually they stormed away, saying some very uncomplimentary things about Ghana. I was next in the queue, and I noticed that the check-in woman's fingers were shaking. Ghanaians don't like this kind of confrontation, and nor do I. It should not happen. I put my hand on hers, and said, "Let me pray for you." "Please" she said, "I am so scarred."

Both cultures have to learn to respect each other as people. This is the challenge and the joy of working with African people. I have many friends in Ghana. I do not even notice that they are black. Why should I - they are people, my friends, people I like being with. I'm not denying the unique value of their black culture, but I am not willing to allow it to stereotype me. Seeing these barriers fall, on both sides, is the joy of it all, and certainly the best investment anyone can make.

We make many mistakes as we work with other cultures - both sides make them, and both sides have to learn that these mistakes are the pathway to a better understanding of each other, not impassable road blocks. It all works better when we respect each other. But I have to remember that the greater responsibility is mine - after all I am a guest in their country, not they in mine. I work in many cultures, and this principle has stood me in good stead in all of them.

*** Changing times**

Fifteen years ago, I set out from my hotel in Benin, to try and make an international call home. Every pay phone was broken, until, after 30 minutes we found a long queue, standing by one phone, clipped to a lamp post in the middle of a field. Africans are very considerate, (or perhaps they thought I might faint in the heat), and I was quickly moved to the front. I dialed and dialed and dialed. Eventually, to my astonishment, I got through to my wife, only to be cut off after 30 seconds. The phone had died! The queue dispersed, in a resigned sort of way, and one hour later I was back in my hotel, all for thirty seconds of call. Today, here on our mission base near Accra, I have just phoned home on my mobile, and cleared my e mails on a dongle! Times, even in Africa, do change.

Times have changed dramatically in the mission field as well. We no longer speak of a “third world”, a title I always found fairly useless. We are now part of the “developing world.” Our mission statement is now- “Give a man a fish and he has a meal. Teach him to fish and he has a meal for life.” We, Christian organisations and governments alike are in the “hand up” business, not the “hand out business.” When faced with acute starvation, then we have to hand out, but this is not the way ahead in more normal situations. As helpers, friends, and co workers, we want Africa to stand on its feet.

The issues are enormous, and we have to work at every level. At the political level, Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, (and a Ghanaian) said: “The biggest problem Africa faces is poor political leadership.” I have noticed myself that African “freedom fighters” find it easy to win a revolution, but are not so good at building the peace. Politicians find it hard to tackle the problems they face, and are subject to all sorts of cultural expectations they cannot hope to fulfill. At a recent election, people were saying to me “Our President will find us jobs.” I felt sorry for the new President. How can he hope to do such a thing, but if he doesn’t, I will soon be hearing, “Our President is letting us down.” The Politicians are surrounded by people who want a slice of the pie, and they are not immune from taking their slice as well. “Favourites” seem to do well with contracts, while those outside the circle fail to get work. Perhaps I have grown cynical, but when I read of a contract awarded, I wonder how many “presents” have changed hands. Yet I support the politicians as much as I can. I spend a lot of time explaining to people what a politician can and cannot do. I constantly encourage prayer for the nation and its leaders. Ultimately, they are doing the best they can in very difficult circumstances, and are often very exposed to things happening in the wider world which they cannot control. People keep asking me “Why is the fuel price going up and up. The President should do something.” But oil prices are beyond even the President. What can he do? He can only get the best deal he can for a small and, in world terms, insignificant nation. I try to teach this - I hope it helps.

*** Economics**

I was speaking at a meeting in Birmingham, and an African Pastor, who was working with the local church, came to meet me. He looked very sad, and I said to him “Have you got money to send home to your wife and children?” “No.” He said. I found some money in my wallet, and gave it to him, “Send this” I said. His face lit up. “Pastor” he said “how did you know about this need of mine?” Many years of experience!

Many Africans living abroad send money home. In one recent survey, money being sent home to Ghana was the third biggest foreign currency earner. Economically, internal investment is vital, both at the macro and micro level. Small loans are needed, as well as big infra-structure loans. " But money to be watched over or it will be wasted. Recently, there has been a movement in the developing world, called "Just give money to the poor." It advocates benefits for all, so that the poor can take responsibility for their own lives. Many feared that this money would be wasted, but surveys suggest that it has been used wisely. As a Mission, we have not gone down this route. Our experience has been the opposite - that money not carefully placed and accounted for does get mis-spent. All missionary organisations must decide which approach to adopt.

