

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SAVANNAH EDUCATION TRUST

TWO GUINEA FOWL AND ELEVEN EGGS



The savannah of northern Ghana.

© Ghana: A Portrait by Max Milligan



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FOREWORD

In the midst of savannah grassland, on the banks of the Black Volta river in north-west Ghana, lies a village called Bagri. It is a remote place, accessed along a single dirt track that snakes past baobab and acacia trees. The villagers, all fishermen and farmers, live in scattered mud dwellings. Their lives are regulated by the farming seasons and, even when the harvest is plentiful, there is much hunger and poverty. Until recently, nearly one quarter of the children died before their fifth birthday.

Yet neither the beauty of the landscape nor the desperate poverty fully defines Bagri. The village and the people continue to make a deep impression on us, many years after they first entered our hearts. In 2005 we sat outside the simple church building in Bagri and made a promise to the people and to their pastor, Charles Karbo. We promised that, as God helped us, we would try to be their mouthpiece in the United Kingdom – expressing their desire for a school for their children.

This is their story. It is an account of how a Christian school was built in their village, and the way in which the work of Savannah Education Trust has since expanded into other villages. We issue this account on the 10th anniversary of the launch of the charity in 2005. And we do so with a deep sense of gratitude to God as we look back over the past decade.

We would like to thank the Adfield Group who have kindly sponsored this publication and have therefore allowed us to provide it as a gift to our kind supporters at no charge to the charity. We are very grateful to them and to all of our supporters in the UK who have been so steadfast in their support over ten years.

The Trustees
July 2015

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The village of Bagri, northern Ghana: "a cluster of mud buildings in a village of fishermen."



TWO GUINEA FOWL AND ELEVEN EGGS: BEGINNINGS (2000-2004)

Two guinea fowl and eleven eggs: beginnings (2000-2004)

It started under the branches of a neem tree in the village of Bagri on the savannah plains of northern Ghana. We were three white visitors in a remote village. It was August 2003 and the silty Black Volta river had burst its banks. We stopped to wander around the cluster of mud buildings in this village of fisherman. The local chief, reclined languidly in a chair, warmly welcomed us. And, after a brief conversation, he asked us a question. "There is no school in our village – will you help us?"

As we drove away from the village and toward our base in the local market town of Lawra, storm clouds darkened. Forked lightning flickered in the distance. As dusk arrived and we returned to our guesthouse, the power failed. Sitting in the darkness, with torrential rain falling, we talked animatedly about the possibility of a school. It all seemed impossible – a dream even. But a seed had been planted: a seed planted not just by a tribal chief but by an overruling providence.

To explain how the three visitors – Howard Hickman, Paul and Karen Ramsbottom – came to be in a remote part of northern Ghana, the story needs to be traced back to the turn of the millennium. In that year, Howard invited Paul to join him on a visit to Ghana. The purpose of the visit was to spend time with Pastor James Kori, a pastor near Accra, the capital of the country. He had for several years been in contact with Howard's church and was working with them in distributing Bibles and other Christian literature. Pastor James recalls receiving the letter from Howard, outlining our intention to visit: "By this statement, Savannah Education Trust was conceived – waiting for the day of delivery to come."

As well as spending time with Pastor James at his church (Lighthouse Baptist in Nungua), we were also taken for the first time on the long and exhausting journey to his homeland in the extreme north of the country. The diary for Friday 14 July 2000 reads, "Pastor James had promised that the journey to his hometown of Lawra would be longer than our return trip to London. In the event it was tougher than we could have imagined. Lawra is in the northwest corner of Ghana, on the border of Burkina Faso and on the fringes of civilisation."

The journey would later become a familiar one: through rainforest in the central belt of the country, crossing the Black Volta at Bamboi and, across mud tracks, into the sparsely populated but evocative savannah landscape of the north.

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We learnt at least three things from that memorable first visit to Ghana's Upper West Region. First, it was very inaccessible. The journey in a small Peugeot taxi, much of it across bumpy dirt tracks, took 24 hours. The diary notes that on the journey northwards, "around 4am we pulled over to sleep for an hour, surrounded by the noises of insects in the forest. It seemed as though Lawra was running further away from us." Secondly, we were overwhelmed by the poverty of the people. Among the villages that we visited was Bagri, about 7 miles from Lawra along a mud track. The people in the village seemed to have nothing. Some did not even have clothes. The houses were scattered mud structures and most of the people drank water straight from the river. Diseases such as river blindness and malaria were common. We learnt that the average life expectancy for the area was about 45 and there was almost total illiteracy. Thirdly, it was an area with a very rich culture and exhibiting a great warmth to strangers like us, who were visiting. A number of friendships were started on the trip in 2000 which would deepen over the years, and above all with Pastor James Kori and his fellow labourer, Pastor Charles Karbo, whose ministry was largely in the remote villages. We became aware of the tremendous concern that both James and Charles had for their people, and not least the education needs of the village children.

