

# WILLIAM WADE HARRIS: PREMIER AFRICAN EVANGELIST

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*Professor Watson A.O. Omulokoli has become East Africa's premier church historian who has contributed significantly to the research of African church history. Since the year 1986 he has researched and published in AJET no less than seven significant articles on important people and events in African church history.*

*In this article Professor Omulokoli narrates for us the life and ministry of a remarkable African evangelist in West Africa during the early days of missionary work last century. What we need is other church historians to follow in the footsteps of Professor Omulokoli and research important people and events before they fade into the unknown past.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian ministry of William Wade Harris was "one of the most remarkable movements in the whole history of Christianity in Africa"<sup>1</sup> and the most outstanding mass movement to Christianity on the continent.<sup>2</sup> Like John Wesley of Methodism, Harris was a phenomenally successful Christian evangelist who did not pursue the goal of forming a church despite the fact that his ministry

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964/1980), 492.

<sup>2</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 20.

resulted in the conversion of masses of people. Although his preaching endeavours were carried out from the inception of his ministry in 1913 to the time of his death in 1929, the climax was in the years 1913-1915, with the Ivory Coast and southwestern Ghana as his main areas of operation. Estimates of those who were converted to Christ under his preaching vary considerably. Even when the figures are in the lower category of 60,000 to 100,000 converts,<sup>3</sup> this was considered to be "a profound response to the man."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, the number of those baptised was reckoned to be about 120,000 adults "in just over a year."<sup>5</sup> The extent of his impact had no comparison, hence leading to viewing his success in contrast to the failure of the Roman Catholic European missionaries. In one verdict it was stated appropriately,

The Prophet Harris succeeded, where the missionaries had not, in persuading people to give up their indigenous form of worship. Whereas the Catholic missionaries who had been in the colony for the past two decades had succeeded in baptising only a few hundred people, Harris baptised what colonial administrators estimated at 100,000 to 120,000 people in about 1 year, the overwhelming majority of whom took the baptism as the beginning of their lives as Christians and either joined the missionary churches or sought to practice Christianity on their own.<sup>6</sup>

### **BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE**

William Wade Harris was born around the year 1865<sup>7</sup> in Graway

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<sup>3</sup> C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, vol. 4, 1914/1954: (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958/1964), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983/1992), 123.

<sup>5</sup> David Barrett ed., "Who's Who of African Independent Church Leaders," *Risk* 7, no. 3 (1971), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Sheila S. Walker, "The Message as the Medium: The Harrist Churches of the Ivory Coast and Ghana," in George Bond, Walton Johnson, and Sheila S. Walker eds., *African Christianity: Patterns of Religious Continuity* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. It is not easy to arrive at an accurate date of birth of Harris. One source puts this at between 1850 and 1865. See, Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast: The Prophet Harris and the Harrist Church* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina

village near Cape Palmas in Liberia, near the border with the Ivory Coast. He was from the Grebo tribe and was born of parents who were tied to their African traditional background and had not taken interest in Christianity. Aware of the pace of change in the overall environment, his parents were eager that Harris should have some formal education. With this in view, when he was twelve years old, they arranged for him to go and start with a fellow Grebo, the Rev. Jesse Lowrie, while pursuing schooling. This Grebo host served in the dual capacities of a Methodist minister and the director of the school which was part of an American Methodist Mission at Sinoe.<sup>8</sup>

Under these favourable living conditions and circumstance, Harris gained much formal education. This included learning to read and write in both Grebo and English. In addition to these elements, he received Christian instruction and as an indication of conversion, was eventually baptised at the age of 21 years in the Methodist Church tradition. This Methodist background, his conversion at the age of 21 under the agency of Rev. Lowrie, and the accompanying baptism, were so dear to Harris that they formed a very significant part of his spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>9</sup>

### INITIAL CAREER AND WORKING LIFE

Because of their proximity to the sea, many Grebo young men were easily attracted to working as crewmen as an occupation, whether for a shorter or longer period. Harris was no exception to this tendency. Consequently, it was not surprising that like most of his contemporaries, he took to the sea and became "a member of a crew of one of the British ships that plied the West African coast and had the opportunity to visit other African countries"<sup>10</sup> including Nigeria, in the process.