Big sums are lent, but I am always excited by the very small schemes, which lend small amounts of money to farmers and traders, with the expectation that this small loan will be repaid, and then can be lent again. No repayment – no more loan! It may be my limited view, but it seems to me that big loans build roads, while small loans feed families. Of course we need both.

*** Medicine**

"Sister, why is the queue outside the clinic so long today?" I visit hospitals occasionally, and this hospital had always struck me as efficient. "Pastor, the doctor has not come today. So we cannot treat the people. They will all have to come back tomorrow." "And will the doctor be here tomorrow?" Nobody knows.

Ghana works hard at its medical facilities, and medicine is now free at the point of demand - we all have health cards, which we have to buy annually. Medically, one of the biggest problems is stopping trained staff migrating to the West to run Western medical services. This is a hard battle. I was speaking to one man who said to me: "I dream of coming to the U.K.". I outlined what he could expect, and the low pay he would earn. "Yes" he said "but at least I would have money to send home." Medically trained staff can earn vastly more in the U.K., and what's more, they know they will get paid – something which, sadly, is not guaranteed in Africa. But Africa needs them. I don't know how we can stop this medical drain, but it's vital that we do.

*** Education**

At one conference, we gave free pens to all the delegates. I noticed that one of the young women was crying, and I asked her what was wrong. "Pastor, now I have a pen, I can go to College!" When someone has nothing, the smallest thing bring hope.

One of the greatest needs in Africa is education. There are schools in the towns and large cities, and many well educated African people, but in the villages and rural areas, the schooling is rudimentary, and erratic. I asked one farmer in a rural village why he did not send his son to the school. "Don't you want your son to better you?" I asked, "Don't you want him to read and write?" But the farmer replied, "Who will look after the goats? They are my livelihood." Both of us were right in our own way. This is a huge battle. Recently, at the end of a decade aimed at improving literacy, literacy rates had gone down, and not up. But education changes nations. I have already referred to the health cards, but it has proved hard to convince people of the value of this system. One day, a young man, a member of a local church, fell ill. He had no registration for free medicine, so it cost the church ten times what the health card would have cost. I asked the Pastor why the young man had not been signed up. "He didn't understand. He thought the government would take his money and he would still have to pay." This incident was down to lack of education, which limits the understanding of the population, and makes changes very hard to make. A better educated society would break this kind of attitude, which is found everywhere.

What of the future?

The new generation of Ghanaians has different attitudes, are better fed and better educated than those went before. Perhaps they will see the value of paying tax and committing to work for the development of their nation.

Perhaps with them, we can break the cycle of domestic violence, and see a better generation emerge through their marriages. Already we are trying the malaria vaccine, and the results, so far, look positive for the babies. What a great blessing it would be to remove this killer illness from the lives of African people. Great efforts are being made to eradicate TB through vaccination, although this is quite a task. Ghana is working on better irrigation for food production, and better cold store of food so that we are not so subject to seasonal fluctuation.

The greatest hope for the future is the love which the West has for Africa. Across the nations of the West, there seems to be a genuine concern for Africa, and especially in the United Kingdom. Christians and non-Christians alike, politicians, schools, and

local groups seem to have a willingness to help. What we have to do is to harness that help in the right way, so that it is all “hand up” to a struggling Continent, not “hand out.” We will have to expect to get it wrong occasionally, and to feel that we have been misled. These hiccups must not stop us from pushing on in our desire to help black Africa find a better life and a better hope.

It’s not one way traffic. Africa is a unique place. Those who go to help find a warmth in the culture, and receive back in their hearts a real feeling of oneness and achievement. By helping those who need a hand up, we ourselves are encouraged, given a wider view of the world, and the deep satisfaction of knowing that we are making a difference, however small, to the lives of our fellow world citizens. I have lost track of how many people I have seen who have been transformed by their involvement in Africa. Almost all of them have been transformed for the better. Africa gives to those who give to it, in a very special way. That’s why it is a beautiful continent. It isn’t just the physical beauty, or the attractiveness of the people – it’s the beauty of the internal changes which come to all who get involved at whatever level.

How have we fitted into this environment?

What is written here is not theory - it is the background against which we have developed our work - the Serving Africa Mission. We were determined from the outset to be a servant ministry, working quietly with the local churches, to help them grow and develop. We have, so far, concentrated on three main streams of ministry - Pastors fellowship and training, women’s ministry and training of evangelists.