It is always hard to return from northern Ghana to everyday life in the UK. After our visit in 2003 this was exacerbated by some nagging thoughts. Was it possible to help the remote village of Bagri with a school? It was a compelling thought, but was it realistic, or indeed even possible? What was the will of God in this? Just before Christmas in 2003, Howard wrote to Ghana, without any type of commitment, to ask about the likely costs of a new school.

Then, before any response was received, Paul wrote a long email to Howard on 28 January 2004. In it he suggested creating a separate charity to build a school rather than working through an existing church or fund. "There is," he added, "the potential for this project to grow... Most [charities], even the huge ones like Barnardos and Samaritans, started with an individual or a small group".



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Stephen, Howard and Paul with the children of Bagri village.



Women carry water to the site of the Bagri School.



The school starts to rise.

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“Clearly,” he added, “the potential for education in Upper West Region, backed by local Baptist churches, is huge. The costs just for Bagri include the capital costs of set-up ... but also ideally some ongoing funding, e.g. training for Baptist teachers and scholarships for students to continue education. And, of course, there are dozens of other villages in Upper West Region who would benefit from a similar project.”

“In short,” he concluded, “we could see the Bagri project as a pilot which, if successful (and the logistics are daunting), could be copied in other villages.”

Howard had been thinking broadly along the same lines. But he also urged a period of prayer and reflection. “I think we all need a pause to clarify in our minds exactly what is motivating us. We are looking at taking on a very large commitment so need a good basis for the determination and sacrifice that will be required.”

Knowing that a response would take many weeks, a letter was dispatched to Pastor Charles Karbo on 11 February 2004. It asked him his thoughts and also posed a number of questions about the practicalities involved in starting a school.

Increasingly there was a conviction in our minds that the desperate situation of the children in Bagri village could not be ignored. We had walked through their village; we had seen their need; we felt we could not simply ‘pass by on the other side.’

In a very real sense, these villagers were our neighbours – and we are exhorted to love our neighbours as ourselves. Having been presented with a unique opportunity to help, we felt it was only right, in dependence on the Lord, to do what we could for their relief.

And so it was that we began to press ahead with plans to establish a charity and to research the best models for schools in the African savannah.

Tentative names suggested for the fledgling charity included the Ghana Education Fund, the Baobab Trust and the Savannah School Trust. “Savannah Education Trust sounds fine,” wrote Howard in February. “It’s the best of all the suggestions so far.” The first formal meeting (simply Howard, Paul and their wives, Liz and Karen) took place on 18 February 2004 at Howard’s house in Earlswood.

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Across the Spring intensive research was undertaken. Conversations and meetings were held with the UK government's Department for International Development, with a number of other charities (e.g. Action Aid) and with academics.

We were faced with some very practical problems. How, for example, to communicate when letters took several weeks to arrive? And how to transfer funds to such a remote part of Ghana?

To some excitement, a letter was received from Pastor Charles Karbo on 14 May. It confirmed that he had already been in contact with the District Education Office in Lawra about the possibility of setting up a pre-school nursery in Bagri. Not for the last time, we were thinking along exactly the same lines. And a pattern was beginning to be established: the leadership for charity came on the ground in Ghana from Pastor Charles. As well as being a Baptist minister, he was the son of the Paramount Chief of Lawra and had grown up in the Palace. His working life had been spent in education. It was an ideal combination for the work on which we were about to embark.

In this he was helped by others, including Samuel Dapilaa (an accountant and a relative), Alfred Sogsuo (a deacon of the Baptist church) and, from the south, by the gracious counsel of Pastor James Kori. The role of those in the UK was to provide financial support and, alongside Pastor Charles and his team, to set a strategic framework.

In Ghana there was considerable excitement about the thought of a new school. Pastor James wrote: "Last year when I went up north for Bible distribution the people asked of you and reminded me about their request for the school. I told them we all should pray and wait to see what the Lord will do concerning this need. So, to the people of Bagri, Pastor Charles and I, this is good news from you – it is an answered prayer. We shall continue to pray for you and for this school to be realised in due course for the glory of God."

Across the summer months of 2004 things progressed quickly. In June, a Trust Deed for the charity was signed at Paul's flat in Haywards Heath. Later that month the first modest funds were paid into a bank account. Formal notification of charitable status came from the Charity Commission in July. A logo was professionally designed, pro-bono, by a friend's company: Adfield.

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Left to right, Sammy Dapilaa, Stephen Ramsbottom, Pastor James Kori, Paul Ramsbottom, Pastor Charles Karbo, Howard Hickman and Alfred Sogsuo.



