

The Alternative Africa

By Fr. Patrick Shanahan W.F.

Fifteen years on from the article of Fr. Arnold Grol, Fr. Patrick Shanahan picks up the story of Street Children in Africa. This time it is from the West Coast, from Accra, the capital of Ghana, where Fr. Patrick and Bro. Jos van Dinther, of the FIC Brothers, founded 'Catholic Action for Street Children' (CAS) in 1993. They followed this up by starting 'Street Girls Aid' (SAID) in 1994.

This article is about Street Children just as Fr. Grol's was in the February-March issue. But I think there is a need to salute Fr. Grol and to explain where I fit into the picture of Street Children of Accra before talking about them specifically.

Many tributes are written of Arnold Grol. From a streets' experience let me say two things. Firstly the White Fathers owe him a mighty debt of gratitude for being the first among us to risk working with the children of Nairobi's slums. The example is there and is clear - we must place more personnel and resources at the service of this new 'Alternative Africa'. Secondly the continent of Africa owes Fr. Grol and his 'Ndugu Society' much as well. He acted swiftly twenty five years ago to teach Nairobi and East Africa that Street Children exist; that they are not going away; that they are not criminals; and that they need love, respect, care and understanding. He challenged, and challenges still, every Mayor of every African town and city to come to terms with, and recognise, this 'Alternative Africa'.

In our case in Accra, Ghana, we came to recognise this new phenomenon in the mid 1980s. Like all humans confronted with a disturbing new reality we played the ostrich. We pretended the children were not on the streets

and hoped they would all have gone back home very soon. They didn't. They haven't.

In 1987, along with a British nurse - Mrs Judith Eiloart, MBE - I started 'UrbanAid' in East Mamobi, a district of one of the largest slums in Accra, Nima/Mamobi. Still the jump into the world of Street Children didn't happen. 'UrbanAid' was for maternity and small children under five.

It was the persistence of an elderly French priest, Fr. John Thebault, SMA, which finally pushed us into action. He persuaded 'Save the Children Fund' to pay for a piece of research into the state of children on the streets of Accra. This research took place between 1991 and 1992. By April, 1993, nothing was happening, so Bro. Jos van Dinther and I thought the talking should cease. We had been walking the streets of Accra ourselves for more than a year, but April, 1993, saw us starting CAS. This article then is about 'Catholic Action for Street Children'. Later, in another issue, we will talk about the second agency which is run primarily for girls in trouble on the streets, and which is called 'Street Girls Aid'. This will include a report on the state of babies - Street Babies - on the streets of Accra.

Before we talk about the workings of CAS, and later about SAID, I would like to put a face on the 'Alternative Africa'. Let me tell you two stories.

Her real name is not Ama. She is 13 years old and she carries loads on her head in the market places of Accra where I work and live. Tourists take pictures of her. She earns - on a good day - about £1. She sleeps in the central railway yards and she realised that to survive, to get enough to eat and self-medicate when

she is sick, she has to use another qualification - sex. Ama is in current jargon a 'young sex worker', others call her a 'prostitute'. In her own eyes she uses survival sex and sees no tomorrow. She can be bought for 40p.

His name is not Kwame. His story shows how a child in a village can finish up on the streets of Accra. His village is about 170 kms. north of the capital. He was 14 years old and in Junior High School, Class 1. He knew that his father, who had no real farm of his own and who worked for a big cocoa farmer whenever there was work available, was in severe trouble in paying school fees. Three times Kwame had taken home a note from the headmaster. He knew what was in the note. In Ghana if you don't pay you are excluded from school. He knew that there would be no fourth note and that the following Friday he would be told "Stay at home". He spoke to some schoolmates. He borrowed some money and at 4 o'clock on the Thursday morning of that week he walked the eight miles to the bigger village which had a lorry station, bound eventually for Accra. Kwame arrived in Accra on the Thursday night - alone, tired, utterly confused. He slept in the lorry park on the north side of Accra that night and in the morning he looked around for anyone who might speak his language or come from his district. Within the first week he discovered that the streets are rough. He was beaten by other street boys, by city guards and by police. By the end of the first week he had found three other boys from his area, just a little older, and he finished up sleeping with them and 200 others in an open courtyard, in what can best be described by those who know Charles Dickens as a Fagin's kitchen. His first job didn't come for ten days and, on the street with so little money around, solidarity in cast terms is something of a dream world created by novelists and film

makers when they confront the problem of street children. Kwame was in reality alone, hungry and still a village boy.