Following this stint of employment as a crewman on ships, Harris returned home and started settling down. As part of this process, he took up the occupation of being a brick mason. In another major step, Harris "married Rose Badick Farr, with whom he had six

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Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 123-124.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 9.

children" over the years.<sup>11</sup> There were two more significant developments in his life. In one direction, through the influence of a Liberian minister, Rev. Thompspon, he became a lay minister in the Methodist Church. In another direction, he coupled this role as a Methodist Church lay minister with the responsibility of serving as teacher in his former school at the Mission.<sup>12</sup> After many years of association with the Methodists,<sup>13</sup> however, his orientation was more and more towards the Episcopal Church in Liberia. While there is some confusion as to the exact dates and chronology of the changeover from association with the employment by the Methodists to his tenure of service with the Episcopalians, it is clear that he worked with Episcopalians for a definite period of time after his Methodist phase. First, Harris left Methodism and underwent confirmation as a member of the American Protestant Episcopal Mission. It is then pointed out that,

Harris left his job as a brick mason to become an assistant school-teacher at the American Protestant Episcopal mission in half-Graway in 1892. In this position he taught reading and writing for ten years. He was then put in charge of the Spring Hill School in Graway. Later he took charge of a boarding school in Half Graway, where he was responsible for sixteen pupils. In addition, he acquired the influential position of government interpreter.<sup>14</sup>

Together with the ecclesiastical shift which Harris made, there was a profound socio-political change which affected his future

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<sup>11</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> G.O.M. Tasié, "Christian Awakening in West Africa 1914-1918: A Study in the Significance of Native Agency," in O.U. Kalu, ed., *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, (London: Longman, 1980), 296. Just as in the case of his birth, there is lack of clarity regarding the years in which Harris worked with the Methodists, vis-à-vis, his period with Episcopalians. Here, the confusion is compounded when his period of service as a Methodist schoolteacher is given as 1892-1909. Cf. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 14. The claim here is that he became an Episcopal schoolteacher in 1892.

<sup>13</sup> The sequence of events in the life of Harris between his job as a crewman and his prison years is clouded. See above. Also, Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13 and Groves, vol. 4, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 45.

drastically. The assignment which he assumed as a government interpreter was double-edged. While it was a very influential position in society, at the same time it involved dealing with sensitive issues which had a lot of potential for controversy in the critical socio-political sphere. Involvement in this area led to a crisis whose results eventually made a lasting impact on his life, career, and ultimate mission and legacy.

### PREVAILING SOCIO-POLITICAL CLIMATE

Liberia was made up of essentially two groups of people. On the one hand, there was a small, but dominant population of African-American settlers. In principle, these were also the rulers of Liberia. At the same time, there was also a large section of the original indigenous inhabitants or indigenous Liberians. Over a long period of time, the indigenous population was disenchanted with the fact that they were being ruled by the African-American sector of the Liberian population. The disaffection which the Grebo, in particular, had with the Liberian government was partly based on bitterness about treaty violations. Those young men who had worked on British ships and visited British colonies as crew members were in the forefront in agitating for British rule instead of the existing Liberian government. Harris seemed to share this position. In the latter part of the 1800s, there were four wars between the Grebo and the government as a result of this state of affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The strained political picture was compounded by the prevailing emphases in Christian work. While the American Methodist Mission worked among all groups and even had indigenous people in prominent leadership positions, as in the case of Rev. Jesse Lowrie, Harris's teacher and mentor, "the Methodist missionaries in Liberia catered particularly to the Afro-American settlers."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, while the American Protestant Episcopal Mission included settlers in its Christian work, it concentrated much of its efforts on the indigenous population. In the sphere of education, the Episcopal Church put a lot of emphasis on schooling for both adults

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<sup>15</sup> Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10

and children with special attention given to learning to read and write in their own language as well as in English. The Episcopal Church was equally zealous in the training and ordaining of indigenous clergy. The first of those in this category were S.W. Kla Seton and M.P. Keda Valentine who were ordained in 1865.<sup>17</sup> In the area of language work,

Episcopal missionaries learned the Grebo language, devised a system of notation for it, and starting in 1839, published a Grebo-English dictionary and four hundred hymns and part of the gospels and prayer books in the language, as well as holding church services in Grebo.<sup>18</sup>

After identifying with the Episcopal Church, Harris was confirmed as a member there. Just as he had done when he was with the Methodist, he became a lay preacher once he settled in the Episcopal fold. Furthermore, he took up employment as a school teacher in the Episcopal Mission educational system and added to this the role of being a government interpreter. This latter responsibility was very influential, but also politically sensitive with serious potential for controversy. Indeed, it was while discharging his duty as a government interpreter that he landed into problems with the government.