Pastor James Kori.



Pastor Charles Karbo.

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At the same time daily discussions were taking place about how a charity might work. While the Ghanaian economy had experienced growth, poverty in the northern regions was actually getting worse in the mid 2000s. The Ghanaian government had committed to providing infant and primary education for every child by 2015 but even in 2004 it was clear that this target was unlikely to be met.

A discussion document produced in July outlined a plan for a school building and for training teachers. There was no certainty that government would pick up the running costs of a school, and we were concerned about its sustainability. And it was not until 2005 that it became clear that a feeding programme for the schools would also be necessary – although the important principle of reaching every child, no matter how poor, was emphasised right from the start.

Indeed the key principles behind Savannah were laid down in that discussion document – and remain unchanged across a decade. “Education,” it stated, “is important for the children of the savannah. Without education it becomes hard to make any living other than subsistence farming. A basic education has an impact on virtually every area of a child’s life: from the ability to make informed choices on basic healthcare to the opportunity to read the Scriptures.”

The key partners were identified: the Baptist church, government, tribal leadership and local communities. The intention was to work with them to help them build their own school. The village needed to feel an ownership of the school. Financial controls were also clearly essential. While keeping costs to a minimum, the intention from the start was to manage the charity and its communications in a professional manner.

It was virtually impossible to predict building costs accurately. Based on the knowledge of the chapel building in Bagri a tentative sum of £15,500 was suggested. By May 2005 estimates had risen to between £30,000 and £40,000. And by October 2005 Howard wrote: “it’s currently looking like £40,000 which is the very top end of our original estimates” (albeit including £5,000 for teachers accommodation). The eventual cost of Bagri School was £49,800 with an additional £88,300 for the nursery, toilet block and teachers accommodation. Had these figures been known at the outset they might perhaps have dimmed our initial enthusiasm.

As it was, planning continued apace across the latter half of 2004. In August, Stephen Rambottom was invited to join the Board, giving, among other benefits, a teacher’s perspective. He became the third founder trustee. In anticipation of a formal,

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public launch in 2005 a brochure was produced and a website created. A fax machine was purchased and dispatched to Ghana in the hope of easing communication difficulties. A laptop for the UK administration was donated by one of our employers at the time.

Then, during February 2005, the trustees again visited. On this and each subsequent visit the costs were covered by a donation specifically for the purpose: a thoughtful act of kindness. The visit was essentially to reassure us on a number of points: on financial controls; on reporting mechanisms; on the ownership of the land for the school; and on the government’s future role in running and funding the school.

At that time the Ghana Education Service offices for the district were located on the edge of Lawra – up a long staircase to a slightly decrepit colonial-era building. The government officials, who we met in a large, dark room – full of paper – asked us many questions. But we soon became aware that they had already been satisfied by their conversations with Pastor Charles Karbo and that they would be willing to back our school initiative. From September 2005 they pledged to fund the cost of teachers. There seemed genuine excitement at the prospect of a new charity working with the Baptist churches in their area.

With the permission of the Education Office we spent a day visiting schools in the area. We were struck by the relative lack of resources and by a lack of teachers, with untrained helpers often substituting. But most of our time was spent in Bagri itself, renewing our affection for this picturesque village sitting on the border of Ghana and Burkina Faso.

A particularly important afternoon was spent under some huge mango trees, where we had been called to a meeting of the village community. Six hundred pairs of eyes fixed on us. In the dust, children sat crowded together on the floor, transfixed by the spectacle. Following formal exchange of handshakes with the elders of the village, the tribal chief and landlord spoke in welcome. The elderly chief wore a woollen hat and as he spoke he revealed his teeth, worn into pointed stumps. But there was a simple dignity in his words, “We welcome you to our village. For too long we have been in darkness, we hope that you will bring light.”

Pastor Charles and Pastor James both spoke eloquently. Pastor James told the villagers: “This school is your burden. You have asked these people to help you carry it, and they have agreed. But it remains your burden.”

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One of the aims of our visit to Ghana was to see evidence of community support for the school. Once James had sat down, this was demonstrated in vivid form. The gyils (Lobi xylophones) began playing, and the women of the village began dancing in the middle of the circle formed by the crowd. This was a dance to celebrate the soon-to-be-built school: jubilant and dynamic movements.

Following short speeches from each of us, there followed an open forum: a form of basic village democracy in action. A Muslim man stood and welcomed us to the village, saying he was glad to see us. A literate member of the Baptist church, urged the villagers to support the school by not holding their children back for farming – they should not “wait for the spoon to come to their mouths.” This was met with loud applause: “they have heeded his remonstrations,” said the interpreter.