*** The Vine and the Pastor’s school**

In the Vine, our Pastors’ fellowship, one Pastor has a church of over one hundred people, and a good building. Another has a small space surrounded by cardboard, and a congregation of 9! Accra reflects the same variety. Some churches seat thousands, and others less than dozens. African churches vary enormously, but there are some things which do not vary:

* The Pastors are very enthusiastic about worship, long preaching and programmes! Services and preaching can last for many hours. Many churches run programmes of some sort - a teaching programme, a deliverance programme, a youth programme, an outreach programme. The list is endless.

* Finance is quite an issue for all churches. The Pastors are supported by their churches in many cases, but even those in denominations are not overpaid, and much has to come from the members. In the Churches which have no denominational affiliation, the Pastor is paid by his congregation. This can be quite a challenge, and does open the way to many problems. Pastors are only human, and the temptation of money has brought sadness to many of them.

* Practical resources are not plentiful. The bigger churches may have good instruments, good P.A., and data projection. They may also have their own transport. But the smaller ones have very little. In smaller villages, benches are often used instead of chairs, and there is often little light at night. Instruments can be very limited - may be one old conga (drum), or just a piece of metal which is struck to give rhythm. Transport is the standard issue two feet! These churches are mostly found in small villages, and our teams always find working with them very rewarding. There's a simplicity which is very moving.

* Books and materials for study are not plentiful, once outside the main cities. DVD's, CDs and internet are all available. Some countries make more use of these than others. Again, outside the cities, the teaching and equipping of the church has to come from the Pastor. What he doesn't know he has to guess –with varying measures of success.

* Training of Pastors is also varied. Some are very well trained, but others have only a rudimentary training. I'm not in any way criticising – I love working with these men. But I have to see what is lacking, so I know what to add.

Against this background, the Serving Africa Mission has two main strategies - the "Pastors school" and "The Vine."

The Pastor's school is a 2 to 3 day residential course, on our base. Initially I have taught this school, concentrating on very basic things which I know will help the Pastors:-

- * Teaching on different books of the Bible.
- * Simple strategies for church life and church growth.
- * Evangelism - theory and practice.
- * Setting up a teaching programme.
- * How to preach.
- * How to train and release ministries.

Now my Ghanaian team leader, Paul Sefa, teaches most of this material. The teaching is precious, but even more precious is the time spent together. Pastors are slowly learning that they all have the same problems, and that together they can achieve more than they can do on their own.

The Vine is our Pastor's fellowship, which meets twice a week when I am in Ghana. At the Vine, I encourage Pastors to begin to get to know each other, and to work together. I teach, but the main function is to be together, to study and to worship together. We are all working hard to try and eliminate the idea of competition, by stressing friendship, fellowship in the common task, and building personal friendships. This venture is quite new, but has shown much promise. We are hoping to replicating it at our small teaching centre, which is 45 minutes from the main base, with another group of Pastors.

For all the team, working to help the Pastors is an immense privilege and joy. We have made mistakes, but overall, helping Pastors is one of our most satisfying endeavours. Long may it last!

*** Precious women**

"Mama, once I thought I had no value and nothing to offer to Jesus for service. Now you have shown me that I am valuable, and that I can do all sorts of things."

There's nothing like a satisfied customer! For ten years, Mary Smith has been teaching and training women in Africa. It's been a hard struggle, for two main reasons:-

* The women have little self-esteem. They often feel that they are of little value to the Lord.

* Many Pastors are unwilling to use women in any capacity. I have asked the Pastors who belong to our Vine fellowship why they don't use women more widely in ministry. Their response is partly cultural, partly fear and partly a lack of knowing how to use women in the best way.

We accept the cultural position of men being the head of the churches, but we have been able to show many Pastors that using women's gifts and talents enriches the church life, and increases the ministries available to a Pastor in the life of the church. Mary does this by teaching and demonstration. She holds 2 day conventions on our base, and this involves taking women out to minister in local churches - to teach, to speak, to lead small groups, to speak in the markets and to lead worship. This has

met with acceptance by many Pastors, because they know that we want to help and not usurp their position. It hasn't all been successful. Recently one Pastor would not let the team work, even though he had invited it, because he thought we were sheep stealers. There's little we can do in the face of this, but there are plenty of other churches who are glad to receive us.