### **TURMOIL, IMPRISONMENT AND NEW MISSION**

Through incidents, which took place in 1909, he got into serious trouble when his attitude and actions were taken to be anti-government. All this began when he had been appointed a peacemaker between two groups, which were antagonistic towards each other. Instead of being neutral, he sided with the faction which was hostile to the one favoured by the government. As a result of this friction, he was accused of disloyalty and dismissed from his role as a government interpreter. When the situation worsened, he revolted and expressed great displeasure at the treatment which was being meted out to him, and went on to style himself as the

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<sup>17</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

“Secretary of the Graway people.”<sup>19</sup>

In the prevailing atmosphere of discontentment on the part of the Grebo people with the Americo-Liberian government, Harris was now being targeted by the establishment as one of the leaders of a suspected revolt. Matters finally came to a head on 11th or 13th February, 1909, when Harris came into direct collision with the government, was arrested, and jailed. As has been claimed, on this occasion,

With a band of followers he lowered the Liberian flag and raised the British flag in its place, on Paduke Beach near Hooper, while his supporters shouted insults at Americo-Liberian onlookers. He was arrested, convicted of treason, and imprisoned for more than a year.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever Harris might have gone through earlier, the most significant turning point in his life sprang from his experiences in prison. In the period in which he was in prison, he underwent a profound spiritual experience which was to transform him, his life, and his career with far-reaching consequences for all concerned. He used much of his time in prison to engage in earnest zealous prayer and in serious study of the Bible. In time, this laid the foundation when he reportedly experienced a vision. It has been observed that,

In prison he spent a good deal of time praying and reading the Bible. One day, while praying, he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel telling him that he had been chosen by God to preach his Word to all people who had not yet heard the Christian message.<sup>21</sup>

Further details of the vision and new mission included serving God in a manner similar to that in which the prophet Elijah had shouldered his responsibilities for God in his time. In the case of Elijah, as he went about championing the cause of God, he confronted the prophets of Baal and triumphed over them. Moreover, in spreading the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, Harris was charged with the task of baptising those who were converted as a result of his preaching. Indeed, this element of

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

baptism was to become a pivotal undertaking in his ministry.

### LAUNCHING OF THE NEW MISSION IN LIBERIA

When he emerged out of prison changed, Harris was quite clear about what his new mission entailed. Convinced that he had a responsibility to ensure that his nation of Liberia was reached with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, he embarked on preaching ventures there, with the capital of Monrovia as his launching ground. He did not fare well in his home country, with his preaching activities being “met with ridicule”<sup>22</sup> from the people, and with opposition and hostility from the government. This hostile and scornful treatment degenerated into a further brief period of imprisonment. As he set out on his preaching campaign in Liberia, he was armed “with an extensive knowledge of the contents of the Bible”, but was accused of being a disturber of the peace and imprisoned again briefly.<sup>23</sup>

Although in practice Harris was now acting in a new and different capacity, his previous political record began to catch up with him and to raise fears in the minds of those connected with authority. Trouble with the government seemed imminent so he was forced to leave Liberia and to cross to the Ivory Coast, the neighbouring French territory.<sup>24</sup>

On embarking on his preaching ministry after the vision in prison, Harris had a completely changed outlook on life. This included his mode of dressing as well as the entire way in which he carried himself about. All this distinguished him as an identifiable messenger of God in the context of his environment and time. “He had an outfit made for himself consisting of a long white gown with black bands crossed across the chest and a little round white hat, perhaps inspired by pictures of biblical prophets.”<sup>25</sup> Apart from his mode of dressing, he had some unique articles which he carried along with him in the course of his work. These included, “a gourd

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<sup>22</sup> Walker, “The Message as the Medium,” in *African Christianity*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Groves, vol. 4, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Tasié, “Christian Awakening in West Africa,” in *History of Christianity in West Africa*, 297.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, “The Message as the Medium,” in *African Christianity*, 10.



rattle, a gourd bowl for baptismal water, a tall staff in the form of a cross, and his Bible."<sup>26</sup> This was part of the portrait of Harris as he turned his back on Liberia after rejection and headed to the Ivory Coast in 1913. It seems as if his wife had died before he left Liberia for these outside preaching engagements. Accompanying him as co-workers and assistants were two female companions.<sup>27</sup>

The people of the territory in which he carried out his ministry were steeped in African traditional culture and religion. As one who represented the Christian faith as such rather than a particular denomination, the core of his message was simple and direct. Wherever he went, he challenged his listeners to abandon their traditional religion and to embrace the "worship of one God and salvation in Jesus Christ."<sup>28</sup> Those who accepted his message and turned to Jesus Christ were baptised immediately without undergoing any further teaching and preparation. Through this process, his ministry proved singularly successful. In his approach,

Harris's technique was that he and his followers would enter a village singing songs and accompanying themselves with gourd rattles. When a crowd gathered Harris would preach his message. If people agreed to renounce their former religion and worship as Harris preached, he would baptise them with water from his gourd bowl, placing the Bible on their heads.<sup>29</sup>

### **HEIGHTENED EFFORTS IN THE IVORY COAST AND GHANA**

The preaching venture in the Ivory Coast commenced in 1913. Here, his geographical areas of concentration were those of the coastal sections to the south. The ethnic groups living in the lagoons "between Grand Lahou and Bingerville" received special

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 11

<sup>27</sup> Deji Ayegboyan and S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1997/1999), 51. See Also, Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 15. In some quarters these were mistaken for wives.

