

GHANA NEWSLETTER!

A big hello from snowy Sheffield!

Yes, the weather is just a bit different from the 30 degree heat of Africa I was experiencing just over a week ago! I would like to start by saying how much I appreciate your continual love, support and prayers, especially over the time I travelled to Ghana. Thank you so much and it was fantastic to catch up with some of you last week over half term. Some will have already heard some stories I will share from Ghana but there will be bits you won't have heard too!

As most of you will have been aware, the weekend before I flew out to Africa I was feeling rather sorry for myself and spent a lot of time in bed trying to rest before the journey. On the Monday morning I still wasn't feeling great but determined not to let some silly bug stop me from going on the trip I had been so looking forward to for so long!

We flew from Gatwick to Tripoli, Libya where we got our connecting flight to Accra, Ghana. The team was made up of the six of us in my borough team (Lewisham) plus my borough leader and her husband, and five from the Newham borough team. There were also two more leaders who came to help out on the trip, making 15 of us in total. As we arrived in Ghana and were waiting to collect our luggage, we soon realised that actually our luggage was not coming... Not just a couple of our bags had gone missing, but the whole lot of our bags had gone missing! It emerged that our luggage, for some reason, had been left in Libya and not been put on the connecting flight to Ghana! There were only two flights a week coming into Ghana so we were going to have to wait a few days until we got it! The luggage eventually turned up on Friday night so we only had it for the best part of two days!

Our trip was hosted by a female pastor who was born and bred in Ghana and who lives there for a few months of the year and also has a home in England, where she does work in London connected to the work of XLP in Ghana, and lives here the remaining months of the year. We stayed in a house/hostel she owns, in a village called Odemasse which is about a six hour drive from Accra. The house was lovely and very spacious. Pastor paid some ladies who worked in the house while we were staying there, who cooked, cleaned and did all our laundry for us every day! The house had normal flush toilets and a big tap for showering but we did not have running water at all hours of the day. There were limited periods of time when water would run from the taps and there were a couple of days solid when we had no running water, this was because it was the end of the dry season. We therefore took full advantage of a rain storm which came mid-week, so we all took our shampoo outside and had showers in the rain! I think it was the only point during the week which I could say I was actually cold! Light was scarce as well, with the generator which was used to provide artificial light only being on for a certain amount of time during the evening so torches to use around these times were vital.

The 15 of us on the trip were further divided into three more groups for some of the

time while we were out there. One group of us hosted the sports tournaments between various schools which included netball for the girls and football for the boys. I was a part of this group and so the winning school team for netball played us in the final. We lost very badly and completely put to shame!! The boys representing us at football won the tournament however! Both the netball and football tournaments were played on a clay ground which was very uneven and created lots of dust in the air. The students attire for playing varied too. Although everyone wore a coloured bib to represent the team they were playing for, some students were kitted out with proper studded boots, shorts and t-shirt, while others literally played bare foot and didn't really have the appropriate clothing! It was a pretty nerve-racking experience to watch and to play!

The second group of us were involved in taking assemblies at primary schools in a small village called Dampaong. I was also a part of this and really enjoyed this experience. Our assemblies included songs, a short sketch of the story of Jesus walking on water and a testimony which a different person from the group did each time. The number of kids varied in each of the three schools we went to and also their ages ranged a fair bit too. The children were so excited to have us doing their assembly and so receptive of what we were bringing to them. They absolutely loved joining in with the actions and some words they were able to pick up to the songs we did, and I'm sure we could have carried on doing the well known children's song 'Allelu, Allelu, Allelu, Alleluia... Praise Ye The Lord' for at least an hour!!

The last group, which I wasn't involved with, prepared and delivered classes to the students who attend the secondary school XLP built out in Ghana a few years ago, 'Jubilee'. The classes were based around the topic of identity and image and from the feedback we were given, the students really engaged well and had some great things to say. Apparently their English was amazing too, they were coming up with long definitions to certain words with quite advanced vocabulary... Their English is probably better than mine!

The first couple of days we were out there were tough for me as I really wasn't feeling great and wasn't myself. I didn't feel that I was being effective even being there and was wondering what God wanted me to do! The team were divided into small prayer groups of 3 or 4 and we came together in our prayer groups every evening after some worship all together, and discussed how we were feeling about the trip and what we felt God was saying to us. I was honest after the first couple of days and said that really, I just wanted to go home! I felt frustrated and spiritually I wasn't really in the right frame of mind. We spent quite a bit of time praying about this that evening and asked God for healing. The following day was our netball and one of the football tournaments (we held 2 over the course of the week) at one of the local schools. There were hundreds of kids running around and ambushing us as soon as we got out of the minibuss (which was a common occurrence)! Throughout that day there was one tiny girl who clung onto me. She would always want to hold my hand and would always be smiling at me. When lots of people were crowding round me she would want me to pick her up and not let go of her. I felt so encouraged by this little girl and I really feel God sent her that day to encourage me,

to lift my spirits and to say to me; 'Keep going Ruth, I have sent you here for a reason and I will use you'. From that day on I felt great and had a truly inspiring time. Praise God for answering our prayers!