He got a job as a refuse carrier in the markets, which meant that he worked at 3 o'clock in the morning, at 11 o'clock in the morning and at 6 o'clock in the evening, but he started to earn some cash. He also started to learn that on the street you hit first and talk afterwards. He discovered the power of a gang (called a 'base' in Accra). He became sexually active. He tried marijuana but didn't like it, so he settled for the odd snatch at the hard local liquor. Within a month he was angling to become a shoe shine boy. He was by then a street boy. The village had gone. He had joined the 'Alternative Africa'. He was, and



is, a person of the new subculture, or the new ethnicity.

Today Kwame is a shoe shine boy. He is thinking seriously from time to time of getting an apprenticeship, but now as a shoe shine boy he earns enough to eat well on the street, to be a minder of a girl two years younger than him (he is now sixteen). He is our friend and we hope that we reciprocate that. He is a new African. One of the Social Workers at CAS is Kwame's particular friend and that brings us to the style of work that CAS is involved in.

AFRICA MOVES TO URBAN

During the last two decades Africa, as a whole, has experienced the largest urban population growth in the world (4.3%). The continent's urban population grew from 21% in 1975 to 31% in 1995, and it is expected that by 2025 urban dwellers will be the majority of the population (54%). The most urbanised country is Zambia where, in 1998, this percentage (54%) has already been reached. The largest cities of Africa are expected to more than double their population during the next twenty years. This rapid urban growth is projected to continue for at least the next three decades. Africa will be, in fact, the most urbanised continent in the world. Due to this unprecedented rapid urbanisation, combined with disastrous economic conditions, the rate and numbers of absolute poverty in urban areas are increasing much faster than those in rural areas. Moreover, urban poverty has more complicated conceptual foundations than simply measurement of income poverty in urban areas. It includes concepts such as access to and the availability of housing, urban utilities and infrastructure. Urban citizens have to face higher living costs, and they are more vulnerable to price increases and income decreases; urban areas are less effective in providing support networks based on family, kinship and neighbourhood; and urban dwellers

have greater vulnerability of many kinds of contamination and other environmental hazards. In the urban slums and squatter settlements where they live, overcrowding encourages the rapid spread of infections and contagious diseases.

As Africa's urban poor population multiplies, the problems of urban poor children are becoming increasingly urgent. Children cannot be allowed to be a casualty of slow-paced development. The children of the marginalised areas are one of the most segregated and deprived social sectors. Poverty gives rise to other problems such as malnutrition and low food security, health problems, environmental problems, deficient water and sanitation provision, inadequate adult care for the infant and pre-school child, working and street children, single parent heads of households and unhealthy physical environments for children. The African urban poor child struggles daily with these conditions of human deprivation. Deprivation also consists of other more qualitative, and at times subjective, dimensions.

THE AFRICAN STREET CHILD

The most vulnerable African urban poor child is the street child. Classically there are two types of children on the streets of most capital cities in Africa. There are those born in and around the city who have close relatives there or at least have recognised family friends in the area. They go onto the streets every day and are known as children who are *on* the street. They do not go to school. They struggle like everyone else in the market places to earn enough for that day. But at night they go back to a recognised dwelling place. The second category of street children is known as children *of* the street. These are the children who live, work, sleep and carry on with their own social intercourse actually on the streets. I think we have to say that at least 50% of the street

children in Africa are in this category. That is a strong statement to make and at the moment I base it only on my own work in Accra and my own observations in three other African cities, but I have a feeling that it is correct.

There is however a new, more shadowy, category that is being talked about in Africa. This poses the problems of children *for* the street. What do I mean by that? I think an example from one of the slums I have worked in for the last ten years will help. In East Mamobi, one of the slum quarters of Accra, in the lane where I helped start a maternity clinic and where now we have a refuge for street girls, I counted 43 children of early primary school age in September, 1997. None of them, as far as I could see, moved very far from their own tiny area in that particular slum. None of them goes to school. All are illiterate. All need to be fed. They are already *for* the street. Their parents and guardians will have no option but to let them go on the streets, either willingly or unwillingly, in order to hustle for their own daily subsistence. This third category is perhaps the most worrying. It is also the category we cannot quantify at the moment.