<sup>28</sup> Sanneh, 123.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 12.

attention in this evangelistic thrust.<sup>30</sup> By and large, the situation there was such that the population he preached to was made up of people whose lives were governed by the African traditional religion and who had not had much opportunity to hear about salvation in Christ.

In 1914 he travelled to southwestern Ghana where he preached for about three months, with the area of Apollonia as his main focus. From this brief foray into Ghana he returned to the Ivory Coast where he continued with his earlier work. In both the Ivory Coast and Ghana in the period of 1913 to 1915 his "mission was a phenomenal success" with thousands embracing the Christian faith.<sup>31</sup> Both the government and the Roman Catholic Church in the Ivory Coast were initially suspicious about the preaching activities of Harris. The government soon allowed him to proceed with his mission for the time being. On their part, Roman Catholic superiors disagreed with him because of his methods, but only "appreciated him because the number of people seeking to join the mission churches had been increasing by leaps and bounds since the Prophet had begun directing his converts to them."<sup>32</sup> In the end,

The Prophet Harris succeeded, where the missionaries had not, in persuading people to give up their indigenous form of worship. Whereas the Catholic missionaries who had been in the colony for the past two decades had succeeded in baptising only a few hundred people, Harris baptised what colonial administrators estimated at 100,000 to 120,000 people in about 1 year, the overwhelming majority of whom took the baptism as the beginning of their lives as Christians and either joined the missionary churches or sought to practice Christianity on their own.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Ghana, during his brief ministry there, estimates are that about ten thousand converts came to Jesus Christ in the target area of activity. Since he had no interest in establishing his own churches, Harris directed the new converts to join the surrounding established Protestant Churches. As a result of his preaching, influence, and directive, members in the churches in question

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

“increased phenomenally.”<sup>34</sup> The Methodists, in particular, gained immensely from this entire process. A case in point is what took place in the centre of operation of Apollonia. When a Methodist missionary, the Rev. Charles Armstrong arrived there, he “found 8,000 Harris converts in Apollonia in early August 1914, all waiting for Christian instruction. Harris had passed through that area a few weeks earlier.”<sup>35</sup>

Just when his labours in the Ivory Coast were experiencing immense success, the government became fearful about the large masses of people that were flocking to hear his preaching. It has been alleged that the government was apprehensive about the political implications of the large crowds which were trekking in from everywhere to benefit from his Christian work and ministry. The fact that many of the people streaming in to hear him in this French colony were from the British colony of Ghana was particularly worrying the government. The answer that they arrived at was expulsion. As has been explained,

Fears about the political implications of Harris’s activity in the Ivory Coast were very strong. Harris was expelled from the Ivory Coast, and the French colonial government claimed it was in order to avoid local unrest. It is noteworthy that at the time of his arrest in 1915 he was holding a service and conducting baptisms at Port Buonet, near Abidjan, the capital. A soldier and a boy who had accompanied the officer who was to arrest him became converted and were baptised before Harris was led away.<sup>36</sup>

The emphatic and firm expulsion of Harris took place when he “was quietly conducted some 300 miles away to the Liberian frontier and forbidden to return.”<sup>37</sup> Desirous of following up on his work and converts in the Ivory Coast, Harris attempted to return there severally. On each occasion he was turned away at the border by French guards who were in charge of entry points. This meant that his ministry was now essentially restricted to his home land of

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Sanneh, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Tasié, “Christian Awakening in West Africa,” in *History of Christianity in West Africa*, 298-299.

<sup>37</sup> Groves, vol. 4, 46.

Liberia. The exception to this was a brief visit which he paid to Sierra Leone in 1917. During this short preaching mission his impact was minimal,<sup>38</sup> falling far below the success which he had registered in his main operational territories in the Ivory Coast and in Ghana.

### **CLOSING DAYS OF MINISTRY IN LIBERIA**

Once he returned to Liberia in 1915, Harris resumed his preaching endeavours in his home country. While the tempo of his ministry slowed down and was occasional rather than continuous, nonetheless, he maintained preaching as his main work throughout the rest of his life from the time of his expulsion from the Ivory Coast. To accomplish this, he travelled far and wide throughout the country. Because his success in Liberia was not as phenomenal as had been the case in his early ministry in the Ivory Coast and in Ghana, it has been mistakenly assumed in some quarters that once he was expelled to his country, "the rest of his life seems to have been spent in obscurity."<sup>39</sup> While it is true that his ministry there was not spectacular, he still carried on with it, and did not disappear from the scene.

