



An Assessment of the History of Christian Mission in Talensiland: Addressing the Issues of Conflict and Accommodation for Discipleship and Church Growth

Samuel Zuul Bayeti¹ 

¹ Apostolic Church Theological Seminary, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Christians throughout the ages have come to believe that the Great Commission, recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 enjoins them to proclaim the gospel to every person everywhere in the world. From biblical history as well as church history, it is evident that this mandate by Jesus to all Christians has been carried out resulting in the establishment of churches. The emergence of Christianity resulted in the formation of churches. Thus, Christians of all ages have sought to proclaim their faith as the vehicle for the salvation of non-Christians. The Christian faith, as a universal religion, encounters people in their various cultures wherever it is propagated. This paper therefore examined how the Christian faith was transmitted among the Talensi People of Ghana, and how it is being expressed by Talensi Christian converts as well as its impact on the Talensi society. Interviews and participant involvement formed the basis of data collection for the study. Key personalities who were contended that the success of any evangelistic activity among indigenous people highly depends upon how the Christian message is proclaimed, and understood by its intended audience. The paper concludes that for the Christian faith to take root in indigenous societies, it must take cognizance of the people's culture. People do not need to abandon their cultural links in order to become Christians but rather can be assisted to express their faith relevantly in the light of their cultures. This paper adds to the scholarly discourse on the engagement between Christianity and African traditional culture as well as the history of religions and missions as academic disciplines.

Correspondence

Samuel Zuul Bayeti
Email: zuulbayeti@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 is believed by Christians to be the mandate of the church to proclaim God's purposes to all humanity. The question of the why of mission does not appear to raise any problems. Missions is considered the personal obligation of every Christian, who is invited to participate in God's mission to witness and make disciples for Jesus (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts speaks of how the first-century Christians responded to the Great Commission, by proclaiming

the gospel in the then known world. They presented the story of Jesus to their various communities which culminated in the founding of churches.

Prior to the advent of Christianity, and Western ideas in Africa, African people lived and understood their existence mainly in terms of the beliefs and ideas of the communities to which they belonged. These beliefs and ideas have shaped their lives and have become their backbone. To traditional African people, the world was a religious reality to the extent that no aspect of existence could be considered without reference to the comprehensive balance of relationships. In this sense, Mbiti maintains that where the individual is, there is his religion; for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious; religion is in their whole system of being. It is in this sense that religion has been said to permeate all Stata of traditional African life.¹

By the time Christianity emerged in the African soil, the accepted western worldview that came with Christianity was found to be parallel to the indigenous African life and thought. The ideas that came with Christianity were found to be different from what Africans knew and this posed a serious challenge to relationships in the early years. It was for this reason that the early Christian missionaries held the view that Africans had no religion and for that matter no theology. However, when Christianity was first introduced on African soil, the early missionaries failed to recognize the significant role of the indigenous cultures of Africans. Consequently, the converts that were made were not able to match their newfound faith with their traditional worldviews. Nevertheless, African people had their own methods of articulating their theological and philosophical insights.

The Talensi are an indigenous people group who have been shaped by their own historical, cultural and religious past. With the introduction of Christianity on Talensi land many churches have sprung up drawing their membership from the indigenous population. This sets the pace for an inquiry into how the Christian faith had been proclaimed to the Talensi and how they are articulating it in their daily lives. Critical to this study is the need to explore how Christianity has been accepted and how it is impacting the indigenous Talensi society.

The Background of the Talensi

In an attempt to study any indigenous people, it is always expedient to rely on available scholarly sources. However, this is not so with respect to the Talensi. Only a few records are available on the Talensi people and any available information is what has been passed on by the forebears to succeeding generations and remains as, a matter of oral tradition. The writings of Meyer Fortes,² who studied the Talensi in colonial times are based on the information given by the elderly people of the time.³ Much of this oral history needs to be preserved so as to assist up-and-coming generations to be abreast with what constitutes their heritage and identity as a people. However, with many elderly people passing on, it is possible that much of this oral history could be lost posing serious far-reaching implications for future generations. This seems to account for the difficulty in accessing some relevant information about the Talensi in contemporary times.

The Talensi are an indigenous people of northern Ghana extraction. They are made up of different clans, each with its own history. For instance, the Namoo, clan traces its ancestry to one Musuol, an immigrant from Mamprugu who came to settle in Tongo some generations ago. According to Fortes, these people claim remote kinship with the ruling aristocracy of Mamprugu, hence their chiefship is derived from that of the paramount chief of Mamprugu.⁴ These clans who refer to themselves as *Nayir-dem* (people of the chiefship) or *Musuol-biih* (children of Musuol), are located in different areas in Tongo but see themselves as belonging to one stock.⁵ They include Dikpieng(Gung),

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1990), 3.

² Meyer Fortes, An Anthropologist who for many years worked among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana. His works include *Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi* (1967), *Web of Kinship among the Tallensi* (1969) and *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on the Tallensi Religion* (1987).

³ Meyer Fortes, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi: The Second Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe* (Routledge, 2018); .

⁴Meyer Fortes, *Dynamics of Clanship among Talensi*(London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 22.

⁵ Fortes, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi: The Second Part of an Analysis of the Social Structure of a Trans-Volta Tribe*, 3-4.

Siog, Puhug, Kuoreg, Yamerig, Shiega, Poso-Namoo, and Tong-beog. The royal skin or paramountcy rotates amongst these clans or gates. In the event of a vacant skin following the death of a sitting *Tongorana*, members of these royal gates present candidates to be considered by the *Nayir* (Paramount Chief of Mamprugu) for the position of a new chief of Another group of clans in the Talensi society include those referred to as *Tengdan – biih* (children of Tengdana). These are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the land or country. The ritual sanctions of their office are derived from the *teng* (Earth Cult) and hence are the custodians of the rituals associated with the sacred groves and ponds which ensures, *sumaahom* (peace) and wellbeing of the society and its peoples. These clans include Zubiong, subdivided into *Pulien*, *Saapeog* and *Dubaam*, *Zuo* and *Baare*, consisting of *Bagung*, *Lakung – Yil*, *Sakwar* and *Baare–tenget*. These clans are also identified with the *Yong* dance which is their traditional dance, which is played at important occasions including the *Daa* festival, as part of the rituals. There is also a group of clans known as the *Hill-Tallis*. These are located on and around the Tongo Hills. According to tradition, these clans chose these locations as places of refuge from the British and the slave raiders in the early years.

