

**MODERN MISSIONARY STRATEGIES IN THE
EVANGELIZATION OF WEST AFRICA**

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Abstract

Christianity in Africa can be dated as far back as the day of Pentecost in AD 30; people came from Egypt, Cyrene or Libya. Thus it could be said that from then or shortly thereafter that the Gospel came to Africa. After the Gospel was preached in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, God so arranged it that the next place the Gospel would come to was Africa. Apart from the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26ff that tells us about how the Gospel came to Africa, there are other places where Africa and Africans were mentioned. In Acts 11:20 we were told that men from Cyrene were among those preaching the Gospel and a man by name Lucius of Cyrene was mentioned among the leadership of the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1). Also Apollos of Alexandria who was converted on a visit to Ephesus (Acts 18:24), was from Africa. This man from Africa in turn became a missionary to Europe by preaching the good news to the people of Corinth. After this experience, Christianity first came to West Coast of Africa in the 15th century through the activity of the Portuguese explorers among whom were the Roman Catholic missionaries. It was discovered that the early missionaries adopted certain strategies which they used in the conversion of Africans/Nigerians. However, with the advancement of technology in the modern time, modern missionaries in Africa/Nigeria has adopted modern strategies while improving upon the old methods of evangelization to convert people to Christianity.

Keywords: Mission, Missionary Enterprise, West Africa

Introduction

Christianity in Africa can be dated back as far as the day of Pentecost in AD 30; people came from Egypt, Cyrene or Libya. Thus it could be said that from then or shortly thereafter that the Gospel came to Africa. After the Gospel was preached in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, God so arranged it that the next place the Gospel would come to was Africa. Apart from the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26ff that tell us about how the Gospel came to Africa, there are other places

where Africa and Africans were mentioned. In Acts 11:20 we were told that men from Cyrene were among those preaching the Gospel and a man by name Lucius of Cyrene was mentioned among the leadership of the Church in Antioch (Acts 13: 1). Also Apollos of Alexandria who was converted on a visit to Ephesus (Acts 18: 24) was from Africa. This man from Africa in turn became a missionary to Europe by preaching the Good news to the people of Corinth. In expressing this submission, Ukaoha (2013) states, "thus in the Bible we have a record of how God arranged it that the Gospel would come to Africa" (p. 23).

Again, after this experience, Christianity first came to West coast of Africa in the 15th century through the activities of the Portuguese explorers among whom were the Roman Catholic missionaries. A Portugal prince with the nickname Henry, the Navigator wanted to find out more about Africa and in addition he wanted the Roman Catholic missionaries to carry the Gospel to the coast of West Africa where they have established trading center. Commenting further, Anyacho et al (2010) opines that, "his maritime interest which earned him the name Navigator made it possible for discovery of many fields abroad which contributed directly and indirectly to Portuguese empire expansion overseas. Through his sponsored voyages many parts of Africa South of Sahara were discovered" (p. 90). He was the brain behind the Portuguese explorations of the West African coasts in the 15th century. The primary motive of the Portuguese maritime expeditions was commercial. They wanted to secure for themselves the trans-Saharan trade in gold, ivory and slaves which was until then monopolized by the Moors as the Muslims were called then. Secondly, it was political. Prince Henry wanted to make Portugal a leading European power through colonization of Africa. Thirdly, it was religious, to Christianize Africa as a way to rid the North of Muslims. Even though their missionary activities started off and thrived but due to some reasons which bothered majorly on their operations they were frustrated and the mission almost died off.

Following the great revival among the Protestant that led to the abolition of the slave trade with a bill passed in England in 1772 and also with the concern to reach people of other parts of the world with the message of salvation. In 1780 different Christians began to talk about missions and the establishment of mission societies and these mission societies helped in evangelizing West Africa. According to Nnatuanya (2011):

By 1841, the abolitionists were advocating taking the campaign inside Africa itself and seeking to regenerate the continent of Africa by the Bible and the plough. In regard to the nuisance constituted by the freed slaves, many humanitarians had aimed for a Christian colony with a Christian charter and people to be established in African soil. To materialize their dream and desire to free Europe from freed slaves, Freetown was chosen for the experiment and it should be of great interest to state that according to God's master plan, Christianity was planted in West Africa by these resettled Africans who were already Christians before their deportation. These Africa ex-slaves played the most vital role in the evangelization of the African continent. (p. 3).