As he went about his work, his ministry had the greatest effect on those people who had an African traditional background and who in their perception welcomed him as an authentic messenger of God. It was among the African-American settlers and the African elite that his effect was least pronounced. This was not unexpected since most of those in this sector of society considered him to be a misguided religious fanatic who was not worth giving attention to.

Despite the fact that Christian missions working in Liberia benefitted immensely from his ministry, they were reluctant to recognise his work readily. In keeping with his pattern of operation as one who was mainly committed to evangelism, he would preach, and when people were converted, he baptised them, and then went

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<sup>38</sup> Because his evangelistic activities in Liberia in the later period did not meet with impressive and spectacular results, there has been a tendency of assuming mistakenly that there was no activity at all.

<sup>39</sup> Tasié, "Christianity Awakening in West Africa," in *History of Christianity in West Africa*, 299. See Also, Neil, 493.

on to direct them to existing Protestant missions. Once they joined these missions, however, they would be rebaptised. In one incident, his preaching registered remarkable results with about five hundred people being converted and baptised on that single occasion.<sup>40</sup>

When he was not going around on his preaching journeys, he lived quietly at home. His main preoccupation was that of service to God and to the people to whom he had been sent. This was the state of affairs when Harris, "rejected as a prophet by Liberians, died unknown and in poverty, 10 October, 1929."<sup>41</sup> At his death he was materially a poor man, but one who had won a rich harvest of converts for Jesus Christ. As has been appropriately captured regarding his life in Liberia,

He had returned as poor as when he left; when gifts were pressed upon him, he would straight away distribute them to the poor around. He was just a prophet of the Word, and found his deep satisfaction in his obedience to his Lord.<sup>42</sup>

### **STRATEGIES FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CONVERTS**

Harris was seriously concerned about the spiritual well-being and welfare of those who had been converted under his ministry. Aware of the fact that even if he wanted to, he could not be with them forever, he had devised some operational strategies which would enable them to survive on their own in subsequent days. The preliminary follow-up system started right at the time of their actual conversion when indelible means of initiation were employed. First, the Bible was placed on the heads of those who were ready to be baptised. Secondly, those who were converted were baptised immediately, with Harris using the water which he had carried in his gourd bowl.

Following conversion and initiation, Harris instructed his converts on some elementary truths and practices. To begin with, he stressed to them that they should observe Sunday seriously as the Sabbath, which they were to dedicate exclusively to worship and rest.

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<sup>40</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Barrett, "Who's Who," in *Risk*, 27

<sup>42</sup> Groves, vol. 4, 46.

Secondly, he set the pattern which his appointed assistants would later follow by teaching the converts some foundational truths which included instruction in the "Ten commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and Protestant hymns."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he impressed upon them the importance of leading ethico-moral and upright lives which were free from "theft, lying, adultery, and drunkenness."<sup>44</sup>

In all this, Harris insisted "that he was not a minister and did not intend to found a church."<sup>45</sup> For this reason, in areas where mission churches existed and were accessible to converts, he urged them to join these churches and find nurture within their confines, whether these churches were Roman Catholic or Protestant in orientation. Where there was a vacuum and there were no immediate prospects of such churches, the converts were to "build their own houses of prayer."<sup>46</sup> In one approach, when he met Methodist clerks, he entrusted them with the responsibilities of taking care of the new churches because he considered them to be responsible Christians. He would even charge them with the task of going into new areas where, after preaching, they would baptise converts, organise them into churches in which they would then gather to sing, pray, and worship in a Christian manner.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond existing mission churches and the agency of Methodist clerks, Harris tried to work out a novel plan of oversight for the churches. To ensure that there was a reliable structure for adequate leadership and pastoral care in this system, he arranged for each of these houses of prayer to have a minister assisted by 12 apostles who were chosen to this role by the community in the village. There are times when many areas and villages, which Harris had never visited, entered the movement and set up their own structures through which they promoted the ideals of the movement. The pattern was such that,

In many cases far away villages sent delegates to hear the Prophet, be baptised by him, and return to share the new religious teachings with their fellow villagers. This was one of the ways in which Harris's

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<sup>43</sup> Walker, in *African Christianity*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 14

<sup>45</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, in *African Christianity*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 44.

teachings penetrated to areas that he did not visit.<sup>48</sup>

Equipping the converts with hope for the future, he counselled them to be steadfast in their faith, while waiting for teachers who would arrive later with Bibles and who would be able to explain the content therein. In this all-important legacy, "The Prophet Harris also told his converts that 'teachers with Bibles' would come to teach them the contents of the book and how to be good Christians."<sup>49</sup> Together with the preparation which Harris had already given them, the prospects of knowledgeable teachers would prove to be a strong pillar for them in the Christian faith.