More vigorous dancing, and then Pastor Charles turned to us, waving a small slip of paper. On it was written two lines:

“2 guinea fowl
11 eggs.”

“This is only a small piece of paper”, Charles said. “And the villagers have said, though they would like to give you the whole of Ghana in appreciation, they wish to give you a small token. They have collected together what is convenient and would like you to have two guinea fowl and eleven eggs.”

After the meeting the community leaders showed us a plot of land that had been allocated for a school. All land in the semi-feudal village system of northern Ghana is owned by a single man, the tendaana. He had been generous: situated on the approach road from Lawra, near the chapel, this was a central location for the scattered villagers. The offer was essentially a blank cheque: as much land as was needed for a school, for its associated buildings and for farmland. Although we were told that we could freely choose another site, we declined. Not only was this patch of savannah eminently suitable, it seemed appropriate that the local community should choose its site. And indeed the 22 acre site has proved itself a wonderful location.



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At the end of the visit we sat down outside the simple church building in the village of Bagri with the members of that church. It was early evening, the savannah was alive with the noise of insects and the heat of the day had disappeared. On that evening we made a promise: that we would attempt to be the mouthpiece of the people in speaking to supporters in the UK. And, in turn, the church in Bagri made a promise to us: that they would pray, and pray in particular that God would move people in the UK and elsewhere to support the work.



"The simple church building in the village of Bagri."

THE SUBJECT OF MANY HOPES AND PRAYERS: OUR FIRST SCHOOL (2005-2007)

The subject of many hopes and prayers: our first school (2005-2007)

The public launch in Spring 2005, following our return from Ghana, laid down a pattern that would continue during the following years. The intention was to lay out, carefully and clearly, the needs of the village of Bagri – but not to undertake formal ‘fundraising’ or a direct pitch for funds. A friend kindly contributed significant time to create a short DVD about the area and the work, using footage shot by Steve Ramsbottom during the visit. This was the first of three DVDs produced – the others created in 2007 and 2012.

Conscious of the difficulty of communicating the significant needs of such a different part of the world we attempted to use personal stories. In the first brochure this was John, a four year old boy. Subsequent publications and DVDs told the tales of other children. Mperismer was a Bagri boy whose favourite food was baobab leaf soup. Another child from Bagri, 9 year old Fati, was the daughter of Muslim parents whose father said, “we are glad the Christians have come to our village because now we will have a school.” Our increasing concern for disabled children was illustrated by two children: Daafah is a deaf boy who has been funded to attend a specialist school in the regional capital; Beri is a severely disabled child living next door to one of our schools.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, presentations were given at public meetings, including in Bedfordshire, Surrey, Kent, Oxfordshire and Sussex. From the start we emphasised that ongoing, regular support was particularly helpful. We were thankful and grateful to receive a positive and generous response. A letter received in August 2005 was typical. “We were very moved by the presentation at Maidstone recently. For a long time now we have felt that we should be doing more for the poor people on this earth. But ‘where?’ has been our question. And how will we know that the people in need will get the help and benefit they so much require? Well I think we now know where, and are confident that what we give will reach them.”

We were encouraged by some unexpected and extremely generous donations during 2005 and 2006: £3,000 from a legacy, £5,000 from an individual, £7,500 from the Providence Chapel Trust and £8,000 from a foreign businessman who had heard of the work in a conversation with a trustee. Supporters were also kind enough to pledge funds on a regular basis. By the end of our first full financial year (April 2006),

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65 direct debits had been set up, rising to 119 by April 2009 and over 150 by April 2014. By the end of the decade this was contributing some £50,000 each year.

Supporters were kept in contact with the work through newsletters, a Christmas circular and a website. “I read your letter while eating my meal,” wrote one supporter, “and felt ashamed to think how much I have compared with the people in Bagri.”

By Spring 2006 the minutes of the trustees noted thankfulness “for a remarkable first twelve months.” As funds in the UK were being provided, so in Ghana work was continuing apace. In Bagri village, community meetings were held across 2005 to prepare and plan for the work. From September 2005 – for the first time in the long history of the villages – children began gathering each day for school, initially using the church building.

In November 2005 the construction work started in earnest. The building was constructed using local techniques with the mud core of the structure built by the villagers. They were divided by Pastor Charles into three work groups starting at dawn each morning. Carpenters, plasterers and other skilled labourers from the local town of Lawra were used to complete the project.

