

## A VISIT TO GHANA

*Lorna Rattray*

*6th International Congress of Pastoral Care*

On 1st August, three of us set off from Edinburgh airport to travel to Accra, Ghana, for the 6th Congress of the International Council on Pastoral Care and Counselling (ICPCC), which was to take place from 8th to 15th August.

The ICPCC held its first Congress, back in 1979, in Edinburgh, and has organised such an international gathering at 4 yearly intervals since that date, with the aim of enabling pastoral care and counselling workers and teachers to meet and discuss both theory and practice.

The Congress in Accra was hosted by the Ghana Council of Churches, who invited delegates – if it were possible for us - to spend some time in Ghana outside of the conference, and arrangements were made for both pre- and post-conference events. I was fortunate, along with the two other Scottish delegates, to have the time to travel to Ghana a full week before the Congress was due to start, in order to get a 'feel' of our host country. This also enabled us to attend a local church on two Sundays, and to share in Bible study there, as well as experience the fascinating combination of (to me, at least, incredibly 'high') Anglican mass, and wonderful Ghanaian music while we danced to the front, according to the day of the week on which we were born, with our offerings for the welfare fund.

The warmth of our welcome began when we were met at the airport, even before we had reached immigration or customs, and all our entry requirements were sorted out for us. We were then taken straight to our hotel on the outskirts of Accra. This hotel was very recently opened, the owner having changed career from agro-business.

Our first day in Accra was the most difficult, as we tried to sort out money to pay for our hotel rooms, with the added complication of requiring to think, not only in pounds and cedi (local currency), but

also in the preferred 'hard currency' of US dollars. However, after visiting three different banks, and a two and a half hour wait in the last of these, our money problems were resolved, and we were able to enjoy the rest of our stay.

Visiting the sights within the city of Accra was a fascinating - though, due to the incredible crowds, not exactly relaxing! - experience, as was the return journey by train from the main Accra railway station to the junction at Dome, a short walk away from our hotel. Colleagues were intrigued by the crowds in the markets around the stations, the crowds on the trains (and those hanging off them as they hung from the doorways as they travelled), and the skills of balance in those sellers who moved along the aisles of the train, carrying their wares on their heads, and leaning across to passengers with their change - all while the train was in motion. After three months in India, and accustomed to life there, the fascination for me was to be found in the fascination of my colleagues!

We had the opportunity to visit a former Slave Castle, at Elmira, about three and a half hours drive west of Accra, and just west of Cape Coast. This was an interesting, and somewhat emotional, experience - hearing about the history of the Portuguese, Dutch and British slave traders, along with a group of Ghanaian teachers, and feeling strongly the tensions about racial oppression, despite an acknowledgement by all of the incredible complexity of the whole slave trade era.

On our last day before the conference began, Kojo, our hotel owner, drove us, again for three and a half hours, but this time north, to Kumasi, where we were privileged to meet both the newly-elected and enstooled King of Ashanti, and the Queen Mother who, according to the matriarchal structure of Ashanti society, is the one who holds the power, and who has the right to elect the future King.

We were introduced to the Queen Mother, and greeted her through her Linguist, as she is not allowed to communicate directly with visitors. After this, and a visit to the Palace Museum, were taken to a Conference of Chiefs, at which the King was speaking, and after which he mingled among the delegates, and shook hands with us all. As a business man, until his election as King earlier this year, he had, he told me, been a regular visitor to Dundee.

The conference began with a series of speeches and welcomes, and worship led by musicians from a local Methodist church, before we began the pattern of main speakers, discussion groups and workshops. As there were delegates from all continents, and over forty different countries, much of the most interesting discussion and debate took place, as might be expected, over meals or outside the drinks bar.

Midweek worship at the conference was superb, and included music, choirs, our 'dancing' forward with our offering, and a powerful sermon, by a local pastor, on the theme of taking care of ourselves as caregivers.

It was a privilege both to *be* in Africa, and to *hear about* issues arousing concern in several African countries.

A workshop on the theme of mental illness led into a discussion – triggered by a question about whether what in the United States would be defined as 'mental illness' would be considered in Africa to be 'demon possession' – about spirit possession within the newly-emerging Independent Churches in Africa. Two African pastors in the group spoke of the mainstream churches having a clearly Christian understanding of possession by spirits, good and bad, which includes as awareness that both exorcism and medication may be required when treating a person experiencing mental illness. They stressed the need, in Christian belief, to understand God as revealing 'himself' to us in all three 'persons' of the Trinity, and thus, of the significance of the spiritual.

These pastors were worried, however, about the emphasis they were seeing in some Independent Church congregations on spirit possession and exor-

cism. Their concern was that this emphasis was not arising out of Christian theology, but from an unhealthy link with the local traditional religions. They described some Independent Church leaders as still rooted in their traditional beliefs, but, aware of how these are less valued in African society today, having set themselves up as church leaders for the power and kudos it gives them as individuals. So, while valuing the work of the majority of Independent Churches in bringing people to faith in Christ, our group members were conscious of the need to find an appropriate way of assessing the motives of those setting themselves up as leaders. While keen to build on what had previously been familiar to new converts to Christianity, and to make use, for example, of traditional music within worship, these two pastors were concerned that a few power-hungry individuals could spoil the reputation of the Independent Church movement. People who were drawn to congregations, because of the similarity to their traditional religious practices, might be damaged through over-emphasis on spirit possession, which the pastors felt to be neither based on Christian teaching, nor on the teachings within traditional religious beliefs.

It was clear from the discussion that these two pastors, and the other Africans in the group, were more positive about the value of religious belief as helping people experiencing mental illness, than were the American members of the group. Clear, too, was the confidence the Americans placed in psychological understanding, as they explained the need for Clinical Pastoral Education training for all pastors working with people experiencing mental illness.

The whole visit was a wonderful opportunity both to learn about pastoral care in a wide variety of contexts and cultures, and to experience something of life in Ghana.

If anyone would like to know more about the Accra Congress, or about plans for the 7th ICPCCC Congress, which is to be held in Bangalore, south India, in 2003, then please contact me.

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