### MEASURES FOR MAINTAINING THE FAITH

On their part, the new converts were to ensure that they were able to perpetuate their Christian faith. This was especially true in the face of extreme danger and harassment. In the case of the Ivory Coast, after the expulsion of Harris, the government set out to eliminate his nascent movement. In the first instance, the authorities "went from village to village informing the people of the order and setting fire to their bamboo and thatch houses."<sup>50</sup> The movement proved to be too resilient to capitulate to these repressive measures by the government. Everywhere in the areas affected, those who had been converted persisted. A number of steps and practices which they took helped strengthen them in this struggle.

First, the construction of their own churches where none were available was a very serious issue. Even when their initial churches made of temporary building material were destroyed by the government, they constructed more permanent ones made of stone or bricks. Secondly, the Bible had a crucial central role in the life of the movement. Although most of them could not read because they were illiterate, in anticipation of teachers with Bible expertise who would come in the future, they "secured a Bible for each"<sup>51</sup> church. Thirdly, in keeping with the emphasis of the founder, Sunday was

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<sup>48</sup> Walker, in *African Christianity*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Tasié, in *History of Christianity in West Africa*, 299.

<sup>51</sup> Groves, vol. 4, 46.

observed with strict seriousness as a day of worship and rest. In this direction,

The prophet was particularly adamant about the observance of the Sabbath... The founders of the Harrist church wanted the new Christians to become thoroughly imbued with this religion and wanted them to have no activities that might distract them from attending church on Sunday and spending the day worshipping God. The prohibition continues in effect today, and most Harrists do spend a good portion of the day attending church, resting, and sometimes attending Harrist gatherings at which they sing and dance.<sup>52</sup>

Then, allied to faithfulness in observing Sunday as God's day of worship is the importance of worship itself as a communal practice. To ensure adherence to worship on this day, many groups bought bells and appointed bell-ringers to help summon people to worship services. This they persisted in doing even when their employers tried to make conditions hard for them. They followed the practice in which,

Assembling in God's house the people knelt in prayer. The official "preacher", an unlearned man, would lead them. They attempted singing snatches of the songs in pidgin English they had managed to learn, broke out in a song in their own language. The preacher would repeat what they had heard Harris or one of his envoys say.<sup>53</sup>

## **GAINS BY EXISTING MISSION CHURCHES**

### **In the Ivory Coast**

Existing mission churches gained immensely from the evangelistic labours of Harris. It is for this reason that in the case of the Ivory Coast, it has been rightly asserted that all Ivorian Christians are Harris converts. This is not much of an exaggeration in that when Harris arrived Roman Catholics numbered only a few hundred, and these were the only Ivorian Christians in existence upon his arrival. When his ministry there was over, the figure was

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<sup>52</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 110

<sup>53</sup> Tasié, in *History of Christianity in West Africa*, 299.



in tens of thousands by conservative estimates.<sup>54</sup>

Harris had made it clear that since he was not a minister, he had no intention of starting or founding his own Church. In areas where mission churches were in existence, he urged his followers to join these churches. Where there were no established churches, he counselled them to build their own churches and worship there regularly. As they did this, they were to hold onto their Bibles while waiting for teachers who would come "to unlock the Scriptures for them."<sup>55</sup> In the end, in the ivory Coast four main categories emerged out of the fruits of this movement. These were, the Roman Catholic Church which gained the most, mainline Protestant Churches as represented essentially by Methodists, the Harrist Church which claimed allegiance to Harris, and many new movements with separate existence.<sup>56</sup>

Even with all these groupings, it was not possible to cope with the influx of converts from this movement. In consequence of this, many fell by the wayside, mainly out of neglect or in the face of the severe persecution which the government unleashed against them. This was especially true in the aftermath of the expulsion of Harris when "the colonial administration decided to suppress such indigenous religious autonomy by arresting disciples and village leaders and destroying the churches or turning the finer structures over to the Catholic missionaries."<sup>57</sup>

**The Roman Catholic Church:** As is to be expected, in the Ivory Coast the Roman Catholic Church gained most from the evangelistic endeavours of Harris. Most of those who sought for churches to go to found that these were the only churches available. In certain instances, however, some who went to these churches left them in disillusionment since, in their view, they did not measure up to the stipulations of Harris. This happened when they, "finding no Bible

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<sup>54</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 56. See also, Walker, "The Message is the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 18-19.