The intention had always been to build at a pace dictated by the funds available – classroom by classroom. Pastor Charles remembers receiving a call from the UK “that there was small money that could help put up a classroom for the mean time, so I told the team that while we work on building the classroom the school can begin in the Church. We then had a number of meetings with the community and arranged how we would work when money come in. Later, Howard informed me money was transferred into the account, we checked and within the month it reflected in our account. I then called and informed Howard the transfer arrived. He told me there was enough money to build and roof three classrooms so we could work on that. We barely started the foundation of the three classrooms block and during one of telephone calls Howard told me we could go ahead and build all the six classrooms including offices for the head teacher and staff, for the Trust has received enough blessings.”

Communication with northern Ghana was still difficult, but we began to get indications of the telecommunications revolution occurring in the country. In March 2005 we received our first email from Pastor Charles (sent from the regional capital,

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Clearing the land and laying the foundations.



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“The school exceeded any expectations.”



THE SUBJECT OF MANY HOPES AND PRAYERS: OUR FIRST SCHOOL (2005-2007)

Wa). In Autumn 2005 he purchased a mobile phone and the signal, initially very poor, improved gradually over the years. Indeed this transformation in communications – allowing Ghanaians to escape reliance on government infrastructure – was an important factor in allowing the charity to continue. In 2003, there were only 800,000 mobile phones in Ghana; a decade later there were 28 million. By then, it was also possible for regular reports to be sent to the UK by email from a home computer in Lawra.

But in 2006 contact with northern Ghana remained sporadic. During the Spring of that year we received a mailing following a visit by Pastor James with a photo of a simple mud building which had been taken using disposable cameras that we had provided for the purpose. It was an image that we retained in our mind until we visited for the opening in October 2006.

In a never to be forgotten visit we travelled down to northern Ghana from Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. As soon as we arrived in the area we drove, with growing anticipation, to see the school. Early Autumn is harvest time in northern Ghana and the dirt tracks cut through a lush landscape: tall grass with acacia and fruit-laded baobab trees. In the fading light we caught a glimpse of a blue building through the savannah’s greenery. Soon we had turned off the mud track and up to the gates of Bagri Baptist Primary School. It was humbling to stand at last at the gates of the completed school: the subject of many hopes and prayers.

The school exceeded any expectations. It was formally opened on 18 October 2006 in a lively and colourful ceremony, with large crowds gathered in the shadows provided by the eaves of the building. The representative of the District Commissioner gave one of numerous speeches and welcomed Savannah as “a strategic partner who shares our visions and dreams.” But the day belonged to the children and not the formal speech-makers. Some had travelled considerable distances and crossed the Black Volta to be able to attend school. All were smartly dressed in blue uniforms. As we saw them march in through the white school gates, it was hard to imagine that a small time earlier this had been a barren plot of earth.

With so much responsibility placed on him, Pastor Charles was relieved as well as thankful. “I heaved a sigh of relief when the visiting team said they were overwhelmed and satisfied with the work, and that they had seen more than what they expected – and wanted it extended to other places.” We learnt later that the school

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nearly didn't open on time. For some reason the request to open the school had not been forwarded from the district education office to the regional office in Wa. Facing a difficult meeting (the approval deadline having passed some time before), Pastor Charles travelled down to Wa stopping at various congregations en route and asking them to pray as he met the officials. Charles was amazed and thankful when the regional director concluded that it was too good an opportunity to miss. He went against all protocol and retrospectively opened the school – a most unusual action as subsequent events have proved.

One of the remarkable things about Pastor Charles Karbo's activities during the early period of the charity's history was that, as Lawra's Regent, he was distracted by difficult disputes over the paramount chieftancy in Lawra. This was thankfully resolved in 2007. When the new chief was inaugurated, the Ghanaian Times noted that the ceremony "attracted one of the biggest crowds in recent times." The chief, enstooled (to use the Ghanaian expression) as Naa Puowelle Karbo III, paid warm tribute to Pastor Charles for "holding the fort and ensuring peace."

Building work continued at Bagri during 2007. In January, land behind the school was cleared and the nursery was constructed across the course of the year. This helped the older children to concentrate on their studies without having to look after their younger siblings. In the first year, 55 children attended.

And then, in late summer, disaster struck. Heavy floods affected the northern part of the country during a critical period just before harvest. Homes, crops and livestock were washed away. The Red Cross estimated that 50% of crops across much of northern Ghana were destroyed or left to rot in the fields. On 12 September 2007 the Ghanaian government declared the three northern regions as a Disaster Zone. "Our people know what it is to suffer," Pastor Charles said.

Following conversations with those in Ghana, it was agreed to extend the school feeding programme - sending children home with additional food. "We feel strongly," we told supporters in December, "that while we have power to act, we cannot let people die from malnutrition or related diseases within walking distance of the school." The expanded feeding programme, generously supported by specific donations, continued through until July 2008.

The colourful accommodation for teachers was completed by Autumn 2008. The intention was to create housing in Bagri as an incentive for teachers to work in the



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Reaching the villages needs a robust vehicle.