THE POSITION OF ACCRA, GHANA

Accra is the capital of Ghana. It is more than just the political centre of Ghana. It is also the commercial, industrial, business, educational and cultural centre. With a projected metropolitan population of four million in 2010, Accra is not an unmanageable city. However, in terms of economic, political and demographic factors, the processes driving urban growth of Accra are similar to those in much larger cities around the world. It is currently facing many of the common problems of rapidly urbanising areas, such as over-extended infrastructure and social services, unemployment, poverty and street children. There are an estimated 11,000 street children in Accra, ranging in age from 5 to

17 years. Remember what we have said about 50% of them being children who live and work *on* the street (August 1996, CAS figures). In the same month it was estimated that there are 3,000 street babies in Accra. Again, half of these are actually living on the streets.

The income of street children is subject to daily fluctuation. They have no minimum wages, no holidays, no maximum number of hours that can be worked. What children do on the streets for money is influenced by their age, gender and the particular street corner on which they currently find themselves. The major occupations that they engage in are load carrying in the markets, selling petty goods, water and ice cream, and cleaning and sweeping

A 'shoe shine boy' with his priceless box



market places. The more sought after job for the boys is to take up shoe shining. None of the jobs of street children require any training and none of them offer prospects for the future. Their lives are taken up with stressful physical labour and even more stressful shelter and accommodation problems. Street children are usually underpaid, easily dismissed and can be employed as a means of saving money on adult wages. CAS estimates that 81% of all street children it meets are either illiterate or semi-literate.

All street children are vulnerable. Girls on the street are more vulnerable than the boys. The most vulnerable girls are those who are pregnant. And the most vulnerable children of all are the street babies.

LIFE ON THE STREET

The danger for all of us working with street children is to forget what life is like on the streets. I would like to try to describe a day in the life of a boy, a girl and a baby. Let's go back to Kwame. For the purposes of the description, let's make it a day in the dry season. I say that because in the rainy season you will come across a phenomenon that still makes me stop and get very angry inside. It is the picture of what I call the human horses. Very often children in the rains will seek whatever little shelter there is and stand up, huddling close to each other. They will then fall asleep, like horses. But let's look at a dry season situation. Kwame, you will remember, has become a full member of the 'Alternative Africa'. At 16 years old, and a shoe shine boy, he is already a leader on his own particular street corner. He still sleeps in the open courtyard that we spoke of. His first problem when he sleeps is what to do with the money he has earned. His second problem is what to do with his shoe shine box. Recently Kwame switched from saving his money with local money savers to putting it

into the safe-keeping of the house mother of the refuge for street children that CAS runs. We will talk more of that later. Kwame's shoe shine box is most important, so at night the boxes are placed under the protection of the street boy who is the night watchman for that particular corner. This night watchman is paid by the street boys to make sure that others do not come to steal from them when they are asleep. The box is the symbol of his job. It is about the size of a shoe box that you still find in our shoe shops. It has a handle and a piece of rope to enable you to throw it over your shoulder. It contains his brushes, his cloth, his polish and, because every shoe shine boy is a cobbler in embryo, it contains hammers, nails, patches, spare heels, bits of rubber, glue and everything else to enable Kwame to mend your shoe or sandal where you stand on the street. It is his most precious possession and if you touch a shoe shine boy's shoe box you will find the retribution will be swift, violent and very messy. I am constantly reminded of what it must have been like in the old Victorian days in England when I hear shoe shine boys walking through the streets or through a richer suburb banging their boxes with their brushes and shouting to encourage you to have your shoes cleaned.

