GRID & NEA

sustainable development in Ghana

Celebrating 20 Years of God's Blessings

Although GRID and NEA have been working together since 1983 - over 25 years - this year marks a special anniversary for David and Brenda Mensah. Twenty years ago they and their young family moved to Ghana to begin the work that God had called them to.

In 2011 we are celebrating with the Mensahs God's goodness, faithfulness, guidance, blessing, provision, and protection over these two decades. This newsletter issue is a trip down memory lane as David and Brenda reflect on how God has expanded our vision over the years, sharing with us a few of the highlights along the way.

David & Brenda
Elizabeth (7), Carole (3), & Deborah (5)

1990 - Move to Tamale

In one week we purchased a pickup (which is still running today) and had our first experience of clearing a container through Ghanaian customs. We were very thankful that all of our belongings arrived in order. There was much to do as we set up the office, our home, the girls' bedroom/ schoolroom, and the implementation of our first CIDA-funded project.

Chief Soah Naba dancing as we begin working in Janga

1991 - Beginning Work in Janga

For the Janga Chief Soah Naba, we were the fulfillment of his great-great-grandfather's vision: that one day people would come to help and that white people would be involved. The situation in Janga was so desperate and remote that other Ghanaians referred to it as "overseas." We started a women's peanut farming co-op, dug and lined wells, tested tomato farming, and initiated many more development projects.

The Janga Project site and some potential farmers

1992 - The First Volunteer Team

Our first volunteer team was from Ontario Bible College (now Tyndale). It meant so much to the Janga community that people from far away had heard of their difficulties and had come to help.

1993 - A New School

David traveled across Canada, sharing the challenges and progress of our work. We also launched an international school in Tamale. The girls' bedroom no longer did double-duty as a schoolroom!

1994 - A Challenging Year

Conflict erupted in in Northern Ghana. Many were killed. The Canadian High Commissioner, Dr. John Schram, asked David if he could assist in restoring peace in the area. David met with the various tribes, and helped start a project to reconstruct a local market. As difficult as it was, tribes that had been in conflict came together to complete the task. David was also asked to coordinate the Canada Fund in Northern Ghana, a special fund available for community development projects.

Success! Janga farmers produced tomatoes, shipping them to Accra for sale.

1995 - A Fruitful Year

Through his advisory work for The Body Shop, David was instrumental in launching a women's shea butter cooperative. To this day, these 400+ women continue to supply shea butter to The Body Shop. Last year they produced 465 tonnes! They have used their earnings to build clinics, schools, wells, sanitation facilities, and more.

Chief Soah Naba asked us why, after working in Janga for so long, we had not established a church there. Until that point, we and our NEA colleagues had felt that our role was to live out Christ's love by providing water, food, and help for the sick. At the chief's invitation, we felt that the time had come to speak about Jesus. Soon the little church that was built was too small for the growing congregation!

The first women co-op leaders in Carpenter with their bicycles

1996 - Starting in Carpenter

We and the NEA Board saw that our work in Janga would soon be finished. Wells had been dug, the women's co-op program was self-sustaining, tomatoes stretched 21 miles along the Black Volta in the dry season, and more nurses and teachers were present. Janga and its development would soon be self-sustaining.

We wondered where we should work next. We learned that the Bole District – one of the largest and poorest in the country - did not have any NGOs working there. NEA felt that we should rise to the challenge. We targeted the Deg area, one of the poorest sections of the district, and started preparatory work. Local chiefs gave us land near the town of Carpenter to use as a starting point. The Janga Women's Co-op gave the Deg Women's Co-op 60 bags of peanuts to start a farming program there, and so our Carpenter project was launched.

1997 - A Busy Break in Canada

It was time for a break in Canada. Our girls quickly re-integrated into schools while David had a busy speaking schedule. By now we had realized that, although there were similarities between Janga and Carpenter, there were also a few differences. We would need to emphasize environmental protection in Carpenter, as people burned many trees to produce charcoal and fishermen used chemicals to catch fish.

1998 - Unexpected Honour

NEA was honoured as the Best NGO, Northern Region, by the Ghana Ministry of Food and Agriculture.

1999 - Exiting Janga

By now the women's co-op program in Janga had reached over 2000 women. Schools and clinics were in place, dry-season farming had become viable for men and youths, adequate wells were present, and leadership was in place in all sectors. It was time for us to fade out and let the people of Janga carry on. Because our exit had been planned with the community from the beginning, this was not an abrupt ending. We still have a wonderful relationship with our Janga family, and we are proud of their accomplishments!