Through this mission and the efforts of other mission societies with their headquarters in Sierra-Leone the whole of West Africa was evangelized up to the point where Africans began to establish their own local churches known as the African Independent Churches/African Initiated Churches (AIC)

In explaining how Christianity came to Africa, Ukaoha (2013) made three epochs/divisions and they are:

1. AD 62-1500: Africa's First Encounter with Christianity. Christianity in the North of the Sahara and the African Horn: North Africa, Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia.
2. AD 1500-1800: The Second Encounter of Africa with the Gospel. Christianity in the Ancient Kingdoms of Africa: Early Portuguese Maritime Expeditions/Christian missions. Christianity came to ancient kingdoms of Kongo, Angola, Warri/Benin and Zimbabwe.
3. AD 1792-1918: The Third Encounter of Africa with the Gospel. This is known as the era of Modern Protestant Mission. It started with the beginning of modern missions and ended with the rise of African Independent Churches. The focus is on the races of Sub-Sahara Africa. This is the greatest era of conversion in the entire history of the Church. (p. 24-25).

Accordingly, the above epochs (periods) can be categorized as ancient, medieval and modern Christianity in Africa. Interestingly, Christianity in West Africa falls within the second and third epochs but the focus of our study would be mainly on the 3rd period.

Early Christian Missions in West Africa

The first Europeans arrived at the West-African Coasts at the end of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese were the first to introduce the Christian faith into West Africa but following their departure from the West Coast in the mid-seventeenth century, the Christian religion survived only in Upper Guinea where a bishop was maintained in the Cape Verde Islands serving also a part of the mainland. Babalola (1988) wrote that at this time, the Portuguese had more or less a monopoly of movement along the West African Coast and the spreading of Christianity was the chief aim of Portugal's activities overseas. Along with it nevertheless, the Portuguese attached importance to commerce because of the support it gave to the missionary work. For several years they paid attention to slave trade rather than evangelization and Christianization of the people of West-Africa. A new era began with the settlements of Black Christians from Nova Scotia in Sierra Leone in 1787 and the missionary advance inland from Cape Town beginning with the arrival there of J. T. van der Kemp in 1799. New missionary societies (the LMS, the CMS, the Holy Ghost Fathers, the White Fathers, etc.) began work in many parts of Africa.

However, by the turn of the Nineteenth Century according to Kalu (1980), there was systematic efforts by churches of Christian Europe, namely: Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists who were active in Sierra Leone and, with Presbyterians, in Nigeria, while Methodists also set up missions in Ghana, Gambia, and Dahomey. In the 19th century, too, Afro-Brazilians returned to Benin and Nigeria with Catholicism. West Africa owes to the Christian missionaries not only a new religious faith which has changed the beliefs and life of millions of people, but also the foundation of western education.

Challenges Encountered by the Missionaries in West Africa

The early Christian missionaries in West Africa experienced a number of challenges, some arising from factors outside their control and others of their own making and they are as follows:

Unsuitable Climatic Conditions

The tropical climatic condition in the country was not favorable to the early missionaries who came to the shores of West Africa. The high temperatures coupled with high rainfall patterns in some parts of the

country experienced during the daytime, made the missionaries stay indoors, which slowed down their activities.

Language Barrier

Other difficulties they faced were the problems of the many languages and dialects and their ignorance of the true meaning of the various cultures, beliefs, values and ways of life of the people whom they set out to convert to Christianity. It was difficult for the European missionaries to communicate freely with the local people. They had to speak through few interpreters who did not have sufficient education to interpret correctly. In such situations, the message sometimes appealed to the local people depending on the efficiency of the interpreter. Moreover, speaking through interpreters is a defective means of communicating one's thoughts to one's audience. In highlighting how hard it was in dealing with the issues of language and the need for a means of communication, Green cited in Nnatuanya (1936) states that, "the making of Union Ibo was a difficult and delicate task involving questions of inter-group jealousy and prestige as well as purely linguistic considerations, and as such it certainly commands respect" (p. 90-91).