The Naa at the colourful opening ceremony at Gberi School.

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A child outside our first nursery in Bagri.



Children crossing the Black Volta to get to school.



Naa Puowele Karbo III, Paramount Chief of Lawra.



Happy faces.

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village. It was in many ways, the least successful of our initiatives – with teachers reluctant to move from the local market town to a village without electricity. But it also pointed the way to the next phase of our activity in that it was the first time that breeze blocks rather than the more traditional methods had been used. This was a technique that would be used on each of our subsequent schools.

Consolidation and expansion: more villages, more schools (2008-14)

Thoughts had increasingly turned to the needs of children in other villages. Partly in anticipation of an expansion of the work, a vehicle (a Nissan double cab pick-up) was purchased in 2008. Much of the funding was provided by grant-making trusts.

We received further encouragement in July 2008 when Savannah was invited to present its needs to a group of businessmen who had gathered at Coutts Bank in London as part of a new initiative called Cross Pollinate. At the end of the evening £18,000 was pledged toward a new school. The intention was that the next school would be built in the village of Pavuu, five miles south east of Lawra. Like Bagri, this village had an existing Baptist chapel. We described the village when announcing our intentions to supporters in the Spring 2009 newsletter: “a small village (albeit slightly larger than Bagri) consisting almost entirely of farmers. Unlike Bagri, which is by the main Black Volta river, there is little danger of flooding from the nearby Kunyukuo tributary, which is often dry. But the soil is not fertile, rains are seasonal and inconsistent, and farming is very hard.”

Throughout much of 2008 and 2009 there were attempts to get Pastor Charles Karbo (accompanied by Samuel Dapilaa) to the UK to discuss the expansion of the programme. Requests for a visa were turned down, however – and the unsuccessful appeal was eventually heard (in March 2010) at the Immigration Tribunal in London.

The need for face-to-face meetings to discuss the expansion of the programme was given added impetus by a remarkable pledge, received in September 2009 from a family in Sussex, who were previously unknown to us. The family had heard a talk at Lindfield Village Hall and, following conversations with Trustees, kindly agreed to cover the initial and ongoing costs of a further school.

CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION: MORE VILLAGES, MORE SCHOOLS (2008-14)

The trustees travelled to Accra in October, holding a series of fruitful and intense meetings over two days in Pastor James Kori’s house and the neighbouring white-washed chapel building. It was agreed to start a school not just in Pavuu but in the village of Gberi, with formal registration taking place at the same time.

The discussions were also useful in formalising the administrative framework for the work in Ghana. Up until 2009 a small allowance had been paid to those running the Savannah programmes. From 2010 employment was put on a formal footing. Pastor Charles Karbo was appointed as Programme Manager and Alfred Sugsuo as Assistant and Financial Officer. Pastor James Kori, who had been the first link in the story of Savannah, received a small payment as a special advisor and link between southern and northern Ghana. Sammy Dapilaa similarly was appointed to provide occasional technical advice on issues relating to accountancy and educational policy. Later two additional helpers were added to the payroll: Thomas Nangtege and Adams Sogsou.

The new model allowed Charles and Alfred to devote their energies to the work of Savannah. From a UK perspective an important benefit was to allow more detailed and regular reporting of activities and the related finances. In the UK, the growing administration was also put on a more formal basis in 2010 when Jon Hickman kindly took on much of the general administration (including taking on the bookkeeping).

During 2010, building continued apace in the two new villages along similar lines to the Bagri model, albeit using blocks and starting with the drilling of boreholes (both for clean water and to aid construction work). The layout of Gberi – in a ‘u’ shape block – exactly reflected Bagri. Pavuu, in contrast, was built in a single line. The work was complicated (as with the toilet block at Bagri) by a national cement shortage which affected Ghana in 2009-10. The shortage was particularly acute in the northern regions. But by early 2011 the first stage of building work on the main school building block was finished in both villages. Each of the new schools were painted in the striking two-tone blue that had become synonymous with the work of Savannah Education Trust. The timetable at all sites tends to follow a similar order: main school building (including borehole) followed by a nursery, kitchen, toilet block and finally Junior High School.

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Clean water from the borehole.



Playing in front of Pavuu School.



A meal for each child, each day.

CONSOLIDATION AND EXPANSION: MORE VILLAGES, MORE SCHOOLS (2008-14)

Lessons were learnt from the original school building at Bagri. And the need for careful budgeting for maintenance was emphasised during May 2010. A fierce storm, whipping across the savannah, caused serious damage to the roof of one of Bagri's classrooms blocks. Partly in response to this, trustees agreed the following month to create a dedicated maintenance fund of £25,000 for each school. James Rosier, a quantity surveyor, visited in September 2012 and January 2013 to provide expert advice on maintenance.

