



L to r: Fran Carabott and Ben Dawson mix the concrete outside the classroom; Steve McDermott speaks in the church service; Eleanor Ferris decorates the walls

# So rewarding to help Ghanaians

**THE tears began to flow when they had finished the project and were showing their Ghanaian friends.**

These teenagers from churches in Portsmouth had flown to Ghana to redecorate a classroom for children with special needs. After four days of back-breaking work, they were finally able to show the pupils.

And it was the joyful reaction of the children from St George's Anglican School in Ho that made it all worthwhile.

They started singing 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands' to show how pleased they were with the transformation.

But it wasn't just the lives of Ghanaian children that were changed. The eye-opening trip was also significant for the adults and teenagers from Portsmouth, many of whom were making their first visit to Africa.

One of the leaders, Fran Carabott, from St Jude's, Southsea, said: "The children with special needs came alive when we were there. They really wanted to help, and they would hold tins of paint for hours for us. It's incredible, because their culture generally prefers to ignore them. So it was great to do something practical, that made a real difference to them and their environment.

"And for a lot of our team, it really built their faith up. They came away changed, having grown their faith or found real purpose. Everyone got on really well, and we achieved everything we wanted to do."

The 17 adults and teenagers



The Project G team outside the classroom they decorated with Bishop Matthias and some of the children with special needs from St George's School, Ho

on the 'Project G' team had spent six months raising the money to fund the trip, and met regularly to prepare before they went.

The Bishop of Ho, the Rt Rev Matthias Mededues-Badohu, who lives on the St George's School complex, had invited the team to redecorate the classroom as there is little provision for children with special needs in Ghana. He and his family hosted the team for lunch each day, and he also invited them to speak in the local church.

The team started each day with Bible study and worship, worked throughout the school day, and then led after-school games and activities for pupils.

Megan Wade, 17, from St James Church, Milton, said: "The

highlight was when we had finished painting and the children with special needs and their teachers gathered in the classroom. It was the joy and happiness on their faces that made us so emotional.

"One of the girls gave me a handmade bracelet to say thank you. It put it all into perspective, how much it all meant to them. I don't think we anticipated how much this would actually improve their lives.

"I feel so much happier now, and I'm trying not to get angry about the kind of stupid things that bother us in this country. You realise how lucky we are here, and that God's love is the same for every person in the world. It has really opened my eyes, and it feels

so fulfilling, seeing people who believe the same as I do, but who worship in different ways."

The vicar of St Jude's, Southsea, the Rev Mike Duff, found himself mixing concrete by hand – there was no concrete mixer – and laying it outside the classroom, to improve its entrance. The team also painted a verse from Psalm 139 above the door to remind children they are created in God's image.

And one of the other team leaders, Rachel Duff, said: "Painting the classroom also made a difference to the main teacher of the children with special needs. She was sceptical to start with, but afterwards she said: 'This will make me a better teacher'.

## WHAT THEY THOUGHT

"It gave us a real sense of reality, because they all seem so happy when they have so little. It makes me angry coming back here and hearing people complaining about their new phone.

"It made us cry when they were all singing at the end. I gave one girl, Vera, who was 10, my water bottle, and she wrote me a lovely letter to say thank you."

**Hollie Simmons, 16, from Kings Church, Somerstown**

"It was a great experience, and it was interesting to see the big difference between the rich and the poor in Ghana – there were seven-bedroomed houses next to shacks. The children with special needs were caring and compassionate, and it was really nice to be able to do something for them.

"I have grown a lot in my faith. This has really reaffirmed it, as I didn't even go to church last November. I was able to give my testimony at the service on the Sunday morning. And the team has been more like a family than a team, and we are committed to seeing each other regularly.

**Steve McDermott, 19, from St Cuthbert's, Copnor**

"I work with children with special needs, so I could see that schools in Ghana don't have the same resources to be able to help such children. It was amazing to be able to do something that will make a real difference to their lives. Being with the kids was fantastic, and the memories we made and the friendships we made will last forever."

**Lauren Brushwood, 19, from St Cuthbert's, Copnor**

"I was impressed that no one from the team slacked or complained. And the hospitality of the bishop was outstanding. They had 17 extra people to feed every day, cooking on an open-air fire in a courtyard.

"We'd love to maintain some links with the school. Perhaps we could take a group back there in another two or three years."

The group from Portsmouth deanery were visiting the Diocese of Ho as part of our Inter-Diocesan West Africa Links (IDWAL).

Each deanery in matched with a diocese in Ghana, and the link between Portsmouth and Ho is fairly recent. For more details of our long-standing links, see [www.portsmouth.anglican.org/idwal](http://www.portsmouth.anglican.org/idwal).