Misconception by the Early Europeans

The problems created by the white missionaries themselves arose largely from a misconception of what Africa represented. Europe in those days looked upon Africa as 'the Dark Continent' with very primitive civilizations, and most Europeans refused to adapt their religion to suit the local situation. And yet this was what earlier missionaries in pagan Europe had done when, for example, they had changed the Sabbath to suit the pagan Sun Day (hence Sunday), and had also adopted the dates of the pagan festivals to celebrate Christmas Day and the Easter festival.

Despised African Culture

The early African converts to Christianity, were made to abandon their ancestral culture and way of life as 'pagan' therefore to be shunned. Indeed, in some situations the converts were taught to feel that they were absolved from obeying their own traditional rulers and certain laws of the state. These trends occasionally brought kings into conflict with the missionaries and their converts.

Health Problems

The greatest problem faced by the early European Christian missionaries were, the tropical climate and health Hazards. Many missionaries died because of the climate and tropical disease. This single problem made the missionary work very difficult. However, the discovery of quinine and other curative medicines in the late 19th century made the history of the missionary work in West Africa a different thing altogether.

Financial Problems

Almost all the missions in West Africa faced financial problems in the early stages of their missionary work. They relied very much on their home churches for their funds. But the funds and other needed materials even when available could not reach their station in time. This was because all the ships that came to the coast at that time were owned by trading firms and companies whose interest were basically on trade. In such a situation, provisions and other things had to be sent into the country not in large quantities as would have been desired by the missionaries.

Transportation Problems

Lack of transport from the coast to the interior parts of West Africa was one of the major difficulties encountered by the missionaries. There were only bush paths, and no roads in the early times. Their luggage and other necessities had to be carried on heads and took a long time before reaching the missionaries. Besides, the missionaries had to travel longer distances to inland towns from their southern stations.

Insufficient Christian Literature

Another difficulty that the early missionaries faced in the spread of Christianity was insufficient Christian literature at that time. There were no Bibles in local languages, likewise grammar books were scanty, and so the missionaries had to spend time learning local languages, and translated the Bible and wrote series of grammar books. In Nigeria, one of the lasting works of the C.M.S. missionaries was the development of literature in Yoruba. Among several others, the native Bishop Ajayi Crowther produced the first translation of the Bible in Yoruba. In 1859, the first newspaper in Yoruba, called the *Iwe-Irohim*, was published by

the missionaries. Similar developments were carried out by the missionaries in other Nigerian languages, Efik, Kanuri, Igbo, etc.

Food

Lastly, the missionaries were not used to eating our local foods. This made it difficult for the early missionaries to stay in the country for long. However, with time, they brought some crops, which they cultivated and which sustained them

Modern Missionary Strategies

Some of the missionary strategies used in evangelizing West Africa can be said to have been in use over time but they are still relevant even in this modern times in the evangelization of West Africa. It is worthy of note that considering the modern means of evangelization in West Africa some of the challenges encountered by the early missionaries have been taken care of. Thus this paper looks at those missionary strategies that are being used in this modern time in evangelizing West Africa and they are as follows:

Education and Establishment of Schools

The provision of education and establishment of schools was one of the methods adopted by the missionaries. Citing an example with the CMS missionaries in Igbo land as it's seen clearly in Okeke (2006) citing Taylor's report on August 6, 1857: "Twelve children were brought to me to be educated by their respective parents and guardians. I looked upon them as the commencement of our direct missionary work. We lost no time, but began to teach them ABC" (p. 36). More so, the C.M.S missionaries discovered that the achievement of their goal will be through education. What followed was the establishment of schools like - Central School, Onitsha in 1860, St. Paul's Training College, Awka in 1904 (This was established for the purpose of training teachers) and Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha, Anambra (1925) among many other numerous schools. There is no doubt that since nineteenth century, mission schools, which were founded by foreign missionaries promoted Western education that was offered free or highly subsidized in most cases and many of today's Nigerian leaders benefited from the free education offered by the missionaries, which became the bedrock for Nigerian nationalism and independence.

In this present time, education and establishment of schools is still a vital tool in evangelization. No wonder at the beginning of a new Church a school is also started alongside the Church and so many other new mission schools scattered all over West Africa including Universities which still have the aim of evangelism. The churches that have established universities are but not limited to the Adventists (Babcock University) the Baptist (Bowen University), the Cherubim and Seraphim (Moses Orimolade University). For Ogbu (1996) "education had the basic goal of evangelization... (p. 18).