Kwame will get up when it is daylight. He will need to pay for water to wash and he will need to pay the same price again for the dubious privilege of using a pit latrine for his toilet needs. By 6.30 a.m. Kwame will be looking for the women who sell food on the streets. If he has kept enough money from the day before he will buy some rice water or some local porridge and a piece of bread, and then he will join the crowds as they begin to move around the city. The first thing to remember about shoe shine boys is that they walk enormous distances every day because everyone they pass is a potential customer. The second thing is

that they all have their own areas to work in. Some of the worst fights I have seen are between shoe shine boys who cross over into somebody else's territory. By midday in the dry season it is beginning to get not just very hot but, because of the west coast, it is beginning to get equally humid. Kwame will normally eat in places he has used before. Street children eat very well in terms of quantity. Like most poor people in the world they spend 70% of their income on food. The problem of eating on the street is with the hygiene and cleanliness of utensils, the servers and the cooks. At some point in the day he will surely find some shade to collapse in (a lot of them have started to use the CAS Refuge in order to flop out). By late afternoon, when the city turns itself around, they will be back in the crowds looking for customers. When it is dark they do not shine shoes. As far as I know Kwame has two girlfriends but he has not fathered any children yet, nor to the best of my knowledge has he suffered from a severe bout of venereal disease. He is lucky. Kwame will go to see one of his girlfriends. He will also meet the other shoe shine boys in his gang. He will have earned, if it has been a good day, the equivalent of £1.50. If it has been a bad day he will be hungry. He will give some money to whichever girlfriend

he meets. If he is not too tired he may go to one of the ramshackle video viewing places. He doesn't smoke much marijuana even though it is quite cheap and he can't afford to go to the cheap disco joints that are beginning to mushroom. The chances are that Kwame will be fast asleep by 10 o'clock, having first paid the watchman, spent some more money to wash and checked that his box is safe.

Ama has two places to sleep. Her main dormitory area is in a piece of land adjacent to the central railway station in Accra where, on a normal night, you can count a minimum of 400 girls sleeping under the 'kiosks' - stalls - which are very often raised up from the ground. During the day, when it gets too hot and market women do not want to move through the streets with their goods, Ama's services as a load carrier are not needed and so you will find her using a kiosk built by CAS as a place to rest. Like Kwame, Ama will get up at sunrise. She won't bother washing properly but would rather be in the market places as near to 6 o'clock as possible so that she can check whether there are loads to carry in the area from which she starts that day. She is small, chunky, pretty, and as she gets older she will be able to carry heavier loads and so earn better money. Now,



at the age of 13, she is at the bottom of the ladder. She, too, will try very early in the morning to get hold of some porridge or some bread, but if she has had a bad day then in Ama's case she will have to borrow some money from her friends. What does it mean to be called a 'load carrier', or 'carrier girl' which is a better translation of the local expression used to describe Ama's occupation? Let us suppose it is 7 o'clock in the morning and a market trader from a smaller market in the suburbs of Accra has got a bag of rice to sell in her own area. The bag of rice for Ama's size will be about 25 kilos. Ama will put this bag on her head (helped by others to lift it) but not directly onto the head because the girls have worked out that if you do that you will damage your neck muscles very quickly. So, her most precious piece of equipment, the tool of her trade, is her carrying pan. This is either an aluminium basin or a basin enamelled a bit like the way the old-fashioned kitchen basins were. The carrier girls have them in three sizes, depending on their own age and size. Ama's is a medium-sized one. This is how the market woman with her rice will watch Ama and her friends load the large sack. Firstly, Ama will use a piece of cloth rolled round and flattened, put directly on her head. She will then put a basin on top of that cloth. She will then crouch down. Two of her friends will lift the sack and place it flat across the basin. Ama will then carry the sack, following the trader woman to the nearest lorry park/bus station that she uses. No money transaction takes place until that sack is loaded into the van, lorry, taxi or small bus that the market woman will use. The deal is struck depending on the size of the load and the distance it has been carried. Sadly it also depends on the age of the girl. Ama is very young. Very often she will be cheated of the full amount.

Sometimes Ama will come to the CAS Refuge but most times she will sit in the shade