Opening a new church in Jama, near the Carpenter site.

2000 - Special Churches

Our special relationship with Uxbridge Baptist Church started when we welcomed our first team to Carpenter to build a warehouse. By now a number of churches had been established in the Deg area and David had started training pastors to support the many new Christians. The churches were growing faster than we had ever dreamed! We had the privilege of having pastors and teachers from Canada and the United States come and assist us in this. Rev. Douglas Porter and Dr. Douglas Webster were the first to visit in this capacity.

The team from Uxbridge Baptist Church built a primary school in Carpenter.

2001 - A New Primary School

Another building team from Uxbridge Baptist Church returned to build a 6-classroom primary school in Carpenter. At this point, our project area had expanded considerably.

2002 - Building Peace

A serious conflict broke out in Upper East Region. David was invited to be part of a mediation visit to the area with senior northern chiefs. En route to the area, David noticed that the chiefs in the mediating team were quite nervous and were wearing their talismans for protection. They asked David to pray for their protection. When they arrived, he was alarmed by the crowd that had gathered, and particularly the warriors ready for battle. When the meeting started, the mediating party asked David to be their spokesperson. As he stood to speak, his knees were knocking because of the gravity of their situation. But as he spoke, a dove flew into the gathering and landed on his shoulder. The crowd was immediately subdued, and began to say that David must be a man of peace and should be listened to. Before long a treaty was drawn up between the warring tribes. As the mediation team returned to Tamale, all of the chiefs wanted to know where the dove came from. David told them the story of the dove that landed on Jesus at His baptism and remarked that God had sent the dove.

Chiefs joined with us to protect local waterways from over-fishing and pollution.

That little blue cooler was the start of our aquaculture program.

We were "enstooled" as Chief and Queen Mother of Development.

2003 - Protecting the Environment; Enriching Lives

Environmental protection has been central in of all GRID and NEA's work. Our concern over the poisoning of the Black Volta River led to the formation of the Nensom Environmental Watchdog group. This is a group of about 600 volunteers who patrol over 200 km of the river and its tributaries to ensure that poison and illegal nets are not used in fishing any more. This innovative method is supported by the police, the army, the Environmental Protection Council, chiefs and community residents. It took some time to convince people that this approach would actually increase the number of fish in the river, but once they put the system to the test they found it was true. They joyfully began to report fewer birth defects in their babies and the return of species of fish they hadn't seen for years – not to mention a higher income for fishermen and fish sellers.

2004 - Starting the Impossible

Growing fish in northern Ghana? They said it couldn't be done. But in 2004 the Carpenter Aquaculture program was open and already proving people wrong. This program is designed to provide people with the protein that is missing in their diets. We started small, but the opening was a special event attended by over 3000 people! We were surprised by the North Mo chiefs' decision to honour us and 'enstool' David as the Chief of Development and Brenda as the Queen Mother of Development for the entire tribe.

2005 - Staying the Course

This was a year to keep on working – expanding farms, increasing co-ops, drilling wells, and building schools. Another building team from Uxbridge Baptist Church helped construct a warehouse in Yaara so that the peanut seed for the women in South Mo villages would have a place to be stored. How happy they were to have such a great building for their seed so close at hand! It was wonderful to see this warehouse also fill up with seed knowing it was just a fraction of what the women had produced - proof that they were able to provide food for themselves and their dependents.

2006 - Shared Vision

We returned to North America to update our many Canadian and American partners on our work in Ghana. For a few months, David was Uxbridge Baptist Church's interim pastor. One day while we were at the church, Dr. Jennifer Wilson paid us a special visit. She wondered if there was an opportunity for a medical mission to support us in our multi-faceted work in Ghana. Another dream was about to come true ...

2007 - Special Events

We returned to Ghana to host a conference for SIM Canada's development partners. The focus was on sustainable development and it was a hands-on experience for all participants. Co-op women leaders (who have never been to school) formed a panel and very capably answered questions on the difference the program has made in their lives. Chiefs talked about the importance to working together for the good of the community and area. We even conducted a participatory evaluation with the guests observing! It was special to hear from the international guests of the progress they were making in their corners of the world as well.