We have taken many western women with us in these training programmes. As black and white eat, sleep and work together, we have seen the cultural barriers falling, and both sides have been greatly enriched. Again, it hasn't all been success. Some black women are too disorganised to make use of our training, and some western women have found the challenge too great. Ultimately, we want a black team of women to take over this work, and we are beginning to see signs that this might be possible. It's their church in their country, and we are determined to give it all back. Let two of the women speak for themselves:-

Beatrice:

"I learned many things working with Mama Mary. It has really helped me a lot, so much so that I don't even know where I should start from or where I should end it. All I can say is God is real. When you look for him, he by all means shows up. He did just that for me. Glory be to his name. I also learned how God has given women gifts and how he can use women to do His work too. When you look in the bible, he used a lot of women. He used Hannah, Lydia, Mary, Elizabeth, Esther, Deborah and then he also used Rhoda. The bible says, they are just women like me. These women gave all that they had to God. They gave their hearts, their lives and their time. I want to do the same, and I know that I can, and that he will use me."

Grace:

"Working with Mama Mary did a lot for me. I learned that as a woman I shouldn't look down upon myself, but rather I should use the gifts that God has given to me. This will build up my spirit and at the same time enable me to minister the word of God to other women. I thank God for that."

*** Glorious evangelists!**

Every African is an evangelist!! Well, not quite, but African people have a great desire to share their faith. Many of them call themselves evangelists, but I find there are usually a number of issues to be addressed:

*** Who has told them?**

“Evangelist” appears to be the default answer when we ask what gifts people have. But when we look further, we find that many of these ‘evangelists’ do not know what the Gospel is, and do not see fruit for their labour. Much of this problem comes from the inability of the church to recognise and release gifts. Most Pastors will just agree with what a person claims.

*** Who has recognised them?**

In Ghana, we have many ‘single person’ ministries. These are individuals who have launched out on an evangelistic path, travelling around and speaking whatever they want and saying virtually whatever they want to say. These people hinder the development of good, well trained and well cared for evangelists. The root of the problem is that the Pastors do not know how to recognise this or any other gift.

*** Who has trained them?**

Often, the answer is “No one.” And this is where “Glorious evangelists” are a key part of our vision. “Glorious evangelists” is our training school for evangelists, led at present by Hilary, one of our team, who is herself an evangelist. We select those who we feel have the gift, and along with the support of the Pastors, we teach them on our base, and then the evangelists go out with our evangelist, and learn on the job how to be more effective. We have to teach very basic things - the content of the gospel, using stories to share, using our personal story, and being brief and clear.

One of the biggest problems we face is that most Ghanaians will say that they are Christians already, and that they will respond to any “appeal”, however it is made. We have to evangelise with this in mind. Quite a lot of response is really people taking one step on in their life with Jesus, which is wonderful in itself. Many people who belong to other religions will also talk with us, and are very open to the things we are sharing.

We carefully control the content of what is shared. We have to answer to the Pastors of the local churches for what we are doing, and we want to be sure that the Good News which our evangelists are sharing is biblical, complete and clear. If we don’t do this, many wayward elements will be included, including wrong uses of Bible verses, and illustrations which do not illustrate!

We try to make the training fun. Recently, we put all our team in a small mini bus, and sent them off to evangelise at bus stops and small market trading areas. The bus

would stop for 30 minutes, and the evangelists would all climb out and start sharing about Jesus. This “bus stop evangelism” made a big impression, and we intend to do it again and again. We are finding that those who are evangelists delight in our training programme. We are also in the process of looking for someone who can, in time, replace our evangelist. We must start training this person now, so that in a few years’ time, they are ready. We cannot stand still.

Africa doesn’t stand still

Ghana is changing. Oil has been discovered off shore, and by 2011, the oil, will be flowing. This will bring many changes. It is estimated that the Government will receive one million dollars (US) a day for the foreseeable future, and expectation is high. But oil can also bring many problems. Already, people are demanding better hospitals, better services and more wealth for themselves. Will they get it? Will this wealth transform or degrade Ghana? Will the citizens be living a better life in the next decade, or will accounts in Swiss banks grow for the few, while the many stay much as they have for the past decades? I’m not criticising Ghana, but a number of African countries have found that the discovery of resources has brought nothing but strife and war. Liberia and D.R.Congo come to mind. It is going to take strong leadership to handle such wealth.

Things are also changing within the culture. The big cities act like magnets to the poorer people. We find many people from the North migrating to Accra, in search of work. The large cities do not have the same sense of tradition or family. The local chiefs have far less influence on everyday life in the cities. Young people are looking for better work, better food, better medicine, iPods, mobile phones, cars, homes and families. Traditional village life is still strong in the countryside, but for how long the traditional way of life can hold out against the strong pull of city life and city ways is unsure. Part of me is glad that the people are getting more opportunity, but part of me is sad to see the traditional way of life under threat. I suppose this is the way of things. Everything changes, and we must, as a Mission, change with it, so that we stay contemporary and relevant.