Development of Literature and Linguistics

The need for the development of literature and languages of West Africa was a strategy. Christopher Taylor had to study and attempt to develop the Igbo vocabulary. The study led to the translation of the Lord's Prayer that was used on 13th September, 1857. In reaction to Taylor's contribution towards the role of education, Okeke (2006) emphasized that Taylor's labour in translation introduced the Igbo to the art of reading and this in turn enabled them to master English language and opened up for them the immense wealth in literally works. In other words, it is on record that the missionary endeavor of the CMS was instrumental in the development of Igbo language.

Presently, the Diocese on the Niger is on a mission work at Togo in which some mission minded persons has been sent to evangelize the land including Priest who are leading the mission work and serious works are on the way in translating the Bible to their local language to aid the missionaries to minister effectively to the locals.

Establishment of Health Care Delivery and Hospital

It was around 1890 that one of the missionaries of the CMS, Rev. Henry Dobinson started a dispensary for a formal medical work among parishioners in and around Onitsha. The medical work was carried on by Miss Mary Elms, a Nursing Sister who had her nursing training in Sheffield England in both general nursing and midwifery. According to Mgbemena (2020), this bold step was the origin of the Niger Mission Medical Services which later gave birth to Iyi-Enu Mission Hospital in 1907. This venture helped immensely the evangelization of the people because preaching the gospel and healing the sick cannot be separated. The need for healing of the body from different disease that the Igbo man could not understand causes them to embrace the gospel.

This till date is still a very effective strategy to the evangelization of West Africa and Nigeria, many hospitals are still been established by the Churches with the intention of evangelism having in mind that medical care is still a way or means of evangelism especially when it is subsidized or even free as the case may be.

The Use of Skill Acquisition

The missionaries in their bid to evangelize Africans today make sure that holistic evangelization is carried out employing the use of proper and effective education which involved training in skills to make sure that their converts are useful to the society and themselves. In additions to that, few were trained as artisans and builders with the current fashion in mind.

The Come as you are Syndrome

This missionary strategy adopted in evangelizing the Church today is all about allowing people to come into the Church the way they are, regardless of how they dress or their appearance. This pattern is highly adopted by the Pentecostal missions where women go to the Church without covering their hair, they go to the Church putting on trouser, and men go to Church curling their hair like women, believing that as they come the Spirit of God will now do whatever He wants to do with them. Even though it was discovered however that not much is being done as they remain that same way they came. Mgbemena (2020) states that the "new" Churches had deviated from the old method of "preach, teach, and baptize to that of "preach, baptize, and teach". According to him the change in approach has denied the people of the intellectual content of evangelism.

As a strategy, one can say that it is working out for them because it draws a large number of people to them who so much appreciate that mantra of not being confined to a particular thing for whatsoever reasons and even some of the mainline Churches have been attracted to this theory but are practicing it partially due to pressure.

Revival Services and Crusades

A striking missionary strategy and method adopted by the Christian churches today is the organization of revival services and crusades. Thus public places, like market places, motor parks, community squares, and halls are flooded by all shades of evangelists and listeners.

In most of these revival centers emphasis is on miracles, faith healing, exorcism and deliverance from curses and demonic attacks. Most often these miracles and healings are advertised to the general public.

The emphasis on faith healing strategy today has given rise to charlatanism and proliferation of independent Churches. The African Guardian cited in Mgbemena (2020) summarized the nauseating situation thus:

All manner of crooks across the land, Veritable devils' advocates, social misfits and drop-outs, suddenly profess divine inspiration and extra-ordinary power to heal and to confer good fortune. The truth about all this is that they are based on personal greed and a wanton zeal to commercialize the Lord's Temple rather than on doctrinal differences. (p. 7).

