

CHALLENGES AND SETBACKS OF MISSIONS IN GHANA

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Introduction

Even though the early missionaries and the work of missions, in general, have contributed so much to the socio-economic and political lives of Ghanaians, there were some challenges and setbacks that the missionaries had to grapple with.

Prof. Omenyo succinctly captures these challenges in this statement:

“Western missionaries thus encountered the African world view from a background of Christianity embedded in enlightenment, which is perceived as superior to that of the African. This attitude made the effectiveness of their mission a nonstarter”.

This concern was also expressed in Christian Baeta’s statement that:

“The fact that the evangelists and their hearers belonged to such glaringly different racial types; the fact that their cultural backgrounds were so different, the unfortunate association of the colour black in the European superstition; the slave trade, with Europeans being always owners and Africans always the outstanding; the assumptions by the missionaries of a position of superiority vis-à-vis African, which assumption Africans weakly and unprotestingly accepted; the fact that the majority of missionaries to our parts were connected with the movement known as pietism; these and such-like factors determined the policy, which was adopted by all missions practically without exception, of non-amalgamation with, and aloofness from Africa culture”.

These challenges included; the lack of understanding of the existing traditional religion and culture, lack of relevant training of some missionaries who came, especially in cross-cultural issues, syncretism on the part of the natives due to their religious predispositions, and the challenge of keeping missionaries healthy and protected from tropical diseases. The health factor is perhaps the most debilitating challenge the early missionaries ever faced.

The Health Factor

Various factors were militating against Christian success in eighteenth-century Ghana. The rate of mortality among Europeans on the coast was the most challenging of them all.^[1]

From 1828-1838, the first decade of Basel mission involvement on the Gold-Coast for instance, many of their new missionaries were faced with extreme health hazards. Eight out of ten missionaries dispatched died within months or very few years after arrival.^[2] If one considers the first 20 years about half the missionaries arriving died.^[3] Jacobus Captein had a similar frustration when the headmasters Abraham Suurdeeg and Jan Boying of the school he started in Elmina died shortly after taking over the school. This finally brought the school to a premature halt.^[4]

The disastrous loss of the entire first batch of four missionaries in 1832 caused the committee in Basel to appoint Dr. C. F. Heinz to evaluate the situation. Unfortunately, he also succumbed to fever after just six weeks of arrival. For the next forty years, the leadership never gave a thought to sending a medical doctor to the field.^[5] The causes were invariable: hepatitis, yellow fever, and malaria. At that time, however, these tropical diseases had not yet been clearly

^[1] Debrunner, W. Hans: 1967. A History of Christianity in Ghana. Waterville Publishing House. 349

^[2] Schweizer A. Peter. 2000: Survivors on the Gold Coast. Smartline Publishing House. Accra. 90

^[3] Schweizer A. Peter. 2000: 90

^[4] Kpobi, N.A. David. 1953: Missions in Chains. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer. 151

identified. They were generally lumped together as “tropical fevers”.^[6]

Lack of Understanding of African Religion and Culture

By 1980, about half of Ghana’s population was on record as belonging to one or another of the Christian churches, and although the nation could not be regarded as a Christian country, the churches were exercising a remarkable influence on society. But while Christianity brought the country’s people undoubted benefits, it also eroded the Ghanaian people’s ancestral customary practices, values, and way of life.^[7]

As an institution, alien to the people and their religions, introduced into the country by missionaries with very different traditions and culture, the Christian religion made radical inroads into Ghana’s culture, beliefs, and other aspects of her social heritage. Much of these, however, after sounder reviews, have been found by leaders of the Christian churches themselves not to be, after all, at variance with the Christian faith and morals.^[8]

Instead of adapting the teachings and practices of the Christian religion to suit harmless Ghanaian indigenous values and practices, the early Christian missionaries totally condemned them as ‘pagan’ and to be shunned by their converts, whatever they considered strange. This contrasts with the “Christianization” of the Roman, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon cultural practices. This situation arose largely from the missionaries’ ignorance of the true meaning and significance of certain local institutions and practices. Some of their converts, particularly the over-zealous catechists and other evangelists, who misled them to misinterpret the people’s ancestral heritage, were also at fault.^[9]

African Traditional Religion was labelled with negative and depreciative words like “superstitious” and “magic”.^[10] Consequently, the Christian missionar-

ies, notably the Presbyterians, separated the Christians from the rest of the townfolk due to many groundless fears of contamination with ‘pagan’ influences. Hence, they lived in secluded part of the townships known as Salem.

