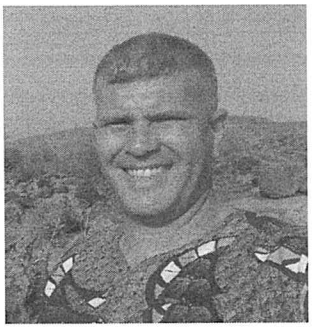
3166

MISSION CONNECTIONS

A program of Presbyterian World Mission • pcusa.org/missionconnections

Spring 2025



Fishing Together

Joshua Heikkila

Dear friends,

Early last year, a personal friend of mine died unexpectedly – an officer in the Ghana Army named Suley, who was in his early fifties. This was not someone I'd gotten to know through any work with the church, but rather a person I befriended in quite different circumstances.

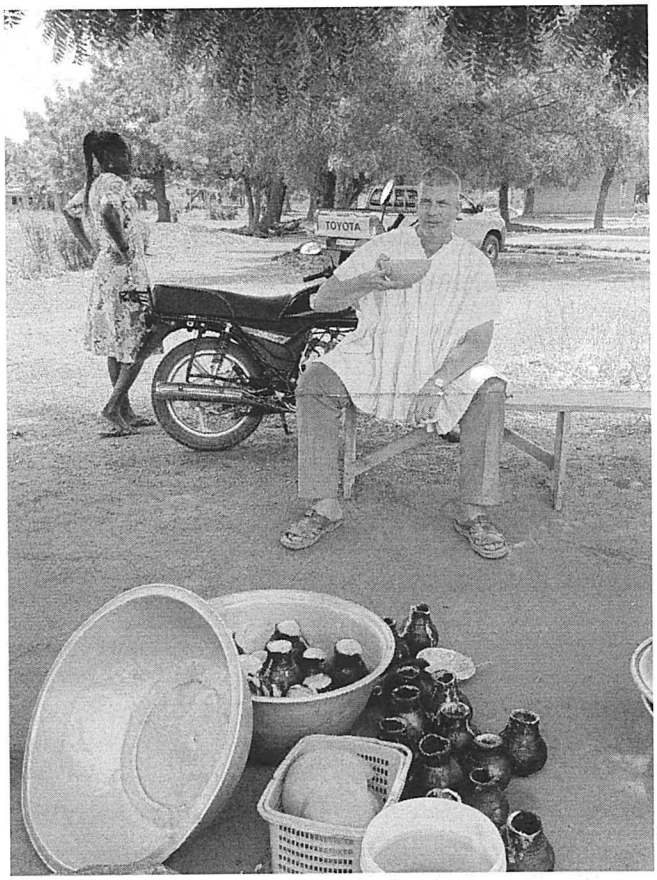
All over Ghana, there are these roadside bars set up as evening approaches. Known as "drinking spots," they are places where tables and chairs are brought out and people come to enjoy a cold beer or soft drink at the end of a long and hot workday. As the theme song to the '80s sitcom Cheers expressed, these are places where "everybody knows your name" and you are embraced and can feel at home. If church is a community where people gather and care for one another, these drinking spots are definitely an alternative form of church!

This friend of mine who died came from the Dagarti ethnic group, who inhabit the northwest corner of Ghana, along the border with Burkina Faso. Dagartis are widely known for three things: being staunch Roman Catholics, the xylophones which are played in their traditional music, and the local drink 'pito' which is brewed from the grain sorghum. Like all northerners in Ghana, Dagartis are a wonderfully warm, friendly and welcoming people.