Violence against women, once something which was just accepted, is now being challenged. This is going to be a hard path for the whole nation. Women have, in the past, just accepted that they would be beaten and raped within their marriages. At last, the government has passed the “violence against women” act, which at least is hopeful. But changing attitudes on the ground, especially among the women themselves, is going to be a hard struggle. This is not just Ghana’s problem, but an African problem.



The beloved Missionary school

The work we do keeps moving on and growing. Since writing “Reflections” a new project has started. Here was what I wrote at the very outset of it:-

During the summer of 2011, it became increasingly clear to us that the Lord was calling for a change of plans in our building programme. The Lord began to make it plain that we should concentrate on the “Beloved Missionary School.”

There is a great need for a school for the 5-11 year olds in our valley, and we feel called to help. The Beloved Missionary School.” will be a 2 storey building, next to our base in Media near Accra. In the ground floor will be 6 classrooms for the children. We will link with the Ghana Education authority syllabus, and pay the teachers we employ. We will provide all the teaching materials.

We will landscape the base, so that the school has a playing field, where events can take place. (This will not be their playground!) Parent/teacher groups will meet on the base, so that we can establish a strong link between base and school. The Lord wants his children taught in an environment where he is honoured, and where he can call them into his service in the years of their life which follow their time with us.

But there will be so much more, which is the “missionary” emphasis comes in. We will help our children in the Christian faith, and help them to discover what part they can play in the work of God, as they grow older. Some, perhaps many, will come to our “School of Ministries”, where we teach young people about spiritual gifts and service. To underline this side of our work, upstairs we will establish the “Emmaus Pastor’s school.” This is where we will train our Pastors, and where Pastors and leaders from the district can come to study, think, pray and learn. With the Pastors upstairs, the school and children downstairs are literally under the covering and prayers of the Pastors. In the Emmaus School the Lord is providing

protection and prayer for the children. One of my favourite words, as my team are always pointing out, is “nice!” The Pastors being taught and equipped over the heads of the children and so praying and caring for them - that’s very “nice!” More details to follow.

Since then...

Mary, my wife, and senior teacher on the base told me this story:-

A little girl by the name of Precious came and sat beside me. She stroked my hand then she laid her head on my hands and shut her eyes. At that moment she had such trust ! Then the Lord began to speak to me of the school and in my mind came this picture Precious and I entering the throne room of God and I was asking him for a school for her. Today that is becoming a reality in the earthly places.

Plans for the school are well under way. The land is bought, and we are applying (December 2011) for our plans and local government registration.

Many people are getting involved in this little project. So are we, as a Mission asking for money?

From our formation twenty five years ago, we have never done that. We are a faith mission, and trust God and him alone to provide as we pray. Supporting the Beloved Missionary School means that we are giving our hearts, love and commitment to another land and the needs of another land. In the brochure I have written for men – the “1 in a hundred” project, I write this:-

“What do you get by becoming 1 in a hundred? A badge? A certificate? Recognition? No— all you get is the dignity of knowing that you have helped another father’s children. What more do you want?”

We are asking those who feel touched to give their love and their support to the parents of another land, who they do not know and will never meet, saying “We too have children to educate. From our common humanity and our common needs and hopes, let us help you.” Once we have given our hearts, the giving follows.

Further details

Jim and Mary are willing to come anywhere to speak about this project. They use African music and PowerPoint, as well as answering the many questions people have. No group is too small. There is no charge for anything, but help with fuel costs is always welcome.

There are a number of ways to get more information about this project:

Website: www.serving-africa. See the **BELOVED SCHOOL** page

Facebook: facebook.com/servingafricamission

E mail: jimsmithghana@yahoo.co.uk

Phone 07803 617435

Post Rev Jim Smith. "Freshfields" Mutton Hall Hill, Heathfield,
East Sussex TN21 8NL

Rev Jim Smith and Mary Smith

Jim Smith has been involved in ministry for over 40 years. He has a wide experience of teaching in 60 countries. He has written extensively for and about Africa. This material is available for free download.

He has been an Anglican minister for 40 years. Currently he is working with the Serving Africa Mission, based in Heathfield, East Sussex.

Jim is licensed to the Diocese of Chichester. His wife Mary leads the ministry to women in the Serving Africa Mission and within the U.K.

All materials are available for free download from www.serving-africa.org