Another innovation, which the Christian churches, introduced concerned marriage. The new institution refused to accept marriage performed according to the people’s own customary law and practices, and unless a couple married ‘in the church’, as it was popularly described, that is, according to the churches own ritual, they were denied important benefits such as Holy Communion and Christian burial rites.^[11]

According to Larbi, the western mission agencies coming from the post-enlightenment, rationalistic background, approached the missionary task from this ideological frame of mind. For many in the receptor culture, Christianity was not accepted for its religious value; rather, it was a religion that offered material blessings. To learn to read, to learn something of the ability of the European to control his environment and to evolve a superior material culture, factors which to the African were bound with the white man’s worship of Christ, operated as strong motives for announcing oneself as a baptismal candidate.^[12]

Larbi further observes that the other extreme, which is the denial of the existence of the spirit-force (witches, sorcerers, fetishes, magic, charms, and the local deities) in the missionary enterprise also radically, undermined the work of the missions. In the process, they ended up producing “two-world” Christians with double allegiance.^[13] Tite Tienou confirms this in his book “The Theological Task of the Church in Africa” that in practice and privately, all African Christians feel the tremendous burden of carrying at least two cultural loads: the modern or so-called Western culture and the traditional.^[14]

^[5] Schweizer A. Peter.2000: 90

^[6] Schweizer A. Peter. 90

^[7] Buah, F.K. 1998: A History of Ghana (Revised and updated). Malaysia: Macmillan Publishing.139

^[8] Buah, F.K. 1998. 139

^[9] Buah, F.K.139

^[10] Pobe, S. John.1991: AD 2000 and after; The Future of God’s Mission in Africa. Asempa Publishers. Accra. 72

^[11] Buah, F.K. 1998: A History of Ghana (Revised and updated). Malaysia: Macmillan.139

^[12] Larbi, Kingsley E. 2001: Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity. Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, Accra-Ghana. 29

Paternalism

Increasing financial paternalism and accompanying Westernization of the gospel are the two most critical issues facing world missions today.^[15] Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and justified by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm.^[16] The analysis of paternalism involves a limitation on the freedom or autonomy of some agent.

Many mission agencies in Ghana have had to depend on foreign support to operate and to maintain their missionaries. Subsequently, this has sometimes led to donors prescribing what their donations should be used for against the real and most important need on the ground. Increasing financial paternalism creates dependency. It denies the wholeness of the individual and ultimately leads to his or her bondage and suppression. There can be no genuine reciprocity between individuals or groups when one of them treats the other like a child. Unfortunately, due to various constraints, notably the economic hardship, missionaries and mission agencies have been trapped in this web of control by the donor agencies. This to a large extent has stifled the progress of missions in Ghana.^[17]

Lack of Relevant Training

Indigenous mission societies that sprang up as offshoots of western missionary efforts in Africa, either saw little need for relevant missionary training, did not have the relevant missionary training or did not have the know-how to prepare the staff adequately before sending them out to the mission field.^[18] The practice was to send anybody who had the call for ministry regardless of the nature of the ministry, to a Bible school for training, where available. In most cases, the students of the Bible Schools and Seminaries were equipped for pastoral work

in organized church denominations rather than in rugged missionary work which the African mission field demands. The effect was that Christian workers who were trained in the Bible schools plunged into missions and were ill-equipped for the challenges they faced on the field.^[19]

The new sending agencies in Africa, mostly from a Pentecostal background as a result of charismatic revival in the institutions of higher learning, were modelled after faith missions of the early European missions. These African missions, like the Pentecostals, did not grasp the need for training or patient, careful selection of missionary candidates. Furthermore, many of these new sending agencies were being led by directors who themselves did not go through any form of training to prepare and equip them for their work, especially in cross-cultural settings.

