

WOMEN IN MISSIONS

Naana Nkrumah, Rhoda Oluwakemi Appiah & Yesutor Gumenu

Introduction

Women all over the world continue to contribute significantly to the development of their nations in the socio-economic and political arenas among other things. Even more significant is their eternal impact demonstrated in their contribution to the spread of the Gospel. Although the missionary landscape has for a long time been dominated by men, women have in no small measure contributed to the cause of Missions.

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines mission(s) as “an organized effort for the propagation of the Christian faith”.

In Mathew 28:19-20 & Mark 16:15, Missions is conceived as the lifelong commitment of Christian individuals and groups to actively obey the command of Jesus Christ to go into the world and raise disciples (i.e. obedient followers or devotees) from every tribe and nation through the preaching of the Gospel and to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Since our article focuses on Women and Missions, it is important that we biblically define who a woman is in the light of the Creator’s intention and design. The Bible states in Genesis 1:26-27 that God created human beings (man and woman) in His image and after His likeness to rule over His creation. In Genesis 5:1-2 (KJV) we are told that Adam is both the name of the first man and the name for humanity (i.e. both men and women). In effect, a woman is God’s creation made in His image and likeness with the responsibility of stewardship and rule over God’s creation as God Himself intended in the beginning. The woman’s role as a helper to the man is concerning the husband-wife relationship called marriage.

In exploring Women in Missions, we are careful to include both the direct and indirect roles played by women with special attention to their uniqueness. We have attempted to look at the Woman in Missions as a Mother, Wife, Spinster, Widow, and even as a little girl. Additionally, we have juxtaposed Bib-

lical examples of such women with their contemporary ones. It is our fervent hope that every reader, especially today’s Christian woman would see her indispensable place as a vessel for the spread of the Gospel in raising obedient followers (disciples) for Jesus in every tribe and nation.

Biblical & Contemporary Examples of Women in Missions.

- *Mary, The Mother of Jesus Christ & Susana Wesley, The Mother of John and Charles Wesley.*

All through the Bible; from Genesis to Revelation, we see a God who loves community and is constantly looking for ways to draw people to Himself. As Rev. Samson Dorkunor, a former President of the Ghana Evangelical Missions Association (GEMA) rightly puts it, “God’s strategy has always been men.” That is to say that human beings have always been God’s channel for perpetuating His will on earth including missions.

To this end, the Bible is replete with examples of women who were used by God in the business of raising people for the kingdom of God. One of such women is Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, the world’s only Savior. Before the coming of Christ to earth, God greatly used the nation of Israel to portray Himself to the rest of the world in addition to working in various cultures to draw people’s attention to Himself.

The writer of Hebrews puts it aptly: “*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things...*” Hebrews 1:1-2 (NKJV). Although God, in times past, sought to make Himself known in various ways, the coming to earth of Jesus Christ was and still remains the greatest blessing ever, in that His birth, death, burial, and resurrection paved the way for all humanity to have access to God by believing the Gospel.

It is no mean thing that the Savior of the whole world was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a woman and was birthed by her for the salvation of mankind. The ridicule which she bore as the Virgin with child coupled with the nuances of pregnancy among other things cannot be overlooked. Mary's contribution to the missionary enterprise is indelible especially when one considers the kind of Child she birthed and how that in the absence of her "Child", there would be no salvation for mankind nor a worldwide missions movement to start with. We are aware that such an example of missionary contribution may not be fully appreciated by everyone but this in no wise lessens its weight as a worthy example.

Along with Mary, let us also consider Susanna Wesley, the mother of Charles and John Wesley. She, like Mary, is another example of a godly mother who birthed and raised godly children whose impact continues to reverberate around the globe. An article by Joseph W. Martin titled "Susanna Wesley, Mother of Methodism" featured in the Charisma Magazine says this about Susanna, "*Most historians consider John and Charles Wesley, the two founders of the Methodist Church. But behind these men stood a strong mother whose influence molded and shaped their destinies. In addition to her regular domestic duties, she handled the religious and educational training of her children...*"

The training Susanna Wesley gave her children has resulted in some 40.5 million Methodists in 138 countries today. Her life testifies to the truth that "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it". Proverbs 22:6 (ESV). Indeed, "she earned the title, mother of Methodism without ever (directly) planting a church".

Women in Ghana Missions

- *Mary Steele, (1928 – 2017) a nurse-midwife turned missionary & Rev. Edith Eyoman Larbi, A missionary to Klonu.*

Mary Steele, a professional nurse-midwife, in 1962 took a bold decision to leave her family, friends, and career to respond to her true calling. Her resolution to relocate and work as a Bible Translator in Ghana defined her life. Mary came to Ghana in 1962, the same year that GILLBT was founded and she retired in 2016. Mary served with GILLBT for 52 consecutive years, making her GILLBT's longest-serving

member. Her time in Ghana was dedicated to the development of the Konkomba and Bimoba languages into written form.

Mary Steele promoted literacy and translated the complete Bible into these two languages. She also supervised the revision of the Konkomba and Bimoba Bibles, making them the first GILLBT-sponsored language groups to have revised versions of the complete Bible. Her faith in God and her contribution to Bible translation were outstanding. Mary was widely loved and greatly respected in the UK and also in Ghana. Mary's contributions could only have been achieved by an institution. In the field of Mother Tongue Bible Translation, Mary's work can simply be described as superhuman. It takes an institution to do what she did.

