THE ROOTS OF GHANA METHODISM

BY

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FOREWORD

The last Synod of the Ghana District of the Methodist Church was held at Winneba in January 1961. At the request of that Synod Mr F. L. Bartels, then Headmaster of Mfantsipim School, has produced this book on the history of the Methodist Church in Ghana.

The Methodist Church in Ghana has achieved autonomy after 126 years of tutelage under the British Methodist Conference. This book is a long-awaited memorial of that achievement, telling as it does for the first time the complete story of the beginning and growth of the Methodist Church in Ghana. The story is well told and will give all Methodists in Ghana a pardonable sense of pride in the part which their ancestors and they themselves have played in the progress of their church towards independence.

Although in the past fragments of the story have been told, it is only in this book that the devotion and affection of the early African pioneers of the church are revealed. Here in this book we meet Joseph Smith, William deGraft, George Peter Brown and their companions at their first meeting at Cape Coast on 1 October 1831. We see them resolved to study the Word of God as the best rule for Christian Living—they were Methodists before they were received into the Methodist Church—and watch them becoming involved in the life of their country. We encounter also Elizabeth Waldron, known as ‘Nanaa’, devoted to the care and upbringing of the young, and William Andrew Parker, the man who was ambitious for Church and State. These men and women, who were until now obscure figures in the past, are portrayed vividly as pioneers whose quest for divine truth became a daily pursuit: the local groups which sprang up through their inspiration were the beginnings of Ghana Methodism, which grew and developed into the autonomous Church of today.

To the British Methodist Conference and to its early missionaries the Ghana Church owes great gratitude, particularly to the Revs. Joseph Dunwell, George Wrigley and Peter Harrop, who are buried under the pulpit of Wesley Church at Cape Coast, and to Thomas Birch Freeman. Their courage, dedication and sacrifice were the foundation of the Church in Ghana. Supported by their faith in God and sure of ultimate victory, they pursued their missionary activities in a country which was then a remote and sometimes dangerous part of the world.
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The story traces the various phases in the organization of the Church—the class meeting, the society meeting, the quarterly meeting, and the Synod in its representative and ministerial sessions. These councils of the Church provided a training ground for leadership in Church and State in this as in other lands. It is not by accident that men like King Gharney of Winneba, George Blankson of Anomabu, F. C. Grant, J. M. Sarbah, Casely Hayford and J. P. Brown of Cape Coast, and a host of many others, who had all been trained in the Methodist Church, became leaders of political thought in the Gold Coast (as Ghana then was).

The part played by the Methodist people in the educational development of the country has also been vividly portrayed in these pages. Their particular contribution has been to post-primary education: they founded teacher training colleges, ministerial training colleges and secondary schools under peculiarly difficult circumstances. Their successes were due not only to the wisdom and courage of the ministers and lay leaders of the Church, but also to the loyal and courageous support of the ordinary members.

This history gives us the picture of a Church that is not anxious about continued existence as a separate and distinct body. It is refreshing to read of its part in the creation of the Christian Council of Ghana and the beginning of conversations about Church union. We believe that more Christian bodies will join the council, and we pray that all may join to seek the union of the Churches in one body for service to the world and to the praise of God.

The tradition of unselfish service to Church and country created by the early Ghanaian Methodists has been followed by many others, among whom may be mentioned Mr Bartels himself. Through modesty Mr Bartels makes no mention of the valuable contribution which he has himself made to the attainment of autonomy by the Ghana Methodist Church. Wherever possible he has chosen to remain anonymous in his narrative. For instance he does not include his name in ‘the core of the lay membership of the Church’s principal advisory committee, the Standing Committee’, on which he served with distinction. Nor does he mention the fact that he was invited to address the British Conference on 5 July 1961 when that conference recorded its approval, by a standing vote, of the Deed of Foundation of the autonomous Ghana Methodist Conference. He refers to ‘a layman’ who at the Synod debate of January 1956 voiced the doubts which were felt about
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the proposal for an autonomous West African Conference and, in so doing, redirected the thoughts of the Synod towards what it really wanted—an autonomous Ghana Conference. That layman was Mr Bartels.

Mr Bartels’ services were always at the disposal of the Church, and he served on important committees, represented the Church on inter-district conferences and assisted in drafting important documents. His greatest contribution has been to education. His administration of Mfantsipim School, the oldest school in the country, was so successful that it became a model to be followed by many similar institutions. Both the Government and the managers of educational institutions frequently sought his advice. In this way he not only helped his Church and country but also demonstrated the part played by the Church in the educational development of Ghana.

I would finally like to draw attention to the challenge of the times, which Mr Bartels discusses in the concluding paragraphs of his book. The political, social and economic situation in Ghana offers an opportunity to our young Church to bring to bear upon our nation-building the message of the New Testament, the message of the need for an unceasing search for righteousness and for the exercise of love for God and for man in our daily lives. In that opportunity lies the way of service to our nation. This call to service is a challenge which the Church readily and courageously accepts as its first great mission.