According to tradition, the people of *Sepat*, *Wakii*, *Tengzuk*, *Yindur*, *Santeng*, *Sii*, *Gorogo*, and *Gbeogo* are identified as the settlers who migrated from other areas. They are also identified with the *Goleb* dance which is a war dance that commemorates the resilience of their forebears in the consolidation of their land and people in the early years of war. As part of the rituals for this festival, the *Goleb-dan*, (owner of *Goleb*) is responsible for all the *malema* (rites) regarding the *Goleb* dance and the success of the festival which often comes off every year in the month of March.⁶

Religious Beliefs of the Talensi People

In order to understand the context in which Christianity has been embraced and is practised among the Talensi, it is necessary to study the traditional customs, and beliefs which shape the Talensi. The way the Christian message has been communicated, accepted, and practised among the Talensi, to a large extent may have been influenced by their beliefs and practices.

Naawun/ Wunaam (the Supreme Being)

The Talensi, like all other indigenous people of Africa, have been influenced by religion long before the coming of Christianity. Traditional religion imbued their faith and continued to do so in such a way that their daily lives were controlled by religious practices and customs. Ekeke and Ekeapara underscore the African understanding of God by saying:

The concept ‘God’ refers to the living eternal Being who is the source of all living and whose life existed from the dateless past. He is self-existent and is the one whose power sustains the universe. He is an all-knowing Being who knows and sees all things at the same time without any modern instrument. He even knows the end from the beginning.⁷

The characteristic of *Naawun* is that He is not associated with a specific tribe or considered a family deity or god. The manifestation of *Naawun* in the minds of the Talensi leaves such indelible marks in their hearts to the extent that they believe that he is a universal God or deity and cannot be approached in the same way as done to the local deities. According to Barker, *Naawun* is believed to be “above all other gods; he knows all, sees all, and is all-powerful.”⁸

The strong belief in *Naawun* is reinforced by the daily experiences of the Talensi and the tithes they give to him. For instance, in daily speech, the Talensi will wake up in the morning and respond to greetings saying, *Wunaam pang*, *la-asom- ma* meaning by God’s power it is well. When one is embarking on a journey, he or she is bid farewell in the words, *wunaamnam-mare paasom-ma* meaning God leads you safely to your destination.

⁶ Allman and Parker, *Tongnaab: A History of a West African God*, 41.

⁷ Emeka C Ekeke and Chike A Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010): 209–18.

⁸ P. Barker, *People, Language and Religion in Norther Ghana* (Accra: Asempra Publishers/GEC, 1986), 102.

They believe that *Naawun* does no evil but rather like a good mother, takes care of all her children without discrimination. This is expressed in the manner in which God provides rain for all people to plant and grow their crops. When one is taken ill, it is often said *Wunaam be nia, pang nan tana*, meaning God is present with you, and strength will come to you. Thus, the Talensi believe that it is *Naawun* who possesses all power and controls all events.

Naawun is believed to be the Creator and sustainer of the universe and all that exists. This universe, in the Talensi belief system, was created out of nothing.

Naawun is considered as one who loves and cares for his creation. He thus, controls the whole cosmos and orders all that pertains to it. This is what *Idowu* means when he posits that:

Africa recognized only one God, the Supreme, Universal God. Even though she has a picture of him which is of various shades, she calls him by various names and approaches him in various ways; he nevertheless, remains one and the same God, the Creator of all.⁹

The observation advanced by *Idowu* indicates that the African knows a Supreme being who is universally accepted and acknowledged. This idea underscores the Talensi religious position as they regard *Naawun* as superlatively great, unchanging and, unsurpassable in his cosmic power.

Yaabnam (The Ancestors)

Much as the Talensi believe in the Supreme Being, they also believe in the spirits of the ancestors, *Yaabnam*. Anderson observes that

the ancestors are believed to be those who have died, who exist in some usually undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access. There they look after their descendants' welfare and expect their cooperation in return. They have the power to both help and harm their wards. Ancestors can be angered and thereby can bring calamity to their descendants, especially when their instructions are not carried out.¹⁰

In the Talensi belief, the ancestor is one who died at a mature age or as a parent. The unmarried and infants who died could not be accorded the status of ancestry after death, as they had no offspring to minister to. The ancestors are not on the same level as *Wunaam* or the Supreme Being. This is because the ancestors were people who lived, and after death, have joined the spirit world. Their power is believed to be from the Supreme Being to administer the affairs on the earth, on his behalf. The Talensi associate more with the ancestors than with the other divinities because they were once human and are believed to know the human condition and needs very well and thus in a better position to solicit help and blessing from the Supreme Being. Moreover, for the Talensi, there is a strong link between the ancestors and their living descendants, a link that death cannot break. This explains why shrines dedicated to the ancestors are located in the homesteads of Talensi settlements usually in front of the houses.

The ancestors are highly regarded as the mediators between the living descendants and the Supreme Being. This explains the high moral standard that qualifies one to be an ancestor. Since the ancestors are believed to be the embodiment of the moral code, it implies that if one was not responsible on earth he could not also effectively mediate between the living and the Supreme Being. The place of the ancestors in the religious life of the Talensi is cemented by the sacrifices that are offered to them periodically to solicit their help and the intercession of the Supreme Being. They are sometimes invoked in blessings and curses depending on the situation. In line with this, Fortes believes that the ancestors "though dead and gone from the physical world of the living are invisible but effective and are accessible through the special medium of religious ritual."¹¹

⁹ B. E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. (London: SCM Press, 1973), 12.

¹⁰ A. Anderson, "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestors: Confrontation or Compromise?," *Missionalia* 21, no. 1 (1993): 26–39.

¹¹ Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22.