Most agencies did not require any form of training, but rather saw the training period as a waste of time, while souls were perishing in heathen lands. They felt that all that missionaries needed was knowledge of the Bible, to be able to tell sinners that Jesus loved them and that He came to save them from their sins. Armed with Bible knowledge, Christian workers moved out in faith and zeal to send many hundreds of workers to mission fields in and around Africa. Some agencies recruited indiscriminately, without references to individual qualifications or the home church, and without missionary training.

Many missionaries have gone out not only without the necessary skills, but also without adequate field supervision, mentoring, and appropriate care. In fact, in some cases, missionaries went out by themselves to unreached and very difficult areas. This approach has done more harm than good. Some of these untrained missionaries crashed woefully and returned home broken. Others who managed to weather the storms and who stayed on “ruined” the work and shut the door to subsequent missions.

[13] Larbi, Kingsley E. 2001: 29.

[14] Tienou, Tite. 1990: *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*. African Christian Press, Achimota, Ghana. 22

[15] Kornfield, William J. 1997: What has our Western Money and our Gospel wrought. Editorial of *Mission Frontiers* (January-February). *Frontiers*. Pasadena. 1

[16] Dworkin, Gerald. 2002: Paternalism: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://mb-soft.com/believe/indexa.htm>

[17] Dokunor, Sampson: President GEMA (Interview). 12-7-04.

[18] Famonure, Naomi. 2002: *Doing Member Care Well; Member Care for African Mission Personnel*. William Carey Library. Pasadena. 95

[19] Famonure, Naomi. 95

Syncretism

Paul G. Hiebert, who had served as a professor of Anthropology and South Asia studies at the Fuller Theological Seminary defined syncretism as the mixture of old meanings with the new so that the essential nature of each is lost.^[20] Syncretism is also the process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. It is also the union of two or more opposite beliefs so that the synthesized form is a new thing. It is not always a total fusion but maybe a combination of separate segments that remain identifiable compartments. Originally a political term, “syncretism” was used to describe the joining together of rival Greek forces on the Isle of Crete in opposition to a common enemy.^[21]

Heibert explained that the major cause of syncretism is when the Christian message is translated into the native forms without the thought of preserving the original meaning. He drew the line between Syncretism and Indigenization, which is careful preservation of the meaning of the Gospel even as it is expressed in native forms.^[22]

This was one of the major challenges that the early missionaries had to contend with; the syncretistic nature of African Christianity. Debrunner described such as living in a partly disillusioned world as semi-sophisticated bands of people, searching for new ideals and new forms of religions. These people remained Christians at heart, whilst at the same time vigorously pursuing material advantage and succumbing to crude superstition -cruder than that of old pagans.^[23] He quotes some Basel missionaries as saying, “We suffer from the evil influence of lapsed Christians in Akwapim and of elements attracted by the possibilities of making money. Among the congregation, lack of discipline and conformity with the world is spreading...”^[24]

According to Larbi, anybody who knows African Christians intimately would know that no amount of denial on the part of the church will expel the belief in supernatural powers from their minds, and he becomes a hypocrite who in official church circles pretends to give the impression that he does not believe in these things, while in his private life he resorts to practices which are the results of such beliefs.^[25]

The 21st-century edition of Operation World reveals that over 64% of Ghanaians call themselves Christians, but only 40% have links with a church and only 12% are regular church attendees. African traditional world views and practices, the researcher noted, have gone hand-in-hand with the claim of being Christian.^[26]