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President, Methodist Church, Ghana
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PREFACE

Most of the material for this book has come from three sources: despatches in the Public Records Office, London; the archives of the Methodist Missionary Society, London, and of the Methodist Church, Ghana; and the oral history of the people of Ghana. The Ghana Methodist Church provided the funds necessary for the collection of some of the material, and made it possible for me to add considerably to the information which a British Council Scholarship, a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, and a William Paton Fellowship held at the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, had enabled me to assemble some time ago. For the assistance from these sources I am most grateful.

The written records are in general the work of European men and women who looked at the African scene with a foreign eye. What these people saw and wrote had their own activities and attitudes at its centre, and the result did not always reflect the thoughts and feelings of the Africans among whom they worked. Like every Church historian who writes about the Church in Africa I have had to try to wrest the story of an African Church from material which is largely an account of the activities of Europeans. The special difficulties of research in these circumstances may be seen in an important episode like the downfall of the Fante gods, Nanaam, recorded in chapter III of this history: one of the principal actors in the drama is referred to in the sources by the colourless phrase 'an educated native'. His name, his place in the life of the Community and of the Church, must remain forgotten.

The letters and reports of missionaries were considerably influenced not only by what the Missionary Committee in London expected to hear but also by a desire to encourage members of the Methodist Church up and down the United Kingdom to collect funds for missionary work overseas. Progress reports, which not infrequently provided stories which helped to raise money, often lacked the detail of genuine reporting. The sensational always attracted attention whereas the unspectacular often passed unnoticed.

Written accounts by Africans have helped to redress the balance. These, however, are somewhat thin, although they have been supplemented from the rich oral tradition of the Ghanaian people which must be fully tapped before some of the questions which have been raised in the course of this history can be answered. What, for example, were
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the contents of the missing minute book of the Christian group to which the first Methodist missionary to Ghana preached his first sermon? Much longer research is required before justice can be done to the great story of the co-operation between Ghana and England in the building up of the Ghana Methodist Church.

The Synod of the Ghana District of the Methodist Church decided to present the story of the Ghana Methodist Church in a book in anticipation of the events of July 1961 when the Church would cease to be a Missionary Church and would take over full responsibility for all its affairs. This Synod invited me to revise Dr A. E. Souton’s Gold Coast Methodism 1835–1935 and to bring it up to date. In the course of the revision I came to the conclusion that the new material that had come to light since Dr Souton wrote his history would interfere with the narrative he had so well presented. For that reason I asked to be allowed, and was given permission, to write a new book, though drawing heavily on Dr Souton’s work.

Unlike Dr Souton, I have been concerned less with the development and more with the foundations of the Ghana Methodist Church. I did not have the time to deal both with the development and with the origins of that development. Moreover, while a great deal of information is available about the Church’s progress, very little is known about its beginning or roots. And the little that is recorded is a mixture of fact and fiction.

The Roots of Ghana Methodism must be regarded as the effort of people too numerous to mention individually; but I must single out a few for whose help I am particularly grateful. Adu Boahen, Lecturer in History, University of Ghana, Casely M. O. Maté, Unesco Chief of Mission, East Africa, formerly Senior History Master, Mfantsipim School and Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, Ghana, and L. A. Creedy, Education Secretary of the Methodist Church, Ghana, for the meticulous care with which they examined the manuscript and made suggestions; the Rev. Noel L. Warman, for his numerous helpful discussions of parts of the book; the Rev. T. A. Beetham, A. E. Chinbuah and L. B. Greaves for their comments; G. Thackray Eddy for the information he supplied on the final stages of the negotiations for the establishment of the Ghana Conference; to Brenda Wolfendale, Archivist, Methodist Missionary Society, for the ready assistance she gave me in the course of my research; Thomas Sam, John Acquaye, Margaret Perez-Torrenblanca and Susan Layton for their secretarial

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services; to all these and to W. E. F. Ward whose book, A History of the Gold Coast, has been an invaluable source of material, I owe a big debt of gratitude.

As well as indicating the source of my information, each reference listed in the book is an acknowledgement of my indebtedness. This is particularly true of references to Dr Southon’s Gold Coast Methodism. With my original mandate in mind, I have not found it necessary to depart much from Southon, where his narrative has faithfully conveyed all the known facts and the spirit of the times. I should also like to mention four other sources which have been useful—R. M. Wiltgen’s Gold Coast Missionary History, F. M. Bourret’s Ghana, C. P. Grove’s The Planting of Christianity in Africa, and The Year Book of Education (London 1949).

A book commissioned by the Church to be written primarily for its members, with Dr Southon’s popular book as its precursor, presented some difficulties: I have tried to write for the general reader without neglecting the historical facts which are essential to an understanding of the sources of the strength and weaknesses of the Church. The result of my efforts is The Roots of Ghana Methodism, and it is hoped that the scholar as well as the general reader will find it of some value.

F. L. B.

Paris
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The superior figures in the text refer to sources listed on pp. 324–49