Bagri School was proving an inspiration in more positive ways too – both to our own new schools and beyond. On 27 July 2010 the school was visited by the regional chief, Naa Puowele Karbo III. He declared it “a model school and an example to others”. A visitor from another NGO working in northern Ghana was also impressed. “I think that it was all the more impressive because I had seen the reality of education in the area ... the Bagri school gives a fantastic insight into what can be achieved.”

The school at Bagri was built to accept children up to the age of 11. During 2011, it was agreed to build a new block – a Junior High School – to allow the children to stay at the school until the age of 14 (when Ghana's national exams are taken). The expansion was again funded by the Sussex family, and was completed in Spring 2012. Each year, as the pupils pass from primary to high school, they receive a copy of the Bible and *Bible Doctrines*, kindly donated by a British church. In 2014, as the first pupils passed their national examinations, they were offered scholarships to continue their studies at the boarding school in Lawra.

Meantime children in both Pavuu and Gberi had been gathering for lessons each day long before the school buildings themselves were complete. The schools were formally commissioned during one full and extraordinary day during a visit by trustees in October 2011: Gberi in the morning and Pavuu in the afternoon.

With no proper road, the approach to Gberi village passes through long grass. Between the straggly green grass we had glimpses of a brilliant blue: the new school. As we arrived we were overwhelmed by a large crowd of women from the village and the harmonious sound of their song as they danced towards us.

Events at the two villages followed a similar format. We sat under a large canopy on armchairs in front of a table thoughtfully draped in a Union Jack flag. In the burning heat, there were 16 or 17 speeches and short performances by the children who looked very neat in their blue uniforms.

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Both occasions were graced by the Paramount Chief of Lawra. He sat under a huge umbrella in his full ceremonial dress including a large medallion from colonial days bearing the engraved head of George V. The government was also well represented with officials from the regional office.

We spoke last, directly before the unveiling of a plaque. It was an opportunity to express many of our heartfelt feelings: thankfulness to God, gratitude to our kind supporters and shared excitement with the children and villagers.

On the return to the UK, acutely conscious of increasing responsibilities, the trustees turned thoughts to the expansion of the Board and in January 2012 invited Joe Sayers to join them. Later that year a formal strategy document was agreed with the team in Ghana, and published for supporters to view on the website.

The expansion of the Board exactly coincided with the signing of an agreement with a Swiss company, u-blox (Howard's employer). This provided long term funds which allowed us to extend our work into a further village – the village of Mettoh. By now the pattern of building was becoming familiar. But that did not undermine the deep emotion felt by trustees when they visited the village in September 2012. We were welcomed to a community meeting by the chief, who spoke with great feeling. "The village has waited many years for this day. We never imagined that we would have a school and yet here it is before our eyes."

Nor did the increasing experience of the team in Ghana negate the challenges. The climate, particularly the scorching crescendo of temperature in March and April and the heavy rains of summer, made the work difficult for the villagers undertaking construction work. There were other problems too. "The day did not end successfully," noted the diary for 22 August 2012. "The place was full of scorpions and one of the labourers had a scorpion sting. Work slowed down because the other labourers were careful while working."

Of all the schools planted by Savannah, Mettoh proved the most challenging in another regard: receiving the necessary approval from the education office in the regional capital in Wa. The initial building work was complete in 2013, and the school had started while construction work was still ongoing. But it was not until 2014 that the formal permission was received from the government – and not without intensive lobbying from Pastor Charles.

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"We never imagined that we would have a school and yet here it is before our eyes."



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Korh School.



Village children gather around the school flagpole.



Luke: one of the teachers trained with a Savannah scholarship.

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The challenges did not dim the enthusiasm of the staff in Ghana. Nor did the plight of the children without education in neighbouring villages diminish as the years rolled past. In 2014 it was agreed that a further school might be constructed in the village of Korh, some ten miles east of Lawra. The funding for the new school building was largely provided by a legacy received in 2013 from the estate of Thomas Dadswell.

A network of schools was emerging in the savannah villages around Lawra. Among other benefits, this allowed useful links between the teaching staff. Regular meetings brought the teachers together to improve standards and morale at each school. A VSO worker in the area in 2013 wrote, “You seem to have found a way to motivate your teachers, which makes a huge difference to the children they are educating.”

In early 2014, for instance, workshops were held – including one for teachers focussed on assessing and reporting, and another specifically for the head teachers. Throughout the ten years, occasional workshops had been held for all teaching staff across the district. In May 2006, for example, the charity funded a workshop for 65 unqualified teachers in Lawra District – the bedrock of the teaching in this area, but often to a poor standard. At the request of local VSO workers a phonics programme was funded during 2008 and 2009.