to rest. She has very good friends and she comes originally from the far north of Ghana. She has been on the street for three years. At the beginning of 1997 Ama, who was no longer a virgin anyway because she had a boyfriend as a minder and she paid him in sex, decided that she could supplement her income by becoming a sex worker. My workers and I have come to call Ama and little girls like her 'sex for survival workers'. Personally I do not regard her as a prostitute in the way I regard the older sex workers in the city as prostitutes. I see Ama as a little girl caught by the need to survive and by realising that she could use her body for just that. Now, Ama doesn't offer sexual favours very often during the day. She is too busy and too tired, but at night in her place near the central railway station, when she has washed and changed into non-working clothing, she often moves to the other side of the railway yards into a deserted market where at night, in one of the small areas, we have discovered what can only be called an open sex market. There boys and young men can come and find a girl for quick sexual gratification. My worry is that Ama will realise not only that she is very pretty but that if she gives up carrying loads she can become a full-time sexual worker and so enter into the fastest growing industry on the west coast of Africa, which is prostitution. So far her minder, who knows that she sells herself regularly through the week, has not allowed her to take on such a job full-time, but it is from situations like this that little girls like Ama become pregnant, and from such pregnancies come babies of the street. If Ama does become pregnant there is a 90% chance that her minder will abandon her, whether he is the father or not, and this will leave her (and eventually her baby) more vulnerable than ever.

We will return in another edition specifically to little girls like Ama but right now I

would like to tell you about a day in the life of a small street baby called Moses.

Moses is at present one of my favourite characters. He is about a year old. His mother is 15, his grandmother is 36. His uncle, Gregory, is 4. He doesn't know who his father is and one day he will be told that his grandfather went back to the north to find another woman. So, in fact, we have two single mums - or, rather, we have a single grandmother/mum and a single mum. We found Moses because his mother was in some distress one day. At 15 she was selling bread. Moses was about seven weeks' old, and was on her back and was sick.

Gregory was holding on to her skirts crying quite noisily. He, too, was sick. Both of them had malaria. So, the picture the social worker found was mother, son and brother/uncle all in a right old mess. They were offered the health facilities that we are slowly putting onto street corners. The children got over their attacks and our workers asked the mother if she would like the children to go to one of the creches that we operate in the centre of the city. Uncle Gregory was forbidden to go by his mum, but baby Moses was allowed to go to the creche straight away. So, every morning at about 6 o'clock Moses is fed by his mum, everything is organised and she comes across to the other side of the shanty town where she lives and Moses goes to the creche for the whole day. His mother then goes off to work. She has been able to change from being a bread seller to working in a chop bar (local street-side shack-cafe). She earns more money in such a job. She pays half the costs for Moses in the Creche

every day. The rest is subsidised by our own agencies. Moses spends the day, because he is very tiny and very young, in the tiny babies' section of the creche. He sleeps a lot. He has been weaned onto the local weany-mix and he has, in this section of the creche, four local women who are being trained as minders to look after the babies. He is checked regularly by the mobile health unit we have started and has, we hope, the chance to go to school one day. But that's for the future. For now he has to be protected from the flies that swarm all over that part of the shanty where the creches are; he has to be loved and nurtured very carefully. In the evening at dark, when the markets are closing and the lorry parks have stopped bringing goods, and the chop bars close too, his mother comes to pick him up and take him back to the room in the shanty town which she shares with her own mother (his grandmother), his Uncle Gregory, two aunts who are 8 and 10, and twelve other women and children. The

Some of the children who use the CAS facilities



rest is subsidised by our own agencies. I think we will speak more of Moses and his Uncle Gregory later in a future issue.

A year ago we asked 80 girl mothers with babies like Moses or a little older what they wanted for their children. They all said two things: (1) “not to be like us, living on the streets or in the shanties” and (2) to receive a proper schooling and education. Why *we* asked these questions and who *we* are brings me to CAS.

CATHOLIC ACTION FOR STREET CHILDREN (CAS)

So, CAS has been going for nearly 6 years now. It has very clearly stated aims and objectives.

- To interact with street children so they can be understood and supported;
- To assist those street children who choose to get off the street and into a stable living situation;
- To create awareness about the plight of street children who sleep rough in the streets of the capital, Accra, of the main port town, Tema, and in the other towns that make up the Greater Accra Region. This region matches exactly the boundaries of the Catholic Archdiocese of Accra.

The programmes currently in action to fulfil this mission are:

- Street work carried out by social workers (trained and untrained). This street work aims at establishing contact with the individual child, getting to know them and befriending them. It is about telling them that they are loved. It is also a way of informing them that each street child has various possibilities once they come into contact with CAS.
- A day Refuge (a drop in centre) where the children can come and go as they please providing they keep three house rules - no drugs, no fighting, no stealing.
- Demonstration classes and literacy classes are offered daily in the Refuge to those children who wish to follow.
- A regular health check is available daily at the Refuge.