This belief in the ancestors forms the cardinal point of the Talensi worldview, which determines and influences every socio-religious activity of Talensi life including marriage, child naming, funerals, festivals and chieftaincy. The *Yaabnam* are highly regarded because their wishes constitute the basis of morality and ethical standards and spirituality among the Talensi. Compliance with their wishes and directives is believed to bring about blessings such as fertility for the land, animals and the people, and ensuring peace, and good health. Contrarily, disobedience to ancestral wishes incurs their wrath and can result in *toog* (sickness), *wolog* (drought), *kom* (famine), *kum* (death), and miscarriage among women and livestock animals.

Teng (The Earth Cult)

The belief in divinities is very much embedded in the Talensi tradition just like the belief in the Supreme Being. The Talensi believe that other divinities exist and have some divine power that can influence their lives. Unlike the ancestors, these divinities are never in human form and their origin is unknown. Idowu believes that divinities and ancestors form separate homogeneous categories of their own. Divinities and ancestors could be described as domesticated spirits. The ancestors have always been a part of the human family, and the divinities are intimately a tutelary part of the personal or community establishments.¹² The Talensi recognise and venerate the divinities represented by the sacred places including *tongbana*, (groves), *koleh*, (ponds), *tanhe*, (rocks) and special grounds perceived to be the abode of deities. These sacred groves include *Leong*, *Laatee*, *Gayen*, *Takuuk*, *Zunnuo*, *Dayelog*, *Limihil*, *Tenkurug*, *Sielog*, *Zukok*, *Duun Kpaleg*, *Baat-daa*, and *Kupiela* among others. The ponds which are also located in different settlements include *Kolkpeng*, *Kpaala*, *Sanii* and *Bulugkpet*.

Other sacred sites or grounds from where rituals are periodically carried out include *GbeogTangzuu*, *Baartoo Bilimbi*, *Tenzuk-nnuo*, where the final rites of the *Goleb* festival are performed, as well as *Musuol-ni*, which is the ceremonial grounds for the *Gingangodance* during the *Daafestival*. The *Tengdendem* the religious official mandated by custom to offer the prescribed sacrifices to the Earth cult of which he is the chief priest. He has attendants who assist him in all the ritual activities connected with the sacred sites.

Religious Practices of the Talensi People

The various rites and ceremonies by the Talensi constitute an expression of their religious beliefs. The tribal unity based on the religious bond of the ancestral cult has been demonstrated over time and continues to shape the Talensi society. These practices are to be observed by the younger generation, as part of the traditional education.

Bakolog (Divination/Sooth Saying)

The religious life of the Talensi finds expression in the traditional rites or *Malema*. Much as they believe in the spirit world as the pivot around which the physical life revolves, they do not take chances with the cause of events. In their belief, whatever happens in the physical is already determined in the spiritual realm, hence their desire to find out the cause of those events. The traditional act of determining the cause of an event or determining the unknown is often known as divination. Divination provides African traditional societies with the means to commune with the spiritual realm and to come up with prescriptions for a better and harmonious life. According to Peek, throughout Africa whether in the city or in the country, no matter the religion, sex, or status of the individual, questions, problems, and choices arise for which everyday knowledge is insufficient and yet action must be taken. The information needed to respond effectively is often sought, through a diviner. In the view of Peck divination continues to provide a trusted means of decision-making and a basic source of vital knowledge.¹³

¹² B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 186.

¹³ Philip M Peek, *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Georgetown University Press, 1991), 1-2.

Kaaba (Sacrifices)

The element of sacrifice is an important aspect of traditional religion just like other practices. Africans, and for that matter the Talensi, place much premium on sacrificial acts because they believe they are the means of cementing relations with the ancestors and divinities. They are a means of communion by which the family seeks to establish good standing with its ancestors and to solicit help in times of need. According to Talensi custom, the *Kaaba* can take many forms depending on the situation. They consider two main forms of the, which include the blood sacrifice and flour sacrifice. The sacrifice of blood often involves animals including cattle, goats, sheep, or dogs, as well as chicken and the flour sacrifice involves millet flour mixed with water and offered to the Shrines. Thus, the deities are called upon to come for Zomkuom as part of the people's prayer to ensure peace in the family or community. For the Talensi, the *Kaaba* constitutes a pillar in their worship experience and much emphasis is placed on it.

In extreme situations, dry flour is offered to the deities to solicit rain in times of drought. This type of offering indicates a lack of water to mix the flour, hence is offered in a dry state. For instance, in extreme dry periods, it is believed that when the official *Tengdan* of the *Kpaala* Ponds offers dry flour, to the *ponds*, it would result in rainfall. This form of sacrifice is symbolic in that it provokes the particular divinity to act on behalf of the community by providing them with rain.

Among the Talensi, sacrifices are offered as acts of thanksgiving, pacification and supplication. The sacrifices of thanksgiving are usually done after harvests when the first fruits are offered to the ancestors to thank them for their assistance in obtaining a good harvest. The annual celebration of the *Daa* festival provides families, clans, and entire communities the opportunity to offer thanksgiving sacrifices to their ancestors as tradition demands. Sacrifices of pacification are offered to pacify the deities as a result of wrongdoing on the part of a family, clan or individuals. Such wrongdoing may include cutting wood from the sacred groves, sleeping with someone's wife, and having sex in the bush among others. These crimes are believed to provoke the anger of the deities which call for sacrifices to avert any misfortune that may result.

The sacrifice of supplication often takes the form of requests or prayer and is carried out by individuals or the community on such occasions such as the beginning of a new farming season and before embarking on a journey and when one is going in for a wife among others. In this case, sacrifices are offered to the deities to solicit their blessing and favor for such undertakings.

Child Naming and Initiation Rites

The Talensi, believe that the birth of a child marks the re-birth of a particular ancestor. Through divination, the particular ancestor who has been reborn is ascertained and this is often reflected in the name that is often given to the newborn child. It is very common to hear such names as *Mbawomya*, (my father has heard), or *Mbalebna*, (my father has returned), among others. Consequently, personal shrines are raised for such children right from infancy to be their guardians. Therefore, child naming does not only give the child a family identification but also establishes a religious bond with the ancestral world. It is believed that the soul of the child is dedicated to a patron deity for its protection and guidance through life, and such a link is maintained through regular sacrifices.

