

Jesus Christ vs. a god made of mud & clay

Dear Friends,

The Akrampa Mission is going on 20+ years of bringing the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to the people of Akrampa and its community. We're entering the year 2019 with the same vision (bringing the salvation message to a people who need to know of the saving love of the Lord Jesus Christ) and mission (helping them to see their lives holistically) as a significant people with God-given resources and opportunities for meaningful existence.

To some, such an agenda might seem so simple, tending to be repetitive. On the ground however, over the years I can say that this is never the case, as we find generations of children who have passed through the school that First Lutheran Church built, providing the means by which their future destiny is shaped by the education that they have received and are receiving.

The 20+ years of the mission can be counted differently depending on what milestone you choose as its beginning. 1994 brought me home from Ohio with the vision from Pastor Jimmy and Pastor Woody to begin the mission, making it 25 years. 1995 was the actual beginning of the mission work, making it 24 years. And in 1996 Pastor Jimmy came to Ghana for the inaugural celebration of the mission, making it 23 years. Anyway you count, First Lutheran's mission with Akrampa is a wonderful success. That being said, there have been challenges over the years.

For me, evangelizing to a community that for many years, until the middle of the twentieth century, had been living in fear of and under the influence of the man-made god (made from mud & clay) that they were devoted to, has been an adventure. Teaching them about Jesus Christ vs. the 'gods' of their ancestors has been a blessing as much to me as them. Though I have never lived among them - all these 20+ years - our relationship has been as though I lived among them.

Before the school was built we helped the villagers to understand that they have God-given innate gifts and talents that could be applied to free themselves from their physical and material bondage to their circumstance. And we explained to them that their spirits did not need to be 'imprisoned' by the unseen malevolent spirits that they believed were controlling their destiny and lives. They needed to be helped to turn around cultural practices and beliefs in the right direction, the Christian direction, so their lives would be harnessed in a positive manner both for individual and community benefits. They needed to see that Christ came that they might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). They were a people who could be described as the 'people that lived in darkness upon whom light has shined' (Isaiah 9:2).

In the attempts to bring about this 'liberation', alongside the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, we introduced into their lives the need to acquire skills that will position them to improve their life's expectations. In previous letters to you, I have described the people as mainly agrarian by inclination. This means they lived off the produce of the land, cultivating food crops (like vegetables) and a few cash crops (small-scale production of pineapples). Because they

lived close to the small forest that has been declared a reservation by the government, they sometimes will go in and 'raid' the forest for dry wood to harvest as firewood to sell at the local market. I described it as raid because there is prohibition on doing anything in the reserve that attracts a penalty (imprisonment or a fine by the local magistrate court). Early in 2000, I had to stand in to bail the chief, who was arrested because some of the people became fugitives of the law. The case was mercifully dropped by my intervention.

We helped to bring health personnel into the village because of the incidences of various diseases that troubled them. Those were the days before clean pipe-borne water was provided by FLC. Then, waterborne diseases like elephantiasis and infectious diseases like tuberculosis were very endemic. In one week alone I would make not less than four trips between Saltpond, Akrampa, and the District capital called Winneba, carrying the infected to the government hospital for treatment and back to Akrampa, before going home to Saltpond. That's part of why so much mileage was put on the Jeep.

I really had to literally fight to keep those people affected by (especially) tuberculosis from becoming victims of exploitation by the local fetish people who labelled the sick as violators of the god of the village. Such victims were subjected to making sacrifices of goats and sheep and several fowls, to appease the gods, which they claimed would 'forgive' and cure them of the infections. Eventually, I was challenged to have the people cured by modern scientific medical practices, or face restrictions on my activities in the village. The health personnel in Winneba were so cooperative that it led to the full recovery of the two most severely affected by the disease. It was a fundamental breakthrough that gave us the credibility we needed to be accepted in the community.

Since that experience and the acceptance of intervention that modern medical practices have made, and the successes thereof, the people of Akrampa are no longer living in fear. They are finding themselves freed from living in ignorance. In other words, modernity, technology and medicine, have changed the face of Akrampa and its community, providing them with all kinds of opportunities and resources.

While fighting ignorance and the vicious hold of living in fear of the local god, we had to look at what would replace dependence on the land alone, and better use of the resources available. We thus brought in 'skills development personnel' to teach them to acquire skills and other utilities so that they can experience economic independence. Until then, the women would work as carriers of wares like bread, soaps, other handicraft, selling them in the local market. After the training, and a joy of the realization of the objective, many of them began making those items and sold them at the markets, thus bringing about economic emancipation. It will be remembered, that for some two years - 2007 to 2008 - we would send some of the jewelry, made from palm kernels which were sold (in the USA) and the money that was remitted was given to the women who produced them. The palm kernel jewelry produced were arm bands, necklaces, etc.

WE is a powerful word in this letter. WE means Jesus first, & the First Lutheran congregation, friends of the mission in other cities, me, and my assistant Mercy. WE have all worked together to make this happen. This retelling of the story of Akrampa is a reminder to us of the grace of our God. Thank you.

Blessings, Pastor Ben