The significance, as well as impact of Mary's work in Ghana, was captured by a former President of Ghana, when he conferred on her, a National Award-Member of the Order of the Volta (MV) – on December 11, 2015. This is an extract of the citation given to her:

"...Your personal successes in literacy and community development in Ghana have been laudable. You successfully carried out Linguistics Research and Translated the New Testament into the Konkomba language in 1977. You translated the New Testament into the Bimoba language in 1985 and translated the Bible into Konkomba in 1999. You also produced the Bimoba Bible in 2004. You, Miss Mary Steele, were very instrumental in the publication of the Phonology and Grammar of Konkomba and the Dictionary of Konkomba. You authored Anthropological papers on aspects of the Konkomba and Bimoba languages, thereby transforming these two previously oral only languages to written forms as well. Your work in language development and literacy programmes provided building blocks for collective self-mobilization of the people in the two communities and enabled them to participate substantially in national development. Through the numerous literacy programmes organized in many communities, harmful social practices have been abandoned, while empowering the citizens socially, economically, and spiritually."

Rev. Edith Eyoman Larbi

This missionary to the Klonu people is also unequivocally a shining example and living legend today. Her love for God became evident at a very young age. She joined the Volta Evangelical Association (VEA) traveling with them for crusades, dawn broadcasts, and night vigils. Put in her own words *“I mingled with every creature on the floor: snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes, you name it but all these did not deter me from serving the Lord with excitement.”* Missionary Larbi in her early 20s left Accra without been sent by either a church or mission agency. What prompted this rare decision was a call she received. According to her, she went to a funeral in the said village and the Lord spoke to her in an audible voice *“I will send you to this village.”* Just like Paul the Apostle Paul, after his dramatic encounter on the way to Damascus, she never looked back. Her employers were willing to double her salary in a bid to dissuade her from her decision but this enticement did not stop her, her mind was made, not even discouraging words from a Pastor, who told her that there is nothing in the village, could dampen her spirit.

Ms. Larbi, with no experience or first-hand information about mission outreach except for the little knowledge, gleaned from books; spent nine solid years in the Klonu village, as a single missionary. Her decision to serve God in this uncharted course was not without challenges. She overcame both physical and spiritual attacks. According to her, 6 pythons sent to attack her were killed around her house. Her life was a riddle to both young and old in the village who could not understand why a single young lady will leave comfortable Accra and come and dwell among them in a typical village. To their curious mind, her answer was always *“I came here because of you.”* To the glory of God, her selfless labor among the people of Klonu resulted in the salvation of many. Prominent idol worshippers abandoned their idols and turned to the Lord together with their families as a result of her commitment. Today, Klonu village has produced many servants of God and there is a growing church planted among them.

Ms. Larbi led a simple life among the people, she became all things to them that she might win some. One of the favorite songs which the Lord used to encourage her in those days was *“Make the Lord your delight and your want will be His care”*

Challenges of women in Mission

In contemporary times, women in Africa have defied and overcome many odds to excel and stand out in many fields of endeavors hitherto considered to be male-dominated, from academia to the political field, to heading multinational companies, to entrepreneurship, just to mention a few. However, when it comes to missions, though Ghanaian women like Edith Larbi, (missionary to Klonu) Madam Florence Yeboah, (founded GHACOE Women’s Ministry), Mrs. Georgina Mensah, Dr. Margaret Mensah (who both served in Mauritania), Mrs. Cynthia Mensah (who served in Botswana) and others stand out as living legends, there are still many more lands to be covered. The greatest barrier to women excelling in the field of mission has to do to a large extent, our mindset and the narrow perception of the mission enterprise.

Just as women have taken the bull by the horns and excelled in other fields of human endeavors, the same can be done in the field of missions, both in the marketplace and in frontline missions. If women will rightly conceive mission as *“Kingdom Expansion,”* and see every career as an opportunity to spread the gospel, then the task of the Great Commission will be accomplished in no time. The world of Christian women needs a reorientation into understanding that as stated in one of the materials of *“Simply Mobilizing”*, mission is now *“From everywhere to everywhere.”* God is looking for women to stand for Him as Esther did in the palace, like Deborah in the battlefield; or the young captive girl who introduced Naaman to the God of Isreal, (2 Kings 5:1-5). God is looking for women to expand His kingdom among children in the schools, on the campuses, in the corridors of power to stand against ungodly policies with uncommon passion in the parliament, in the health sector; the list is endless, the only qualification needed by such women is a passionate heart for the expansion of the kingdom of the King of Kings.

- **The way forward: How to sustain the work of women in missions.**

The way forward, we believe is to raise our daughters from the home front to the churches with a Kingdom mindset. The bible says *“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”* (Prov. 22:6 NKJV). Mothers, Sunday school teachers, church leaders, and other should

intentionally sow the seed of missions in the minds of our daughters and disciple them to become kingdom-minded believers. Just as we want them to excel as lawyers, bankers, educationists, entrepreneurs, etc. daughters should be raised with the mind that they can be Christ representatives in any field of endeavor. Let us plant the seed of the 3Gs' in their minds "Going, (going to the field as a frontline missionary like Mary Slessor), Giving (giving of their money, time and talent to extend the kingdom), Groaning (praying for missions).

The truth is that women much more than their male counterparts face enormous challenges when they respond to the call of God. Sad to say, they are even discouraged by their Christian family and friends. The system of the world has always been and will always be anti-God, hence the need for the body of Christ to support with all the available resources,

women, both young and old with a heart for kingdom expansion. We are even in need of affirmative action on the side of women in ministry.

To conclude, we posit that women are great and are an indispensable instrument in God's hand. Given the right upbringing, the right information, the right training, a supportive and encouraging environment, women can do great exploits for God. As Myles Munroe observed, "*Women are multipliers; give her a seed, and she will give you a baby*". Women are incubators, women are burden bearers. Women have a womb. Let the Christian community plant the right seed in those wombs and wait to see the birth of a mighty kingdom workforce that will turn many to the Lord from their sheltered homes to the open field fearlessly.