The main programme for support of teachers remained, however, the provision of scholarships for prospective teachers from the local area. This was provided on the understanding that, once trained, the teachers returned to work in Lawra District. During training, the student teachers helped at our schools. And the first two qualified teachers, Amos and Enoch, joined the staff at Bagri in 2010. “Without this scholarship it would have been hard for me to have a job,” said Amos at the time, “and I would not have the blessing of teaching these children.” A total of five teachers have now been trained, with a larger number currently in training.

The growing number of students at the network of schools offered other possibilities. We were, for the first time, able to undertake a detailed analysis of statistics, particularly attendance and dropout rate, comparing Savannah schools with other schools in the District. And on a number of occasions trustees discussed the benefits of trying to get other organisations into Lawra District to assist the network of schools, albeit noting (as at their meeting in June 2012), “care needed to be taken

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to ensure that there was no distraction from the core strategy or additional workload on employees in Ghana.” During 2014 the first such pilot scheme was launched with an international charity, Worldreader (www.worldreader.org), providing e-books for pupils at Pavuu School and funded, like Mettoh School, by u-blox.

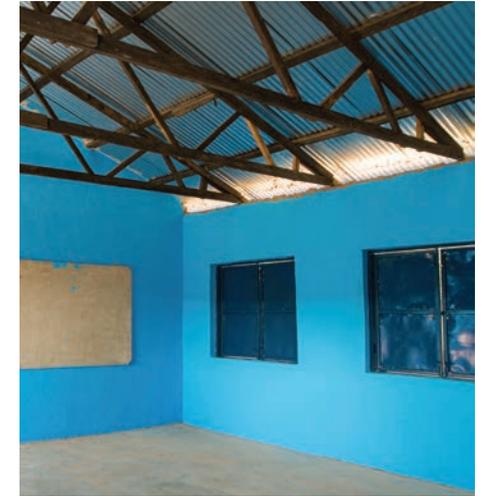
The expansion of the work necessitated further changes to the administration in Ghana too. During meetings in Accra during January 2014 it was agreed to appoint two extra staff: a secretary (Leticia Ziam) and a works foreman (Solomon Kori). The growing staff team moved out of Pastor Charles’ house and into a small office in Lawra. This also provided a modest resource centre for teachers at our schools. Conscious of significant construction work planned for the new village of Korh, as well as the existing schools, a tipper truck was purchased from a dealer in Kumasi at the cost of some £30,000.

The tipper truck helped the building work at Korh to proceed extremely quickly. It was opened in another lively ceremony in October 2014, with the school at Mettoh commissioned later in the same month – the fourth and fifth schools.



The tipper truck.

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All the schools are a striking blue ... in contrast to a green savannah.





Early morning chores.



Chalk face.

CONCLUSION: THE PRIVILEGE OF WITNESSING THESE THINGS

Conclusion: the privilege of witnessing these things

Ghana has witnessed significant change in the last decade. The roots of stable government and democracy, still shallow at Savannah's conception, are now much deeper and were able to survive a contested Presidential election in 2012. The economy in the south was one of the fastest growing in the world over the period, albeit from a very low base. A major oil field – the Jubilee Field – was discovered off the coast of Ghana in 2007. The mobile and digital revolutions have changed communication beyond recognition.

Yet the rapid developments in the south of the country have left the villages in northern Ghana relatively untouched. The people still face age-old problems of desperate poverty. For those involved in the work the most thrilling changes have been to see the profound effect of our schools. It is still sobering to spend time in villages with no education. Here children work long hours with their parents in the fields. The signs of malnourishment are clearly present in wasted arms and legs, swollen stomachs and discoloured hair.

At Savannah schools, the daily meal provided for schoolchildren has all but eradicated malnourishment. Healthy and well-clothed children are enjoying the benefits of a Christian education. The schoolchildren speak simply but with conviction about the difference a school has made to their lives. The prayer of trustees and the team in Ghana is that the education would not only transform these communities in a practical way, but that children would also know the spiritual change that comes through the work of the Holy Spirit. "The Trust," writes Pastor Charles, "has actually brought hope to the people of Lawra District."

In concluding we can only express gratitude for the privilege of witnessing these things and hope that the story is not yet complete. We are grateful to our dear friends in Ghana with whom we have enjoyed such a close relationship. We have been supported by our wives who have stood with us steadfastly – and with considerable sacrifice – every step of the journey. And we extend particular thanks to our many supporters without whom the work simply would not be possible.

Above all we would give glory to God who is fulfilling His purposes in northern Ghana. Across every detail of the story of Savannah are written the words of Psalm 115: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake."

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OUR SCHOOLS