- A farm on the outskirts of Accra where the children who wish can live and work for up to six months as well as learn basic farming and animal husbandry skills.

- Sponsorship for training and education is offered to those children who have expressed a wish to get off the street.
- Social surveys which are carried out on each child once they express a wish to leave the street. These surveys investigate the child’s background further in order either to obtain a reconciliation with and/or solicit permission from the parents to put the child into an apprenticeship (this is a Government requirement) and to establish whether the child has told the whole truth during the contact with CAS. Sponsorship, as we shall see, is expensive and CAS doesn’t want to make a mistake. CAS can offer the child only one chance and so the utmost care must be taken in deciding what form of education or training each individual child should undertake.

With the above described programmes and activities, CAS has established contact with about 2,500 street children, out of which 120-140 visit the Refuge on a regular basis.

I would now like to look at these programmes in greater detail. The main thrust of CAS’ work is to live each day on the streets with the children. It was Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, who said of children in distress met by his organisation “Every child needs the love and friendship of a caring adult.” Sometimes when we tell people that the first job of a worker on the streets for CAS is to know and love the street children of that particular quarter, people become a little cynical. The reaction is often “That’s all very nice and liberal and do-goodie, but what do you actually do?”

CAS actually meets and knows hundreds of children on the streets where they live and work and socialise. What we *do* is to love our children on our streets. Every other activity

in CAS comes from this. Without the street work there is no CAS. There are people in Africa who don’t like the name ‘street children’, who want to change it to ‘community kids’ (this is a name given by the Mayor of Bloemfontein in South Africa in 1997). Others want to call them ‘out of school youth’ (which is very funny when you’ve never been to school). Others want to call them ‘school drop-outs’. CAS

says whatever you call them they live and work (and they work very hard) on the streets and if you want to work with them you have to be on the streets. That is where CAS is.

Our shoe shine boy, Kwame, met CAS on the street. The particular social worker he spoke to every day invited him to visit the CAS centre (the Refuge) and say hello to the staff and to other children. He did, and fairly regularly he visits, rests, talks, plays and leaves again. He is a shoe shine boy. He is a shoe shine boy on the streets and is not going to be cajoled or forced into quitting. Other children who visit the Refuge find out that if they want to do other things than rest or play games they can join in demonstration classes and the literacy programme. The classes currently on offer cover weaving, ceramics, carving, and music making. The literacy classes take place three times a day and child will be encouraged to try and keep up a fair level of attendance. If you have to ask us what is the major activity in the Refuge, we will have to say to you resting and sleeping. Street children are often very, very tired.

Street children fear sickness. To help combat this problem CAS initiated a health programme for street children and street babies which it has now successfully handed over to the Salvation Army. It means that any child who turns up at the Refuge in urgent need of medical attention can find it fairly quickly because the Salvation Army nurses use the Refuge as one of their main bases.

At the end of the last section we reported the findings of the 80 or so child mothers when asked what they wanted for their children. It is clear that they didn’t want the same style of life. Some of our critics interpret that as showing us that we shouldn’t wait any longer but rather tell these 80 mothers that they should leave the street immediately and that we will help them. CAS says that if you do that you show a disregard for the rights of street children to take their own decisions. I have to repeat that once they are on the streets they are different people. Emotionally a 14-year old with a baby is still a little girl. In every other way, though, she is very much a woman. Years ago when we started we thought that the easy answer

Someone to talk to and check the baby over



was to sweep every child off the street into school and there would be no more problems. How naive we were. On a particular morning in 1994 we asked 100 street children across the city one question: "If we gave you everything you needed to go to school tomorrow - school fees, uniform, books, pocket money, travel money, sleeping money - would you go?" Ninety-eight per cent told us "no", some very emphatically. Two said "yes". We realised that there is no quick fix for street children and, more importantly, they must make up their own minds as to which way their future lies.