African traditional religion practitioners, like the Hindus, believe that all religions lead to God, implying thereby that there is no need to change from one religion to another.^[27] It is therefore not surprising that much of the practical evangelical Christianity in Africa is described as being terribly syncretistic.^[28] It was perhaps this frustration that led the Rev. Hendrik Velse to say that, “it was often a futile exercise attempting to convert an adult whose links with the traditional society were almost inseparable.”^[29] The syncretic lifestyle of the Efutu people could be the reason why ten years after the massive conversion at Efutu in 1503, nothing seemed to have remained.^[30]

The challenge of split allegiance or double allegiance to two or more religious sects amongst the people of Ghana was further confirmed in Kwame Nkrumah’s autobiography published in 1959 when he wrote: “Today I am a non-denominational Christian and a Marxist socialist and I have not found any contradiction between the two.”^[31] This, Pobee finds very misleading and a misunderstanding of what the two sects stand for.

^[20] Heibert, G. Paul. 1981: Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. William Carey Library. Pasadena. 378

^[21] Imbach, S.R. Syncretism: <http://mb-soft.com/believe/indexa.html>. Elwell Evangelical Dictionary.

^[22] Heibert, G. Paul. 378

^[23] Debrunner, W. Hans: 1967. 256

^[24] Debrunner, W. Hans: 1967.258

^[25] Larbi, Kingsley E. 2001: Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity. Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, Accra-Ghana. 29

^[26] Johnstone, Patrick. 2001: Operation World. Paternoster Lifestyle. Cumbria. 274

^[27] Christian witness to Hindus [The Lausanne Committee for world Evangelism.] Perspective on the world Christian movement.- edited by Ralph .D. Winter and Steven .C. Hamthorne). 645

Challenges Today

Commenting on the modern-day missionary challenges, Todd M. Johnson in his publication, “Christianity at 2000: Changes Today, Challenges Tomorrow”, notes that; the challenges faced by new missions of the 21st century are legion. The world of AD 2000 is radically different from that of 1900. The overconfidence exhibited early by secular leaders of the Enlightenment Project has been completely deflated by the collapse of communism and general loss of faith in science and the idea of inevitable progress.^[32]

Johnson asserted that Christian theologians and mission leaders who borrowed heavily from this paradigm find themselves at a crossroads. Although some advocate an even stronger “modern” approach, many see the changing times as corrective to the overconfidence of 20th-century strategies.^[33]

Some see the ethos of 20th-century mission creeping into 21st-century initiatives. First is the tendency to convene big conferences with impressive slogans, in which the implications of the slogans are not always seriously addressed.^[34]

Second, the hoped-for century of church union has become one of schism and lack of co-operation. If anything, hundreds of new organizations have emerged, each with its own independently stated plans.^[35]

Third, the number of missionaries available for frontier missions may be impacted by an increasing uneasiness over the efficiency of Christianity in “already disciplined” peoples.^[36]

Fourth, short-term mission efforts are now a driving force in missions. Although this means that more Christians are exposed to mission fields, it seems to be having the effect of injecting a short-term emphasis into long term church planting strategies.

Fifth, although much has been learned about contextualization of the gospel, emerging short term mentalities foreshadow a de-emphasis on language and culture learning, which are still the backbone of the foreign missionary enterprise.

Conclusion

David Nii Anum Kpobi gave some reasons for the failure of some of the early missionaries and chaplains. This was the fact that they worked under various constraints. Also, many of them simply had no interest in evangelizing the local people.^[37] However, there is no doubt that some of them were filled with genuine Christian zeal for the propagation of the Gospel.^[38] These zealous ones, however, happened to come at a time when trade offered more attractive benefits than preaching of the Gospel.^[39] The Europeans on the coast did not only become involved in the gold trade; they also sought to control it. This was no doubt, resented by the local people. It was almost impossible for the Africans to distinguish between the European trader and the missionary.^[40]