Mbiti believes that nearly all African names have meanings. The naming of children is therefore an important occasion that is often marked by ceremonies in many societies... the physical aspects of birth, and ceremonies that might accompany pregnancy, birth, and childhood, are regarded with religious feeling and experience that another religious being has been born into a profoundly religious community and religious world.¹⁴

One important issue worth noting is the role of the male child in the religious life of the Talensi. The male child is regarded as a religious official with the position of a priest to offer required sacrifices in his father's stead. When initiated into the ancestral cult, male children, usually, can ascend to the position of lineage or clan heads, and eventually become *tendan-dem* (Chief Priests) within their clans.

¹⁴ John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 115-117.

Again male children are often initiated into the *bayaah* or sexton cult to qualify them religiously for the digging of graves and all mortuary practices regarding the dead.

Widowhood Rites

The Talensi consider widowhood as an important ritual that establishes the innocence or otherwise of a woman in the event of the death of her husband. The rites also offer widows a means of protection from familiar spirits that may attempt to torment them following the death of their husbands. The rites may involve abstinence from food for a number of days as well as put in seclusion throughout the period of mourning.

Emergence of Christianity in the Talensiland

The emergence of Christianity in Talensiland resulted in the establishment of churches. Some of these churches came to the area through the efforts of foreign missionaries, in collaboration with some native Talensi. These churches belong to the mainline Pentecostal and the charismatic traditions and others. The mainline churches fall under the umbrella of the Christian Council of Ghana and include the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Evangelical Church of Ghana, and the Methodist Church, Ghana as well as the Roman Catholic church. The Pentecostal churches include the Apostolic Church of Ghana, Assemblies of God, and the Church of Pentecost, Deeper Life Bible Church, among others.

The Charismatic tradition is represented by the Fountain Gate Chapel, Amazing Power Chapel International, Resurrection Power and Living Bread Ministries International, Divine Favour Church, Fruitful Life Chapel and the Christ Vision Chapel among others. Besides the above-mentioned church traditions, some other churches are present in the Talensi area. These include the Living Stone Baptist Church of the Ghana Baptist Convention, the Salvation Army Corps and the Church of Christ.

The Pioneer Churches

a. The Roman Catholic Church

The early Fathers of the Roman Catholic Church came to the Talensi area during the reign of *Tongorana* Nanaambeong. Even though there was initial resistance from the elders Tongorana vetoed and received the missionaries in his palace hall where the discussions regarding the establishment of the church were concluded. The grounds near the *Takuk* grove (a shrine believed to be the ancestral home of one of the Zubeong Clans) were allotted to the visiting Fathers. The first Christian worship took place under the trees of the “Takuk” grove. A chapel built of mud and thatch was later erected but collapsed due to heavy rainfall that year. Even though *Tongorana* Nanaanbeong accepted and convinced the *Zubiongtendana* to allow the Fathers to settle on the land near *Takuk*, there was still strong opposition from the indigenes of Zubrochg. This resulted in the relocation of the church from *Takuk* to *Kubaih* (a rocky ground at Kuoreg). At *Kukbaih*, a chapel and a residence for the catechist and visiting priests were built using bricks.

The visiting priests often come from Bolgatanga or Walewale. The first catechist was Elias Atampugiri who hailed from Daporitindong, The first Talensi convert to the Catholic faith who contributed greatly to the spread of the faith was Kpatiran who hailed from Tongo-Dekpieng. With time, the church moved to its present-day location from *Kukbaih* under the stewardship of Rev. Fr. Lapointe. During this period, the need for more catechists became necessary and consequently, four (4) young men were sent to Binduri for training. They included John Badiwon, Martin Nan-Engwala, Lawrence Nabii, and James Daanwalankora (son of the first convert, Kpatiran). After their training, the young men were engaged to teach in schools and assist with worship in the communities.

As stated above, the church was firmly established with a resident catechist and visiting priests from Bolgatanga and Walewale. Rev. Fr. J. Simard often came from Walewale for mission work in Tongo. Indeed, all these activities took place at the time of Bishop Bertrand who was in charge of the Navrongo Diocese. Beginning in 1958, Fr. J. Simard’s visits were very frequent and this led to Bishop Bertrand formally appointing him and Rev. Fr. E. Rioux as resident priests. A durbar was held on 26th October 1959 to formally welcome and introduce the missionaries to the community. This symbolized the indigenes’ acceptance of the gospel. In attendance were Tongo-Rana, Naab Salima and his sub-

chiefs, the then Member of Parliament, D. D. Balagumyetime, Msgr Abatey, Fr. Anuah, Fr. Marneffe and Fr. Lapointe. The day marked the formal establishment of the St. Theresa of the Child Jesus Parish in Tongo.

b. The Apostolic Church of Ghana

The Apostolic Church of Ghana is regarded as the first Pentecostal church in Tongo. It emerged through the initiative of a woman called Felicia Tegbehkawol, a native of Dikpieng. Recounting the history of the emergence of the Apostolic Church in Tongo, she said she got converted and joined the church at Assin Kushea in the Central region in the early 1980s. It was a result of a miraculous healing that took place in the life of her daughter who had been taken ill for a long time. In her view, “the miracle which occurred as a result of the prayers of the church leaders, encouraged her to join the church and remained a committed member after her water baptism.”¹⁵

After the death of her husband, Madam Felicia decided to return to Tongo with her children. Upon their arrival in Tongo, she sent her eldest daughter to Bolgatanga to search for the Apostolic Church there; who returned to Tongo without locating the church, much to her disappointment. Another time, she went personally to Bolgatanga to look for the church, but could also not locate it. One Saturday, she decided to go over to Bolgatanga to once again continue with her search for the church. Again she could not locate it and had to stay overnight with a relative in Bolgatanga. Later, she was able to locate the church and decided to attend worship services there every Sunday.