I realise that many of you will say "Why did you even bother asking children, many of them under 16, what they would like to do about schooling?". It is clear in our own society that part of our job as adults is to help children to grow sufficiently to take care of themselves and become emotionally mature. I think we can say in our own society that the most important right of a child is to be a child, to have adults take responsibility for you until you can reasonably take it for yourself. A street child is forced to jump half-a-dozen stages at once - to go in a space of a few short weeks from being a small boy in a village attending the local primary school and working with his father on the farm at every spare moment, to being a young adult in control of his finances, his feeding, his friends and his survival all on his own. If you are 12 years old and have been on the streets of Accra for a year you will behave as if you are 18. This means that our workers have to take into consideration this huge jump that young children have made into young adulthood and respect their ability and their right to choose whether to leave the streets or not. It is our experience at the moment, in Accra, that the majority of street children wish to remain street children for the present.

Let me give you an example of this from Khartoum in the Sudan from February, 1997,

just in case you think that our situation in Accra is unique. In Khartoum in that month social workers reunited some 216 children who lived on the streets with their families. But to the dismay of these social workers 200 of the boys and girls that they had brought together for reconciliation refused to leave the street and go home to their own villages. When asked, one social worker who wouldn't give his name said that many of the children no longer know how to live with others in a family and that it is difficult to reintegrate them back into school. As a last little extra from the Sudan I would like to quote the following. The newswire service that I got this quote from said: "Sudanese officials must also confront the growing problem of children born in the streets." CAS has been talking about street babies since 1994.

To those children who do say "I want to leave the streets. I would like to find a way out" CAS has a sponsorship scheme in place. Let's suppose that our young Kwame comes to the Refuge one morning and says to one of the staff "I can't put up with being a shoe shine boy any more. I am 16 years old. There must be another way to live my life." The first thing a worker would say is "See you next week. If you're serious you'll want to talk again". The second thing is, if Kwame comes back he will be told that there is no easy path to reinventing your life. Two things will have to take place. The first is that one of the social workers will carry out a social survey to discover everything about Kwame and his family and his village and his clan. The second thing is that Kwame will have to attend the literacy classes at the Refuge on a regular basis. This is to make sure that he is serious and that he will have the groundings of literacy prior to taking up some form of skill training or apprenticeship.

Just to make Kwame's life more difficult he will be told that nothing will happen for at least six months so he will have to show just

how serious he is about a new life. Let us suppose that Kwame and his social worker decide finally that the best thing for him is to become a motor mechanic (in the pigeon English of Accra 'a fitter'). CAS will pay for everything for the three years it takes to acquire the most basic skill certificate in Ghana, a certificate that has the possibilities of opening the doors to work. When I say everything, I mean just that. CAS will pay for his apprenticeship, food, accommodation, and some pocket money until he starts to earn a little like every other apprentice. Tools are provided. For CAS and Kwame it is exciting and it's risky. It's exciting because he has chosen to look at another way to live and has worked hard to discover which way he should go. It's risky because he's only got one chance. One mistake, one failure to respond to the mechanic he's apprenticed to and the sponsorship is finished. You can understand therefore why CAS does not throw sponsorships about like snuff at a wake. Each child has to choose and CAS has to help each child all the way through.

CAS does not measure its work by the number of street children on sponsorship. The same percentage we found in 1994 still prevails. Only a 50th of all street children CAS meets choose to leave the streets. At the same time CAS does not want to debase skills training and education by so-called crash courses in vocational training. It is clear in some countries in Africa that agencies like to round up 30 street boys and call them carpenters after three months' training. CAS feels that that insults the child, debases the skill and helps neither the child nor country in the long run. There is no cheap, easy way to a better education or skill training. At present it costs CAS £600 per child, per year, for three years. Lastly, a favourite question is: "If a 10-

year old street child wants to go back to school and wants to continue after three years, will you still help?" The answer is, simply, "Yes".

CONCLUSION

Urbanisation in Africa has brought us the phenomenon of the poor African urban child. This child can be underprivileged, can be working full-time in sweated labour or can be a street child. CAS has grown as a response to the street child. CAS has a strong story to tell. It is, true, a story that many people do not yet want to hear, especially people in high places across Africa and planners in the rich world who would like it all to go away. CAS says that should not stop the story being told. We realise that it is still a largely unknown and untried territory. Our whole intervention in the lives of these children is, and must continue to be, experimental in approach and in remedies. At the heart of everything we do is the street, which is their home. On that street every child we meet has the right to our friendship and our care and our respect, and to all the help we can offer to enable them to take care of themselves.