<sup>55</sup> Sanneh, 123. See Also Groves, vol. 4, 46. The issue of teachers, white men or missionaries, either with Bibles or knowledge of the Bible was critical to the future welfare of the converts.

<sup>56</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 56.

<sup>57</sup> Walker, in *African Christianity*, 18.

in evidence in the Catholic Church they visited, concluded that Harris would not want them to go there because of the absence of the book."<sup>58</sup> Such exceptions notwithstanding, the tens of thousands of converts who were urged to join existing churches ended up in the Roman Catholic Church as the only option on the scene. The final outcome was such that because of the large numbers of people joining the Church, it grew by leaps and bounds, with the complication that "it was far beyond the capacity of the few missionaries present to minister to this multitude of people whom they had been unable to attract on their own."<sup>59</sup>

**The Methodist Church:** When it came to the Methodist Church, virtually from nothing, it gained a large membership in the Ivory Coast. Since most of the Methodists there were converts from the Harris era, the Church dates its beginnings from the height of his ministry in 1914. In reality, however, the Methodists arrived there ten years later in 1924. As if reaping where they did not sow, on their arrival when they "were enthusiastically welcomed by village after village of 'Harrist Protestants' as the 'teachers with Bibles,' they were immediately overwhelmed by people seeking to join their churches," hardly before their churches were off the ground.<sup>60</sup>

In 1923 and 1924, a Methodist missionary, Rev. William J. Platt toured the Ivory Coast, trying to assess the need for help. He was overwhelmed by what he encountered as he "visited an estimated forty villages and preached to more than eleven thousand people."<sup>61</sup> By the time the Methodists responded to Platt's appeal in 1925, "the French authorities had subjected many Harris converts to severe persecution and restricted their movement. Despite all this, it is claimed that some 50,000 people joined the Church when the Methodists opened one in the Ivory Coast."<sup>62</sup>

## **In Ghana**

**The Roman Catholic Church: Representing the Roman Catholic**

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Walker, *Religious Revolution*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Sanneh, 124.

Church in Ghana, the Catholic Missionary Society of Lyons had been working in the Nzima region since 1908. Between the years 1916 and 1921, the priest in charge, Fr. George Fischer, "gathered some 4,000 Harris converts" into his church.<sup>63</sup> Out of the spiritual movement initiated by Harris, the Roman Catholics were able to establish about 40 mission stations in Nzima and about another 10 along the Tana river in the 1920's.

**The Anglican Church:** The Anglican Church received into its ranks a substantive number of the followers of Harris. Two of its workers, the Rev. E.D. Marthinson and C. D. Elliott normally operated from Sefwi as their base. Following the spiritual outbreak under Harris, they were kept very busy as they tried to work among the converts. In this task, they found one of the followers of Harris, John Swatson, a most useful ally. He was already in the process of forging together large numbers of the converts into Anglican Church communities. He claimed that this was in keeping with the instructions of Harris. With the original Christ Church at Cape Coast as the pattern, these new Anglican communities were named "Christ Church" villages.<sup>64</sup>

**The Methodist Church:** In Ghana, apart from Roman Catholics and Anglicans, the other group, which really benefitted from the evangelistic activities under Prophet Harris was the Methodist Church in Ghana. As soon as its leaders came in touch with the Harris movement, the Methodists recognised that this field provided a tremendous opportunity for ready Christian converts.

In Axim, one Methodist minister, the Rev. Ernest Bruce, was exuberant in his observations on the impact of the movement in areas which had been visited by Harris. He noted that the movement was characterised by deep Christian commitment. Among other things, there was a proliferation of make-shift chapels and churches, there was a great thirst for God's Word, and insatiable hunger for

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<sup>63</sup> Sanneh, 124-125. For the section on benefits to mission churches in Ghana this paper has relied heavily on Sanneh's *West African Christianity*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

the songs of Zion was evident everywhere on the horizon.<sup>65</sup>

The area of Apollonia was greatly affected by the movement following the visit of Harris through there. Not long after the presence of Harris in the area, a Methodist missionary, the Rev. Charles Armstrong, arrived there. He was astounded to find about 8,000 resultant Christian converts waiting for Christian instruction in the early part of August, 1914.<sup>66</sup>

In Ghana's Cape Coast area, the number of converts was staggering. When the Methodist attempted to give assistance to the converts there, they were hampered in this exercise by two serious problems, one internal, and the other external. On one hand, there was the familiar internal limiting factor of shortage of personnel. On the other hand, there was the external interference in the form of new restrictions which the French had introduced when they banned the use of English and the local languages, in the case of this area, Fanti and Nzima, in the face of the First World War (1914-1918).<sup>67</sup>