Our earlier conversation with Dr. Wilson developed into our first medical team in 2007. About 25 doctors, nurses, and health professionals volunteered to bring healthcare to the very poor. It was a first for all of us. Some of the rural clinic staff told us about the illnesses they could expect to see, and the team used that information to organize a full pharmacy and mini-lab. Thousands of people from over 50 villages came to the clinics. It was intense and wonderful. Many lives were saved, and many people were healed. The team worked so hard we didn't think they would ever come back!

Despite the hard work, the medical team returned to save many more lives.

Dr. Jennifer Wilson has now led four annual medical teams to Carpenter.

2008 - Our Work Grows

Interestingly, on their flight to Ghana in 2007, the medical team members met Dr. Kingsnorth, President of the European Hernia Association and a co-founder of Operation Hernia, an organization coordinating surgical missions for the poor. When the medical team found themselves overwhelmed by the hernia burden, they contacted Dr. Kingsnorth. He agreed to come in 2008, along with a top-notch surgical team and a container full of necessary surgical equipment. In November he and his team worked alongside the returning medical team. It was deeply moving to see this happen in Carpenter, the village where David had lost his father because of a strangulated hernia and no funds to get it repaired.

Also in 2008, David fell heir to a family chieftaincy title. It is an influential position next to the head chief of the Mo tribe. After discussing this with the pastors, they prayerfully encouraged David to accept the position. It has been another means of reaching out to the area chiefs and steering the entire tribe. It entails a lot more meetings, a new name, and if you met him in his chief's robes, you probably wouldn't recognize him!

2009 - Evaluating Progress

Since 1988, CIDA has funded GRID development projects. As we came to the close of a CIDA-supported project in 2009, CIDA launched a formal evaluation of our work. We were a little unsure of what to expect, and when we read the Terms of Reference (practically a book!) we were not looking forward to the exercise. It actually turned out to be a great time and the evaluation couldn't have been better. One of the recommendations was that CIDA should use the GRID and NEA program as a model for its other development initiatives. We were thankful.

Ella's Corner

As we celebrate with the Mensahs their 20th anniversary of ministry in Northern Ghana, we give thanks to God for all of His wonderful blessings.

In the early 1980s David Mensah was asked to speak at a World Day of Prayer service. He used this opportunity to tell of the plight of his people in Northern Ghana. We heard of how his mother walked 12 miles to get a small pot of dirty water; of how the cattle were so thirsty that they would run when they got near the river; of children dying of starvation; and of the great need for medical help.

Soon after a small number us met with the Mensahs and made lifetime commitments to this work. Today four of the founding members still remain on the GRID Board.

The very first project was the purchase of a van to carry clean water to villages

God has accomplished more than we ever dared dream of. Many have responded to the gospel; churches have been built; and our programs supply water, food and employment.

There is still much to be done. We cannot help without our team of dedicated prayer and financial supporters. Let Matthew 25:40 be our encouragement for 2011.

Ella Porter

Ella Porter serves on GRID's Board.

2010 - Another First

For several years we had desired to bring together the Christian Chiefs scattered over the northern half of the country. In 2010, this became reality. The first challenge was to find them since we only knew of a few. Initially we thought the number might reach 50, but as word spread, the numbers grew and in the end over 120 participants (from 13 tribes) attended! At first it was a bit frightening for some of the chiefs, since there were representatives from tribes that had been in conflict with each other. They soon loosened up (as much as chiefs can) and realized afresh the deep bond that exists between Christ's followers. Hearing their stories was very special. We made a lot of new friends and when the conference ended, the consensus was that we should be keep this as an annual event. Carpenter has become their 'Jerusalem'.

2011 - Looking Ahead

As we reflect on the last 20 years, our hearts are full of thanksgiving. We are thankful for the many volunteers who have come to work with us. We are thankful for good health and strength for each day. We are thankful that our problems have been so few. We are thankful for God's protection in so many ways. And we are thankful for you, who have supported us in countless ways .

As we begin our third decade of ministry we see the work expanding to new villages, adding more women to the peanut farming program, working with more chiefs to maintain peace, protecting more of the local environment, spreading the Good News to more communities, training more pastors, and bringing health care to thousands.

It is our hope that you will continue to keep us in prayer as we continue with the work God has called us to. Together, we can keep making a difference one life at a time

Shalom,

David and Brenda

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