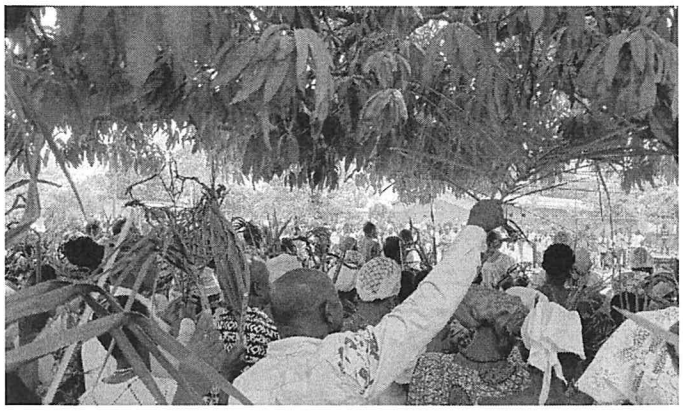
Last year around this time, as the weekend of the funeral approached, I decided to make the 18-hour journey to the Upper West Region of Ghana, even though I knew travel wouldn't be easy. As with most of the trips I've taken to the north, I spent the night in Kintampo, the "Geographic Centre of Ghana." The second day of the journey, while there is a well-travelled road, the joke is told that in the north, there are actually more potholes than paved roads. There's a type of vehicle in Ghana informally called a bone shaker, and this journey was certainly a bone-shaking experience.

When I arrived in the Upper West, it was as I expected it would be. I was given a place to sleep and all my meals were taken care of. Again and again, people thanked me profusely for taking the time to travel so far to be present to say a final goodbye to a friend. Even now, a year later, when I run into Suley's friends and family members in Accra, they thank me for the time I made the long journey to their secluded corner of northwestern Ghana.

After all these years working in Ghana, I sometimes feel like I've gotten off a bit too easy. A good deal of my work has simply been showing up, but the value of showing up can't be



Stopping for some pito -- the local beer brewed from sorghum or millet grain, which is normally sipped from a calabash gourd cup.



The Sunday after the funeral was Palm Sunday, and we attended a palm processional, which began under a mango tree next to the Roman Catholic Church.

underestimated. In a country where people often leave to other places for greener pastures, showing up counts for so much. It's a symbol of solidarity with other people and a actual reminder of God's love for us – our God who took on human flesh and dwelled among us as Jesus Christ. It's sometimes hard to quantify this solidarity – and we Americans love quantifiable results – but showing up and being present is incarnational ministry at its best.

As one of our African partners once said about American church engagement with them, they don't necessarily want us to give them a fish or even need us to teach them how to fish. Rather, what they want from us is to come and fish together with them. They want us to be together with them and build relationships through accompaniment: everything else will flow from this "being together." It's the foundation for everything else.

As my time of service with the Presbyterian Church comes to an end, I want to thank you for everything you've done to be together with our partners. I also want to thank you profusely for all the care and support you have shown to me the past 16 years I've been in Ghana. I have enjoyed so much relaying stories to you about our partners in West Africa. It's been a delight to be with you as you visit the region, as I help you to experience the rich cultures and faith, and as I see everything afresh through your eyes.

Just as God has given us gifts to share with others, God has also given our West Africa partners incredible gifts that can be used to build up the world. We need to be in each other's lives to fulfill the calling God is extending to us as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I expect to be in Ghana for the next several months, as I try to discern what is next for me. The Interim Unified Agency of the PC(USA) has a plan to continue this ministry in a different form, and I expect we'll learn more about it in the coming weeks. Many of us have also become friends during these years together, and I hope you will keep in touch with me. Going forward, I can be reached at *josh.heikkila@gmail.com*.

Blessings to all of you, in your lives, mission and ministry, in all the places God has called you to be. Wherever you are, may you show forth the love and light of Jesus Christ.

Josh

Thank you for reading this letter and for your faithful support!

A new model of PC(USA) global ministry is emerging in 2025, even as the World Mission ministry area concluded in its current form in March. To learn more about this transition please visit ***pcusa.org/wm-transition****. Your prayers of support and financial gifts to* ***E052199*** *for global ministry are needed more than ever as we partner with you, other supporters and global partners to build upon the good work laid by all our mission co-workers, past and present.*

Gifts may be given online at pcusa.org/donate/e052199 or sent to
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
P.O. Box 643700
Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700

Questions? Write to ***GEPartnerships@pcusa.org***