Despite the twin barriers of shortage of manpower and language restrictions, Methodists maintained interest in the lot of Harris's converts in Nzima area. In one instance, the Rev. William Goudie visited Nzima and was able to witness for himself the results of Harris's ministry. Over the years, Methodist numbers increased three times. All the same, as late as 1923 or about ten years since the initiatives of Harris, it was evident that due to lack of effective mobilization and harnessing, "large numbers of Harris converts were still without a church."<sup>68</sup>

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The central element in the life of William Wade Harris was his evangelistic enterprise in the countries of Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and Ghana. The period relevant to this preaching ministry commenced with his divine call and commission while in prison in 1910 and ended with his death in 1929. It was while he was in prison that God appeared to him in a vision and charged him with

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 124

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

the task of preaching the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. He then embarked on this evangelistic venture as soon as he came out of prison, launching it in Monrovia in his own home country of Liberia. Following ridicule, rejection, and further imprisonment, he crossed over to neighbouring Ivory Coast in 1913 where he continued with his preaching work.

As he went about on his preaching mission, he found ample assistance from the numerous local teachers and evangelists who emerged out of his own efforts. They stood by him steadfastly in many ways, including interpreting for him as he preached in pidgin - English in varied localities. Urging those he preached to abandon their traditional religious allegiance and practices, he invited them to the two-fold commitment of the worship of God and salvation in Jesus Christ. Tens of thousands responded positively, and in keeping with their conversion, he baptised them immediately, using water which he carried around with him in his gourd container.

To ensure that their future spiritual well-being was taken care of, Harris urged the converts to join the existing churches since, not being a minister, he did not intend to found a Church. Where such churches were not in existence, he counselled them to build their own churches in which they would worship faithfully, while waiting for teachers who would come later to unfold to them the message of the Bible. After his expulsion from the Ivory Coast in 1915, he returned to his home in Liberia. Here, he continued with his preaching mission, albeit at a slow tempo. This was the state of affairs when he died in 1929 in relative obscurity and in material poverty.

His preaching enterprise was so effective that it was accompanied by phenomenal success. While estimates of those converted under his ministry vary, it is generally agreed that the figures were staggering. A colonial administrator at one time estimated that those converted and baptised under his preaching in one year numbered about 100,000 to 120,000. Those who have sought explanations for this phenomenal success have been at a loss on how to account for his effectiveness. He was indeed a pioneer, premier African Christian evangelist whose movement was adjudged to be "not simply a revival but a Pentecost."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

As a pioneer, premier African Christian evangelist, Harris burst onto the scene of African Church history with a drastically new approach to evangelism - "it was indiscreet, imprudent and undiplomatic" - but immensely effective and successful.<sup>70</sup> God had endowed in him such spiritual resources that were employed for the promotion of God's work in the territory which he traversed. All this he carried out with a demeanor which was seen in terms of a "simple but powerful life-style."<sup>71</sup>

On the personal level, he was imbued with zeal and a deep sense of Christian conviction. This purposeful spiritual posture seemed to be fuelled by an extensive knowledge of the Bible, a secret which enabled him to seek in it "explanations examples, and proofs to support"<sup>72</sup> all he said and did. It was clear that verses borrowed from the Scriptures formed the very bedrock on which his faith was built and nourished. As a contemporary missionary described the essence of his being, "He lives in a supernatural world in which the people, the ideas, the affirmations, the cosmology and the eschatology of the Bible are more real than the things he sees and hears materially."<sup>73</sup>

This personal disposition in turn had a telling effect on his evangelistic ventures. It was for this reason that as he preached "his hearers felt that the power of the unseen God was with him; they heard and obeyed."<sup>74</sup> In a moving assessment of the man and his career, the verdict has been made that,

His soul moved on a higher plane, and that he was a dynamic force of a rare order and a man who would move his age in a new way. His impact on those who came within his hearing was electric, and the effect he wrought on those whose souls he touched was permanent.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Tasié, in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, 297.

<sup>71</sup> Sanneh, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 20.

<sup>73</sup> Tasié, in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, 297.

<sup>74</sup> Neill, 492

<sup>75</sup> Sanneh, 124. It has been commented that in his approach "he showed striking gifts of prophecy and healing; he adopted a less intellectual and more down-to-earth style of oratory; and fearlessly and uncompromisingly he condemned African traditional religion, including all that seemed to be symbols of the pagan faith - magic, the medicine-man, the priests, etc." Tasié, in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, 297.