Going to Bolgatanga for worship service on Sunday mornings became a regular feature for Felicia and it encouraged her so much that she requested that a branch of the church be opened in Tongo. Her request was granted and some elders including Enoch, Agyemang and Twumasi, came to Tongo to find out the possibility of opening a branch there. Together with Felicia, the leaders approached the then *Tongoran* Kosaug Nandiwobog and his elders at the royal court through Kpana Buchi. *Tongoran* Kosaug received the delegation warmly and indicated his preparedness to accept all visitors into his land. Therefore, the idea of opening a church in Tongo was welcome news and he blessed them giving them permission to go ahead and open the church.

While in the chief's court, the chief had requested prayers for two of his wives who had been paralyzed for some time. After the prayer, the two women were miraculously healed and there was jubilation in the chief's court that day which attracted many people. The church leaders returned to Bolgatanga and returned another time with a team to organize the church in Tongo.

Among the first group of converts of the Apostolic Church in Tongo was Ben Boayeng who was appointed overseer with Felicia as organizer. At that same time, Boal Nambunam, Bavi Teng, Malik Kpemvi, Zong Perks, Ojuku Soldier and Bismark Boabil became members of the church. Ban Boayerig and Felicia began to move from house to house in the settlements canvassing for people to join the Apostolic Church. Since it was not an evangelistic meeting as such altar calls could not be made for people to give their lives to Jesus. Rather, people were called upon to join the church voluntarily. These efforts brought in such persons as Robert Putoyin, Kojo Tobeg, and Kwabena Saawung, among others.

The church began its first service in 1984 at the Community Centre. However, social events that were periodically organised at the centre, disturbed worship services. The church members later had to construct a mud hut in front of the Community Centre where they worshipped. It was after some years that the present chapel which is undergoing expansion was constructed. Before then they had to move to Puhuug to a location near the sacred dancing ground. There too, they were asked to relocate due to the fact that the place was a sacred ground, and the activities of the church could disturb the deities here.

The first person to be appointed pastor of the church in Tongo Central was Pastor Enoch Togba. Being a native of the southern part of the country, he often communicated to the Church in English and Asante-Twi, which were translated orally into Talene. This brought many challenges to the church

¹⁵ Interview with Felicia Togbehkawol, Founding Member, The Apostolic Church Ghana, 22nd April, 2019.

as many people regarded the church as an Akan denomination. This affected evangelism and church expansion in the early years. Since then many pastors have come and gone, but no indigenous person has ever been appointed Pastor in the church.

Some of the founding members of the church include BelengLiame (now with Assemblies of God), Hanna Dok, Sonka, Gambia, Gbambigiga, Naara, Wonkuogbil, LaribaDaa, Lamisi Zong and Simon Mbabe (now elder in charge of the branch of the church at Gbani mining site) nicknamed *pangaboy* meaning “man of power” and that was commonly used to refer to him in the community.

c. The Assemblies of God

The Assemblies of God came to Tongo in 1983 through the initiative following the successful opening of the Assemblies of God Church at Duusi, George Apasera. Initial attempts to open a branch at Baare were not successful. During an Easter convention at Zuarungu, the church decided to cross over to Baare to organize an open-air evangelistic meeting. This took place in front of the Baare Chief’s palace and was organized by a group called Aflames for Christ from Kumasi.

A second attempt to open a branch of the Assemblies of God at Baare was initiated in 1986 by the late Pastor Job Tindanbil, then the Pastor of the Assemblies of God at Sandema. Being a native of Baare he saw the need to have a branch of the church opened in his home village. In collaboration with the church at Zuarungu Moshie, led by Pastor Peter Atia, an evangelistic meeting was organised at Lakunyl Park. The *tengdana* (Priest of the Earth cult) of the area came out to chase them from the grounds for the reason that they were causing nuisance to the ancestors of the area. Later one Kambonab Moot, an indigene from the Sakwar settlement, offered them a piece of land where they could meet for worship services. This area is called Buugni near, the sacred dancing ground.

The church began at Buugni and the initial members met there for some time until they constructed a mud hut, in which they met on Sundays. However, they often met at the home of one Danka for evening services since the chapel was far from settlements. Later, land was donated by the late Pastor Job Tindanbil for a permanent chapel which has since been constructed where the church now meets for worship till date. It is on record that this chapel was roofed with aluminum sheets donated by Kwabena Darko, from Kumasi.

Among the founding members of the church are Paul Sapak, David Damaha, James Nasaara, Francis Bonsalegya and Bernard Zoot. Other people who joined the church later include: Kenneth Ananga, Timothy Liame, Baba Kankani, Simon Naaho, Samuel Samare, Joseph Zahaga, Enoch Manyiya, Esther Mansimme, Mary Atielogo, and AzoaNasaara. The current Pastor of the church is Samuel Butias.

Following the successful establishment of the church at Baare, attempts were now geared towards the opening of branches in other settlements in Talensiland. The first such was opened at Tongo Central in 1998. It took an evangelist from Kumasi by the name of Kojo Boateng to initiate the work. He came to Tongo for missions and after courtesy calls on the traditional leaders and the Assemblyman, he was given permission to carry out his mission. At that time there were a number of people who were already worshipping with the Baare church but were residing at Tongo Central. These joined hands with Kojo Boateng to establish the church at Tongo Central in 1998. They included Matthew Kagre and his family, Mercy Yiranbon and her children, and Grace Pambe and her children. These became the founding members of the Tongo Central Assemblies of God in the early days.

The need for a Pastor to take charge of the new church came up, especially as the evangelist had to return to his base in Kumasi. It was decided by the executives of the church in Bolgatanga that Francis Kutiyes, then a student Pastor at the Northern Ghana Bible Institute should be brought to Tongo to administer the church. He arrived to meet eight (8) members who met in a room at the Community Centre. Later land was acquired from the Zubeong Tongdana for a Tango chapel. The church now worships in its own permanent chapel and has a mission house for the resident Pastor and his family.