The ladies who worked in the house we were staying in had big families and their children were often running around outside and wanting to play. Towards the end of the week there was a little boy we noticed who had previously been lively but was now sitting on the ground watching the other kids play and holding his leg. He looked quite distressed and down beat so we asked him what was wrong. It turned out he had injured his leg and had some quite deep wounds which looked like they were from a stick which had gouged his leg. We took him inside the house and dressed the wound. It needed to be seen everyday and re-dressed, but because we were soon to leave we were not able to do this. It costs a family just £10 to have healthcare cover for the year, and this little boy's family were not able to afford this. Me and my borough leader had been looking after this boy and so put in together to cover him and his family for the year so he could continue to get his wound checked out until it had healed properly. This boy also didn't have any shoes and because the wound was at the bottom of his leg it was easily going to get infected if it wasn't seen to. As AIDS is quite a major concern this also worried us, so it was great to be able to help this child and prevent him from having any further health complications.

There was another little girl around the house who was 4 years old and who took a shining to me! She was so adorable and whenever we came back from our days out she would be there waiting to sit on my knee and play around with me. She and a couple of the other girls followed us to our second football tournament which was a few minutes walk away at a nearby village. She insisted I carried her on my back for most of the time we were there and was even dusting the clay off my feet with her own clothes! She was one of nine children from the same mother and I was able to meet one of her older sisters at the end of our stay, who attends Jubilee school! She was telling me how she would like to be a nurse and loves music. She was delighted that I had spent time with her little sister and become friends with her over the course of the week.

Many of the children who we met would really, behave and act as though they were our servants which was quite uncomfortable and sometimes shocking. Many of them would dust off our feet with their clothes, make sure we were the ones who had somewhere to sit down and straighten out our own clothes when they were skew-whiff. It was really hard and such an eye-opener to see how they perceive us as white westerners from England. At points I felt embarrassed to be who I was. I just thought, 'We're all the same, we're all human, you don't have to treat me as any superior to you!'

On the Sunday we went to a church where we led most of the service. The church was in a modest building with four wooden walls made from planks and a tin roof, with a few wooden benches and chairs and a congregation, on this occasion, of approximately 60 people varying in age from new born to elderly. We based our service on worrying and how we don't need to worry about anything because God has already been there. At the end, we gave the congregation the opportunity to

come up to the front to be prayed for by our team, if they had any worries. We were astounded by some of the things people were asking us to pray for. They were all coming to us with worries about their spiritual lives and wanting to do what God wants for their lives. None of them, as I had expected, were saying anything about not having enough food for the next day or not having enough money to continue their education. This was an amazingly humbling experience as normally in the western world, with everything we need and more, it is often the practical things in our lives which we worry about.

On the Sunday evening before we set off to travel back on the Monday morning, we invited the students and teachers from Jubilee School and the younger children who had been around the house everyday, to come to the house for a party! The ladies working around the house cooked a tremendous buffet meal for everyone to have plenty. The little kids were piling their plates so high with food and going back for thirds! We had the opportunity to share our testimonies with them and to hear some of the students stories which were really inspiring and such a fantastic opportunity.

On the last day we set off very early on the Monday morning and went into Accra where we spent a bit of time on the beach and shopping! It made us laugh as Pastor was telling us that the main road for shopping in Ghana is called Oxford Street! This street is worlds away from the Oxford Street we know! We were told that the guys selling stuff assume that we're all rich because we're white and so they immediately double their prices to what they would normally try and sell things for. It was our job to haggle down to half the price they originally asked which was sometimes easier than others! Nine times out of ten we would buy at the lowest price we could haggle to, without ripping them off, because they were all so desperate to make a sale.

The flight back went smoothly with our luggage meeting us at Gatwick Airport! The week was such a huge success with everyone who went having an inspiring, eye-opening experience. We all came back wanting to go back again at some point and with our own individual stories to tell of how different children had befriended us. God really blessed us richly while we were out there and it was evident how much the people appreciate XLP students visiting them every year and helping continue God works already being developed in Ghana. The church is really developing and going from strength to strength. A new outreach program is soon to take off which will be based at, and run by the church we visited. Please think of this in your prayers!

Once again, thank you so much for your prayers for this trip. It truly has been the highlight of my gap year so far.

God bless,

Ruth xx