

Visit by Representatives of St. Faith's Ghanaian Link Parish

On 16th July this year a prayer was answered with the arrival in Havant of the two representatives of St. Faith's IDWAL (Inter-Diocesan West Africa Link) link parish in Ghana, Janette Wilson and Nana Amonoo Smith, churchwardens of the Anglican Church of St. John the Divine, Nsawam. As our previous articles describe ("*Faith Matters*" June 2006, January 2008, February 2008, March 2008), our own visits to Nsawam as representatives of St. Faith's in 2006 and 2007 were '*transforming*' experiences during which we were made to feel very welcome and had a wonderful opportunity to see how our shared Christian faith is lived out by fellow Anglicans in a very different culture. To return their hospitality and develop the bonds between our churches, the two churchwardens were invited to visit St. Faith's in 2007 and funds for this were raised; but, sadly, their UK visa applications were refused. God moves in mysterious ways, however: this year, with the support of our MP, the applications were successful; furthermore, our visit to Nsawam last November provided the opportunity to meet Nana for the first time, to get to know him and Janette, and to form a firm friendship with them both; and, when it finally took place this summer, their visit to Havant exceeded our hopes and theirs.

Despite the historic links with the UK and the prominence of the Anglican Church in Ghana, the differences are immense. For example: Ghana is a tropical country; although it has been spared the ravages of conflict, hunger and disease experienced by nearby countries, it's much poorer than Britain (a secondary head teacher may typically earn less than £40 a month); although children learn English as a second language at school the language of everyday life is Twi; the food is very different; the extended family remains very important; signs of the Christian faith are very evident in Ghanaian life. Consequently, finding themselves in Havant was as much of a culture shock for our visitors as our first trip to Nsawam had been for us. Their visit was intended to strengthen the link between our churches, and increase understanding of one another's cultures and of the ways in which Anglicans live out their faith in different cultural settings. With all this in mind, in consultation

with other members of St. Faith's we put together a varied itinerary of activities and visits. Although Janette and Nana stayed at our house, they also enjoyed the hospitality of several other members of our church during their visit. Space doesn't permit a full account of the visit but we'd like to share some of the highlights.

On their first afternoon here, we walked around the centre of Havant, visiting shops and calling in at the church; and Nana's awestruck comment has stuck in our minds, "*Truly, God has blessed Europe*". That evening, we attended a service of welcome at St. Faith's, after which there was an opportunity for the visitors to meet and chat with Fr. David and members of the PCC and congregation. Janette had been corresponding with Sandra Haggan for a couple of years, so they were delighted to meet each other at last; they had several opportunities to spend time together during the visit and their friendship has grown. On the second day, Janette and Nana spent the morning visiting St. Albans CoFE Primary School with our churchwarden, Graham Frost, who is a parent-governor. This was of particular interest to Janette, a teacher herself. Over the following days, they got to know Graham and his family, and a firm friendship developed; hence, a link now exists between churchwardens of our two churches. On the Friday evening, another highlight was the Men's and Women's groups' barbecue on Hayling beach. Despite the wet and chilly weather, this went ahead cheerfully in the lee of the beach huts in true English fashion and we were able to equip our African visitors with fleeces and anoraks for the occasion. Fr. David had invited David Willetts MP in view of his support for Janette and Nana's visa applications, and they were pleased to have an opportunity to chat with him (though somewhat bemused that a prominent MP should arrive on a bicycle).

On the first Saturday, fortunately warm and sunny, we took the visitors for a tour of the nearby countryside, taking in a traditional pub lunch, and culminating in a visit to Petworth House. Nana, a farmer (chickens, maize, pineapples, bananas), was impressed by the South Downs landscape and very interested in the agriculture. On a later occasion, Colin Hedley

took him to meet a farmer friend and they had a guided tour of the farm. There were several other opportunities to see the countryside at close hand during the early morning walks which Nana and Mike got into the habit of taking at 6.00am each day (people in Ghana tend to rise early, while it's cool – Janette attends Holy Communion at 5.30am each day, and Nana is often up and working around 4.30am): we walked all round Havant, including the industrial estates and the Langstone shoreline; we walked along the shore to Emsworth and back via Warblington church; we walked to Hayling oyster beds to watch the birds; we walked up to Kingley Vale from Stoughton; and we walked through Stanstead Forest, where we saw deer, rabbits, and a fox (Nana enquired whether there were any dangerous animals, as there are in Ghana).

On their first Sunday, Nana and Janette were made to feel very welcome at morning service. On behalf of St. John the Divine, they gave an address and presented St. Faith's with a handsome chasuble and a traditional African stole. Afterwards, they had opportunities to meet members of our congregation and choir. A few days later, they accepted an invitation to visit the church tower to watch our bell-ringers practising - something quite unfamiliar in Ghana. The second Sunday, they joined us for Fr. David's farewell morning service and evensong, and the get-together at the rectory. They were well-placed to share something of the congregation's feelings not only as they had developed a rapport with David and Susan, but also because St. John the Divine had been through a similar experience with the departure of Fr. Felix eighteen months before.

Other highlights of their visit included a day-trip to London to 'see the sights' (the London Eye, open-topped bus tour, and river trip), which they enjoyed immensely. By strange coincidence, we arrived at St. Paul's Cathedral just in time to attend Holy Communion. Photography is strictly prohibited in that magnificent church, but after the service the presiding priest invited us to photograph Nana and Janette with him in front of the main altar, much to their (and our) delight. Subsequent outings, with us or other members of St. Faith's, included: Chichester Cathedral, where again we happened to arrive just in time to take

Communion; Winchester Cathedral and St. Cross; Arundel Castle; Singleton Weald & Downland open-air museum; St. Hubert's chapel, Idsworth; Bosham; Emsworth; Portsmouth Cathedral; Portsmouth Historic Ships; Gunwharf Quays and the Spinnaker Tower; and, above all, visits to people's homes.

Given the discrepancies in material prosperity between Britain and Ghana, it seemed important that our visitors shouldn't go away with a false impression of life here. So the itinerary included a couple of opportunities for them to learn something about the lives of people in less advantaged circumstances. One was a visit to St. Clare's, Warren Park, where Rev. Mike Honour and one of the churchwardens, plus the local



Baptist Minister, took us on a walking tour of the parish, including a visit to the Sure Start Centre, followed by tea at the churchwarden's house. The other was a visit to St. Luke's CofE Secondary School, Portsmouth, serving an area of high deprivation in the city, where we attended morning assembly, had a tour of the school, met staff, and visited classes. Both of these visits were of great interest to Janette and Nana.

Nana and Janette were overjoyed by the welcome they received during their visit – they repeatedly told us, as have their Ghanaian relatives and Fr. Seth in 'phone conversations. Their visit was a really happy experience which has done much to strengthen and deepen the bond between our two churches despite the differences of language and culture. This is especially important at a time when the world-wide Anglican Church is threatened with schism. Before they left we formed a small IDWAL Group to explore ways of maintaining and developing our link, the first

meeting of which Nana and Janette attended. It was a very constructive meeting, and they intend to establish a corresponding group at St. John the Divine. Let us continue to pray for each other and to support one another in our shared faith.

Mike & Ann Fluck

