

Freeing the Fishing Children of Ghana

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I first saw the boys who work the boats on the waters of Lake Volta in April 2002. Hard work under punishing conditions had robbed them of the joy and vitality that lights the faces of healthy, happy children. The faces of these trafficked children in the fishing villages were lifeless, their bodies were stunted in growth from malnourishment and neglect.

I think their minds and spirits suffer another kind of hunger. Working in conditions of forced labor, lacking any familial affection or nurturing, they are traumatized and dispirited. I found that they couldn't communicate as a normal healthy child might. I would ask them, "Do you want to go home to your family?" I had to ask several times before they would answer, as if they had been told what to do so often, they'd almost lost the ability to speak for themselves and express their own wishes.

After the question became clear to them, they did say, "yes." They want to go home even though it may be to the same families who unwittingly allowed these children to become indentured laborers. The parents likely didn't know their sons would be awakened before dawn each day to go to the boats. They didn't know the children would work until last light, pulling the nets from the water. They were probably told that their boys would be cared for and educated while working at a skill that might bring them a better future.

It is called the "placement of children" in Africa, and it has been a long accepted practice. For generations, parents have placed their children for rearing in the home of a relative or a trusted friend. Most of the time, the bonds of trust in the community assured that the child would be cared for and raised decently. In the last 40 years or so, however, traffickers seeking only profits have exploited the crushing poverty of the region and corrupted this traditional practice.

Since we began our work to free the boys in the fishing villages, Ghanaian public awareness is growing of the unfortunate circumstances that the boys endure. We took a television crew with us to the lake villages last year, and a television documentary on the plight of the children was broadcast on national television in December 2002. Having learned of their children's fate in this way, some parents are now working on their own to find their boys and bring them home.

That has been a difficult part of the project for us. Some of the boys don't know where they came from, don't remember their families' names. So we've collected photographs of the boys we hope to liberate and now work to find their parents or other relatives. But in conducting this work, I've found that the conditions that led to the boys' separation from their families

have not changed. Some parents are frightened to take back the children because they have no means to take care of them. I can see the families are also frightened that they'll be punished for having let the young ones go. Those fears are so great it seems that they overshadow the natural love parents have for their offspring. It is a pathetic thing to see.

They say to me, "If you can help us take care of the children, then we will be happy to have them back." And that is what we must do, and will try to do, with a variety of assistance and micro-credit programs. We must help them find a way to bring some income to their families to sustain them.

While we must help the families, our project will also work to help the fishermen find another way of doing business so they do not depend on using child labor. We need to help fishermen find a different way of doing things, or find additional income-generating ventures for them, so they don't use children in this way. This needs a lot of support, financial support and government support.

When we first went into these villages to locate the boys and see what we might do about releasing them, I found out that the fishermen—the slave masters—didn't think it was wrong at all to be using child labor on their boats. The way they saw it, the parent needs money. The fisherman needs somebody to work for him, and the child will do the work. The fisherman doesn't think he's doing anything wrong. In fact, he thinks he's helping to reduce poverty.

So if you tell him that it's wrong, really, he doesn't see it. You have to point out to him that he is using somebody else's child to help take care of his own child who is not engaged in fishing. I tell them: "You send your children to school in the cities in order that they will have a better life in the future, but you send somebody else's children to the lake in the cold of the night and the chill of dawn to fish for you so that you will make money to sustain the education of your children in the cities. Does it not strike you that you are being unjust and cruel to the children that do the fishing for you? Do you not see that you are spoiling the future of the fishing boys for the benefit of your own children? Think about it."

Only then did these fishermen begin to realize that, yes, something in their practices is not proper. It is then that it strikes them there is something basically wrong with that kind of practice.

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