The main challenge that has confronted the church since its inception is the traditional religious practices which affect the commitment of the members. According to Pastor Francis Kutiyes, during

Goleb and *Daa* festivals, when there is always a ban on drumming in Talensiland the church's programmes and activities are often affected adversely.

d. Presbyterian Church of Ghana

The Presbyterian Church emerged in the Talensi area in 1960 through the initiative of Joseph Eicholzer, a German and Basel missionary. He first went to Yameriga to meet the local community and to announce to them his intention of establishing a church there. Before then the people often saw the Catholic Father in Tongo pass through their community to Shiega for mission work without stopping over at Yameriga. In the view of Mercy Teng Yin, the only surviving founding member of the church at Yameriga, Pastor Eicholzer asked the community members who had gathered around him if they accepted his proposal. The people responded positively by saying "We will follow the Pastor and not The Father. The Father passes here every day, sees us but does not bother to talk to us."¹⁶ Pastor Eicholzer was nicknamed by the community as *pangaboy* meaning "man of power" and that was commonly used to refer to him.

On the basis of this response from the people at Yameriga, the missionary (Eicholzer) requested to establish a formal school in the community to train the children of the natives in education and religion. The school began under a baobab tree close to the house of Mankab. Among the first teachers of the school were Sombaal and Wanguu Kumase who taught the children of the community in primary one. The children often sat on kitchen stools which they brought from their homes for their lessons. According to Mercy Teng Yin, it was difficult for the children, but they had to cope with the situation.¹⁷

Later the school was moved from under the baobab tree to a mud-built hut roofed with thatch. This became the classroom for the pupils for some time until through Eicholzer, a new three-room structure was constructed. This building is there to date, even though it is being managed by the Talensi District Assembly.

The school became the nucleus for the church's activities in the early days. According to Lawrence Zongdan, the current Senior Presbyter of the church, the school children were often mandated to come to school every Monday morning with numbered cards collected from the church which indicated that they actually attended church service the previous day which was Sunday. Anyone who did not have a numbered card was canned, and therefore the school children considered church attendance as a means of avoiding canning at school.

The first group of adults who became the founding members of the church included Abraham Toot, and his two wives, and Mercy Teng Yin. They were led by one Alando, a native of Zuarurigu, who became the first Catechist. The church worshipped in a mud-built hut in the early years but was destroyed through a rain storm. Abraham Toot is remembered to have burnt his idols publicly when he joined the church, which indicated his conversion from traditional religion to Christianity. Later on, Samuel Naafo also joined the church and was baptized and confirmed by Pastor Peter Reuters who had replaced Eicholzer as a missionary. Also, Samuel Kurug joined the church bringing the number of the founding adult members to six.

Among the children who went through the local Presbyterian school were one Isaac who is now a Pastor at Walewale. These children became committed to the church to the extent that they often followed their parents on foot anytime they went for church programmes at Datoko and other places outside Yameriga.¹⁸

Challenges to Christian Expression and Commitment

Following the emergence of the churches in the Talensi land, there has been a re-organisation in the society. While there were those who completely rejected their traditional religious values and accepted living wholly by Christian values, others for some reason decided to demonstrate a dual allegiance.

¹⁶ Interview with Mercy Teng Yin.

¹⁷ Interview with Mercy Teng Yin.

¹⁸ All these facts were gleaned from an interview with Lawrence Zongdan, Senior Presbyter, Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Yamenga.

That is, they joined the churches got baptized, and attended church services on a regular basis. However, they did not abandon their traditional religious ties with the reason that there was no need to abandon their traditional values and accept new ones.

Among the reasons for the dual lifestyle displayed by most people is the strong adherence to the traditional beliefs and practices of the Talensi society. By far, this has been a critical factor that has adversely affected the growth of Christianity in Talensiland. The Talensi demonstrate a strong reverence for their ancestors and will never betray their cause. Even though one can choose to belong to a church one would still participate in traditional rituals including sacrifices. In an interview, a respondent pointed out that, perhaps the strong adherence to the ancestors is the reason why most Talensi male adults will not like to be part of the church. Even if they join the church, they will still go ahead to participate in the traditional religious rites. The reason is always centered on fear of the family or on spiritual attacks from the ancestors and other deities.

Another factor that greatly undermines the faith of Talensi Christian converts is polygamy. The Talensi society upholds and glorifies polygamous marriage to the extent that a husband of one wife is often regarded as a bachelor. They often say *poayeng dan-a-dakuol* (meaning a husband of one wife is a bachelor). Emmanuel Kpana Dok of the Fountain Gate Chapel in Tongo Central in an interview pointed out that some Talensi Christian young men seriously consider this issue to be a hindrance to their Christianity. This is because, a Talensi young man, who marries only one wife should be prepared to face public ridicule.

Apart from the traditional practices, there are also some other challenges that confront Talensi Christians in the expression of their faith. Some respondents disclosed that the absence of quality leadership greatly affects their spiritual growth. Some identified the absence of trained leaders, as a critical factor in the growth of Talensi Christians. Being the leader, the pastor is to direct and guide the members in the Christian faith, and the quality of his leadership and also his availability is key to the growth of the church.

Christian Conversion and Discipleship

Conversion to Christianity is a process by which an individual abandons his or her old way of life and makes a decision and commitment to Jesus or Christianity. The crucial questions that require answers are, what does it mean to be converted? What are we to be converted from and transformed to? What is the process of conversion? The answers that we discover for these questions all hinge on one pole, and that is change. Thus, conversion to Christianity often entails a change in direction towards a new way. The Roman Catholic Missiologist, Lubzbetak maintains that “Conversion means a turning away from old ways to new ways, a basic reorientation in premises and goals, a wholehearted acceptance of a new set of values affecting the convert as well as his social group The change that is effected must become a living part of the cultural organism.”¹⁹ Conversion indicates a change from one set of loyalties to another which involves critical experiences. It involves a transformation in terms of values, relationships and attitudes to God himself and others in the same socio-cultural context.

Conversion is not just a small change which results in a person who is decently moral but just needs a little help. Rather, it is a fundamental change in a sinner who is given a completely new heart. This change affects the mind, the heart, and the will, thus the whole personality of an individual. This is why the Scriptures call such a change a “new birth” or refer to Christian believers as “new creation”. The change is brought about by God as He convicts the individual through His Word that is read, taught, or proclaimed.

At the centre of Christian conversion is the Christian message that must be proclaimed. It should be proclaimed in such a way that people understand it, and make personal decisions towards the message. Bediako, citing Mbiti, suggests that:

The gospel which remains basically the same for all time had to be communicated in terms that were meaningful to African perception of

¹⁹ L. J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Techny, Illinois: Divine Word, 1970), 6.