Closely related to this set-back was the method of beginning evangelism from the Royal Court, with the hope that when the King gets converted, the masses would also follow. This strategy turned out to be very intrusive to the Africans. It was perceived as an attempt to dominate the political life of the people. It was clear that they underestimated the strength of traditional religions. The missionaries resented to some extent the very culture of the people and considered drumming and dancing, for example, as serious offenses.^[41] They held the view prevalent at that time, that the Africans had no idea about God, and would therefore gladly accept the Gospel without questioning.^[42]

Agbeti’s appraisal in his book; “West African Church History” confirmed that most of the early

[28] Tienou, Tite.1990: The Theological Task of the Church in Africa. African Christian Press, Achimota, Ghana.22

[29] Kpobi, N.A. David.1953: Missions in Chains. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer. 146

[30] Debrunner, W. Hans: 1967.A History of Christianity in Ghana. Waterville Publishing House.19

[31] Pobe, S. John.1980 Kwame Nkrumah and the Church in Ghana (1949-1966). Asempa Publishers. Accra. 39

[32] Todd, Johnson M. 2002: Doing Member Care Well. William Carey Library,Pasadena.35-36

[33] Todd, Johnson M. 2002: Doing Member Care Well. William Carey Library,Pasadena.35-36

[34] Todd, Johnson M. 2002:35-36

[35] Todd, Johnson M. 2002:35-36

[36] Todd, Johnson M. 2002:35-36

[37] Kpobi, N.A. David.1953: Missions in Chains. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer. 48

[38] Kpobi, N.A. David. 1953: 48

missionaries thought and believed that the African had no religion of his own. Consequently, they (the missionaries) felt divinely called to take their Western Religion and civilization to Africa.

This Western derogatory attitude has been clearly articulated in this German hymn, translated into Ewe, specially composed, for mission fields in India, Africa, and non-Western countries.

*Nu nyuigeowo so gbo
Le nutomawo me.
Anyigbaya nyonuto
Gake ameawo gble.
Mawufedomenyonyo
Gba go de wodzidzro
Ati kple kpe wosubo,
Womenya Mawu O.^[43]*

This verse may be paraphrased in English as: “In those regions (Africa and India) the land is fertile, but the inhabitants are corrupt; may they have a share in God’s grace; they worship wood and stone, they do not know God (they have no religion).” From this so-called depraved nature, the Western missionaries, regarding themselves as superior people, felt called to deliver the Africans. Therefore, they composed and sang:

*Can we, whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high.
Can we, to men benighted
The lamp of life deny.
Salvation! O salvation!
The joyful sound proclaim,
Till each remotest nation
Has learned Messiah’s name.^[44]*

Thus from the foregoing, it may be concluded that the Western missionaries risked their lives to come to Africa because of the derogatory and poor image they had about Africans.^[45]

They paid little attention to the socio-cultural factors that play a very important role in missionary communication. Not much was done to present Christianity in a way that would appeal to the Africans. According to Kpobi, the uncompromising attitude of Christian theology at the time was the reason for their attitude towards traditional religion. He was, however, of the opinion that they would have achieved more positive results if they had regarded the African religion as a preparation for the coming of the gospel.^[46]

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[39] Kpobi, N.A. David. 1953: 48

[40] Kpobi, N.A. David. 48

[41] Schweizer A. Peter.2000: Survivors on the Gold Coast. Smartline Publishing House. Accra.79

[42] Kpobi, N.A. David. 48

[43] Agbeti, Kofi J.1986: West African Church History. Leiden E.J. Brill. Netherlands. 161

[44] Agbeti, Kofi J.1986: West African Church History. Leiden E.J. Brill. Netherlands.161; see also Methodist Hymn Book Number 801.

[45] Agbeti, Kofi J.1986: West African Church History. Leiden E.J. Brill. Netherlands.161; see also E.P Church Hymn book Number 166 in Ewe.

[46] Kpobi, N.A. David.1953: Missions in Chains. UitgeverijBoekencentrum, Zoetermeer. 48