

SUCCESS in the fight against AIDS in GHANA

AIDS in Africa is a much talked about issue in the US. Tapestry, a Faith Based collaborative in the San Francisco Bay Area has taken the next step and is actively participating in the fight to save lives here and in Africa. The group consisting of churches, AIDS service organizations and the Black Adoptions Agency of Oakland have recently completed a trip to S. Africa and Ghana, West Africa. The purpose of the trip was to establish long-term relationships and establish partnerships with organizations already involved in AIDS work in Ghana. We went to Ghana representing the Congressional Black Caucus to learn how we might help the African and ourselves, as many of the issues we experience in the US are the same or similar in Africa. The active participants lead by Pastor Yvette Flunder of The City of Refuge of San Francisco, were East Bay Church of Religious Science, AIDS Project of the East Bay, Aid for AIDS/Africa, and the Black Adoption, Placement, and Research Center of Oakland.

City of Refuge has been involved in S. Africa partnering with various organizations of the Faith Based community responding to the AIDS epidemic in that country for some years. A group from the City of Refuge went to S. Africa a week in advance of a second group who left from Oakland meeting in Ghana on May 7th to begin a two week tour. The combined group toured an orphanage, clinics, and did public speaking in the schools on TV and radio.

The second group lead by Maurice Graham, Aid for AIDS /Africa founder, helped coordinate the logistics with two non-government organizations in Ghana. West Africa AIDS Foundation and Vital International Foundation. They arranged the contacts made across Ghana. In Accra, Ghana's capital the collaboration has partnered with one of the clinics at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital that houses the AIDS unit in the Fever's clinic. There were people lying on gurneys obviously in pain lacking pain medications. There were babies and adults wasting away from the effect of diarrhea and dehydration caused by HIV infection. We prayed with them and offered encouragement. We plan as a group to support them regularly with medicines and equipment to better serve the clinic, which is essentially a Hospice since there are no regular medications being offered. Most of the patients are too poor to afford medications even if they were available. We also partnered with the Osu Orphanage, which cares for children abandoned by parents for many reasons including HIV infection resulting in their deaths. Some of the babies themselves were HIV positive.

We want to provide on-going financial and food support especially infant formula for the orphanage. We went into a school with our members involved with Prevention Education and a person infected with HIV to discuss treatment issues with the children. We spoke on G TV, a national morning talk show as a panel covering issues of prevention, treatment, and the role of the Faith Based community in support of people living with AIDS.

After leaving the capital we went to the Cape Coast area for a rest and a tour of the legendary slaves castles still standing. They reminded us of what we have as African American gone through via our ancestors to stand at a portal leading to the sea titled "The Gate of No Return" and realize that we have come home with a message of hope and healing. What a powerful moment it was for most of us.

We continue on our tour to the capital city of the Ashanti Region called Kumasi. In and around Kumasi we launched on a public speaking tour that lead us to another radio interview and the taping of three TV shows concerning Prevention Education and Treatment as a panel and we met the King of the Ashanti's, his title is the Ashantihene. The King is a advocate of HIV/AIDS himself and has initiated programs of his own in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. We expressed a desire to partner with him and his efforts in Kumasi to fight HIV. One of the TV station owners that recorded three of the shows in Kumasi was also a Chief of the Ewe Tribe. He pledged to help get the word out in a big way by repeating the shows we taped often. We were well received in Ghana and have gained valuable insight on AIDS in Ghana and how we might help each other. We learned that collaborating with organizations here and aboard is an effective way of dealing with HIV for we bring back many lessons to encourage people here in the states who have experienced risky behavior to get tested and seek treatment if they test positive for HIV. As Maurice Graham has stated " Testing positive is not A DEATH SENTENCE, I have Lived with HIV for 18 years and now use the disease to help others live by sharing what works." We do have the luxury of Treatment beyond infection where many in the world do not. The stigma we believe can be lifted through education and compassion.