African needs ... We must now search for ways and means of communicating the gospel to make it intelligible and to bring out its true depth effectively.²⁰

It is interesting to note how people in Talensiland understood the idea of Christian Conversion. Some respondents were of the view that to be a Christian is to join a church and be actively involved in its activities and programmes. The basis for this understanding is that in the early days of Christianity in Talensiland, some church leaders at the time were reported as going around the settlements calling on people to join their fellowship without taking time to explain the Christian faith satisfactorily to their understanding. Most people considered the church to be like any other social group that exists to meet social needs. It can be noted that some churches distributed relief items such as rice, oil, and tom brown (a cereal made out of roasted corn), among others during periods of poor harvest. Consequently, many people found their way into the churches.

This goes to fuel the argument raised by other respondents that true Christian conversion should be total and should manifest in changed life and behaviour. But to be a member of a church and still be involved in the “old ways” undermines the genuineness of one’s conversion. The true convert, to them, should demonstrate that he or she has repented from the old “ways” of life and make a genuine commitment towards discipleship.

There is also another argument as to whether people should reject their cultural links when they become Christians. The answer is definitely no in the sense that Christianity is transcultural and embraces people of all cultures. It is possible for Talensi Christian converts to appropriate their faith in the light of their culture without compromise or conflict. The case of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is appropriate for understanding the relationship that should exist between Christian converts and their cultural backgrounds. In the ruling of the Council, Gentile Christian converts were not to be forced to become Jews before being recognized and accepted as Christians. Rather their conversion was to be informed by abstinence from religious entanglements that conflicted with their Christian profession. This included food offered to idols and social immorality among others.

What this means is that in the transmission of the Christian message, an attempt should be made to present the message in ways that will not only appeal to the audience but should be meaningful to them. It is important that the audience hear the message, is clearly delivered, to their understanding. An understanding of the Christian message will consequently lead to positive decision-making regarding the message. The book of Acts tells of how the apostle Peter proclaimed his message to the Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem following the events of the Day of Pentecost. Peter presented the message in such a way that the Jews understood it. The crucial aspect of Christian proclamation is the impact the message is intended to make. It is important to realize how Peter employed the categories of the Jewish faith, including their history, the prophets and the Law to communicate effectively to his audience. Effective preaching is one that employs the categories of the intended audience to bring out the true meaning of the message meant for them. Herein lies the understanding of the message if people are able to make connections to it in the light of what they know. In Acts 2:37 we read,

When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do’? (NIV)

Bediako describes the dilemma of the African in his or her relation to Christianity, by saying that “African Christians in the early missionary enterprise in Africa came to the realisation that they had been cut off from their own past and denied continuity within their respective African ethnic identities.”²¹ What Bediako seeks to convey is that the early African converts. Christian converts were not given the opportunity to understand and express their new faith within their cultural milieu. This

²⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the 2nd Century and Modern Africa* (). (Oxford: Regum Books, 1992), 308.

²¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 237.

is reflected in the way they heard the message that was proclaimed to them. In line with this, there is a need to understand that preaching a universal message that fulfills the aspirations of all people in their cultural contexts is the way out of the identity crisis that confronts African Christians.

African Christian scholars believe that there are elements in African religions that prepared African peoples to receive Christianity. Mbiti argues that the conversion of Africans to Christianity does not mean that they have abandoned all their former religious ideas and traditions.²² It is possible for the African Christian convert to still embrace some traits of their cultural backgrounds. Asante provides the reasons for syncretism in African Christianity by saying that, the African conception of individuality as a reality defined by the community is crucial to the understanding of salvation.²³ He argues that “salvation can hardly be defined as individual experience in isolation from the community. The gospel can hardly be proclaimed in the traditional African context as an invitation to come out of the community. Rather, the gospel should be proclaimed to the Africans as an invitation to experience newness and fullness of life in the community.”²⁴

When Christianity came to Talensiland, there was a mixed reaction to the way the Christian message was received. Unlike the mainline churches which established schools and provided other social services to the native population as part of their mission strategy, the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches had different approaches in evangelizing the people. In their communication of the Christian message, they sought to create the impression that Christianity was opposed to the traditional culture. This resulted in many people opposing the Christian message and rejecting Christianity.

Christian conversion therefore hinges on proper understanding of the relationship between the Christian faith and traditional culture. A message that condemns the traditions and customs of its intended audience cannot convert anybody. Instead, the hearers might be infuriated and reject the message totally.

Another critical phenomenon affecting Talensi Christian conversion and discipleship is the issue of syncretism. This resulted from the situation where people accepted the Christian faith as a means of meeting their social needs, but still leaned to their traditional beliefs and rituals. Gehman citing Edwell, defines syncretism as “The process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. It is the union of two or more opposite beliefs so that the synthesized form is a new thing.”²⁵ What this means is that syncretism occurs when one professes one faith and lives according to the tenets of another faith. This results from a number of factors. In the first place, the person might not have a right understanding of, the Christian faith, and may thus get involved in say, traditional religious practices. Secondly, it might also be that out of fear of his or her traditional background, one may belong to a church and still participate in the traditional religious rites in his or her family. This situation constitutes a major challenge in Talensiland that the churches are struggling to address.

Authentic Christian conversion is thus possible when the Christian message is authentically proclaimed to the audience to meet the needs of the people it is intended for. Any missionary process that does not involve the proclamation of the message in a rightful manner is bound to produce no converts. Some people can join the church in the name of being a Christian but that would not amount to Christian conversion. The distribution of food, clothing, and other material things may attract people but Christians are mandated to proclaim the message that leads to salvation. Conversion does not entail mere church attendance or membership being given Christian names in baptism, but rather a personal encounter with God through personal conviction and developing a positive mindset to live as a Christian through discipleship development.

²² John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975), 30.

²³ Emmanuel Asante, “The Gospel in Context: An African Perspective,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 4 (2001): 355–66.

²⁴ Asante, “The Gospel in Context: An African Perspective,” 355-366.