This scenario is to be blamed on too much emphasis on miracles and faith healing and on the church leaders' pre-occupation with prosperity and riches. These crusades and revival meetings are good avenues for soul winning even though some mistake it as avenue for fund raising. Considering this kind of strategy one can say that it is very important as far as evangelization is concerned just that care should be taken so that things are not over done thereby making people see it as not too good a strategy

Tracts, Pamphlets, Posters, Banners, Stickers and Aprons

The other contemporary method adopted by the Christian Churches today is the use of tracts, pamphlets, posters, banners, stickers and aprons. It is a simple and profound evangelistic strategy. Pamphlets contain scriptural texts, expositions and sermons of other people. Many Nigerians have been converted by reading these literatures.

Indeed, the use of stickers are common among Christians in the country today. One finds them on cars, commercial lorries, and on wares. There are according Mgbemena (2020), such stickers as "It is well with my soul: Jesus Christ", "Jesus saves", "Angels on Guard", "I am Glorious", and so many others that defy description. The users of these stickers use them not only as adornments but as expressions of their faith. Psychologically, the use of the stickers allays fear and assures the drivers and their inmates of divine protection and same goes with the aprons that are been worn for both advertisement and protection.

Mass/Social Media

This is a veritable strategy adopted by contemporary Christian Churches today, which involves the use of electronic media and Internet facilities. Radio and TV are rife with Church programmes and some Churches have gone online. Every now and then, 'tele-evangelists' appear in these various channels to minister to people through the mass media, thereby gaining audience which they could not have reached ordinarily. In this way people who never wanted to go to the Church have heard the word of God and repented

The social media is another channel through which evangelism has really gone very far, services are online even at the same time of worship (live) through the online streaming. The facebook, twitter, whatsapp, instagram, youtube, etc. are various platforms in the social world through which the Gospel have gone beyond borders (unhindered to missionary capacity but now to network and its attendant needs). According to Grosso (2018), social media allow us to communicate with hundreds of thousands of people with one click – so what better place to spread this message of hope and love than facebook (or twitter or instagram)?

This is a very powerful strategy that goes as far as reaching out to people even in their living rooms and bed rooms even though it's quite costly but it is worthwhile in modern evangelism in West Africa.

Grassroots Evangelism

This is a strategy adopted so as to reach the most interior parts of West Africa with the Gospel and as it were almost all the Churches adopted this strategy. The mainline Churches created more dioceses so as to bring the Church and her administration closer to the grassroots. The Anglican Church even went further to create what is called missionary dioceses and with this sending the Church and her administration even inside the very interiors of the land. Some of the Pentecostal Churches like the RCCG, Winners, etc. are also working on that strategy.

Welfare Packages

This is a very important strategy in evangelism today in West Africa and in Nigeria in particular, considering the present condition and plight of people in this part of Africa. The best gospel you can preach to a hungry man is to give him food and this have been tested and proven

over time. So many Churches have keyed in big time in this welfare programme and package, the resultant effect is unprecedented. According to Okeke (2010), the retired Bishop on the Niger in his book saw it as an opportunity to care for the less privilege and because of its importance and role in evangelization mandated all the churches to create their own welfare committee. For example, presently Diocese on the Niger operating through her foundation (Calvary Care Foundation), the late Prophet T. B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, with some other Churches are well known for giving welfare packages to their members and non-members alike, some of these Churches have gone as far as building houses, for their members especially widows, giving of scholarship, etc..

Considering the poverty level in West Africa Churches have tried a lot in being the hope of the hopeless in the society around them and this has endeared the Church to the people and this in turn yielding a remarkable increase.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the coming of the missionaries played significant role in the overall development of West Africa and Nigeria in particular. The old missionaries strategies were of great importance having helped in laying the foundation of what is in existence today. Even though some of these old strategies or methods of evangelization are still been used, the modern strategies of today's missionaries such as skill acquisition; come as you are syndrome; revival services and crusades; tracts, pamphlets, posters, banners, stickers and aprons; mass media; grassroots evangelism; and welfare packages towards gaining converts into the Church in West Africa and in Nigeria has tremendously helped in reaching the previously unreached very fast and in a more convenient form. The impact of these missions endeavor today reverberates all around West Africa/Nigeria, regardless of the changing time they were able to meet up with the times and keyed into it and became even more relevant. There have been a remarkable growth in the Church both numerically and structurally which validates these modern mission strategies that have been adopted so far. These modern mission strategies as enumerated above helps the Church in one way or the other in achieving her main aim of evangelization in Nigeria, in this modern era of technological advancements and awareness.

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