²⁵ Richard J Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (East African Publishers, 2005), 271.

The Impact of Christianity in Talensiland

Social Significance of the Church

Despite the seeming challenges that confront the churches in the Talensiland, Christianity has gained roots and is advancing as an important institution among the people. In its mission among the Talensi, the church had sought to bring the gospel both in word and deed to the people. It has been the quest of many church organisations to proclaim the holistic gospel which addresses the material and spiritual needs of the people. It has also scored high marks in the provision of social services for the betterment of the local people. These include schools, clinics and water facilities including boreholes. He said further that the White Fathers taught the local people backyard gardening and were involved in the establishment of small gardens around the missions. The early Christian missionaries held the view that evangelization should go hand in hand with human development. According to official church records the founding Fathers of the Catholic Church were totally committed to evangelisation and human promotion right from the onset of their missionary work. They preached the Gospel to all people without discrimination irrespective of tribe, language, sex, class, or age. Their aim was to ensure unity and co-existence among the tribes and people. The Church's social philosophy was informed by the context in which they encountered the local people. They were poor, ignorant, and vulnerable to disease, hence the need for the missionaries to build schools, vocational centers and clinics. It is significant to note that the missionaries were guided by the scriptures that "God intended the earth and all that it contains for the good of humans. He has also endowed man with intelligence to enable him to know how to subdue the earth for his purpose.

It is worth noting how Christianity has transformed many Talensi converts to a great extent. The Christians are now recognized as *nereba kiriki* (important people) within their respective families. Christianity has transformed the lives of such people and given them dignity to the extent that people now hold them in high esteem. They are consulted in matters that affect their families' welfare and have a stake in decision-making processes within their respective families. The positive testimonies among many Talensi regarding their brothers, sisters, and children who are Christians give credence to the impact that Christianity is making in Talensiland.

Preservation of Talensi Culture

The introduction of Christianity among the Talensi has created avenues for some aspects of their culture to be promoted and preserved. The careful use of Talensi idioms and vocabulary in Christian activities has conveyed Christian truths to the people in a way that would otherwise be impossible. Many have also come to understand certain wise sayings and have become aware of aspects of the Talensi wisdom that had been unknown to most of them. Thus, the churches are helping to promote and preserve the Talensi language which to a large extent can sustain the Talensi culture.

Again it is possible to find Christian tunes in Talensi used in church worship accompanied by the use of indigenous musical instruments such as *yiih*, *gooji*, *longa* and *siyaa among others*. This has enhanced the native language, especially in the composition of scriptural songs which has the potential of reaching the masses of non-literates with truths they otherwise would not hear. With the introduction of Christianity, indigenous creativity is also being induced as people use the biblical texts to compose songs for Christian worship. The scriptural songs in Talensi tend to depict the theological orientation of the pioneer missionaries to the work of the Gospel which aimed at enforcing a solid foundation for the Church among the Talensi.

Transformation of Community Life

The introduction of the Christian faith in the Talensi society has brought positive changes to many Talensi communities. Talensi Christians now enjoy great respect from the communities and their leaders to the extent that they are given separate burial grounds, instead of being buried in their family graves upon their death. Christian memorial services are often conducted by churches for their departed members, and also marriages involving Christians end up in church premises to be conducted in the Christian way.

In the early years of Christianity, most people who were adherents of the traditional religion wanted to protect their religion and felt threatened by the emergence of Christianity. Some parents forbade their children from attending formal schools so as to protect them from indoctrination by the teachers. But the situation has changed as many children including girls have enrolled in formal schools and literacy programmes. It is on record that many people now appreciate the value of education, due to the foundation laid by the churches with the establishment of schools. Many have also been enlightened on health issues such as family planning, sanitation, water treatment, food handling, and personal hygiene among others. Today the Talensi society can boast of having teachers, medical doctors, engineers and other allied professionals, as well as many students in second-cycle schools and tertiary institutions.

Social institutions have also witnessed some transformation. The status of women has been raised to the extent that the bonds of patriarchy which restricted women to the kitchen more or less and debarred them from decision-making process are gradually being loosened. The missionaries initiated female education and this has gone far in the emancipation of most women. It is evident that many leading Talensi women in health and education today are products of the church's initiative. The Christian men no longer regard the bride's worth they pay for their wives as a license to lord it over them. Again women now feel safe in acquiring property, a situation that hitherto was nonexistent. Talensi Christians have come to acknowledge the equality of all persons before God irrespective of sex and this has brought harmony to families and communities. A number of respondents admitted in the interviews that Christian teaching on marriage, forgiveness, and love has helped to reduce quarrels, fighting and other negative tendencies in families and communities.

It is significant to note that the conversion of some notorious personalities who once made life unbearable for the people has brought peace to most communities. Such people used to be alcoholics and drug addicts who attacked innocent people, especially on market days.

However, following their conversion to Christianity, many people are hailing the churches. Thus, the transformation of community life tends to give credence to the power of Christianity to bring about positive change. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come." (NIV)

CONCLUSION

Christian missions cannot be carried out in a vacuum. It involves a message, a messenger and an audience. Each of these players in the missionary process has a role to play in making missions a success. The message of missions needs to be well-packaged to achieve the desired result. It should be communicated in such a manner that it will make meaning to the intended audience. The messenger in the missionary enterprise must demonstrate a sense of purpose in the transmission of the Christian message. He or She must demonstrate a full knowledge of the message and deliver it relevantly and accordingly. The audience, who constitutes the recipients of the message of missions has to be considered critically as the end of missions. The church acting in this case as the messenger of missions should not ignore the culture of the indigenous people it encounters. It is therefore crucial that the proclamation and expression of the Christian message in indigenous contexts should seriously take into account, the religio-cultural environment of the intended audience in order to generate genuine commitment. Additionally, the growth of churches in indigenous societies such as the Talensi is largely contingent on how well Christian converts are disciplined and integrated into the church environment. Native leadership training, mother tongue Bible studies as well as Gospel and culture workshops for church leaders can go a long way to advance the course of Christianity in indigenous societies.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Samuel Zuul Bayeti is a Lecturer at the Apostolic Church Theological Seminary, Kumasi Ghana.