

HISTORY OF METHODISM IN NIGERIA)

Methodism was established in Nigeria with the arrival in 1842 of a Wesleyan Methodist Church Missionary. There were two brands of Methodism that came to Nigeria; the Wesleyan Methodism in the West and Primitive Methodism in the East.

The abolition of slave trade in 1807 in England gave Africans sold into slavery the opportunity to regain their freedom. The exercise of this freedom led to the resettlement of the freed slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Some of these slaves later returned to Badagry in today's Lagos State among whom was James Ferguson. Ferguson, having tasted the goodness of the LORD and being in the light, appealed to Rev. Thomas Dove, a Methodist Minister in Freetown via a letter dated 2nd March, 1841 to send a missionary for the purpose of leading the people to the saving grace in Jesus. Warraru, the King of Badagry, countersigned the letter which content reads;

I am now in a place of darkness where no light is.
I know that I was once under light and now I am
in darkness. It is to bring our fellow citizens into
the way which is right, and to tell them the
goodness of Jehovah, what he had done for us...
and as I know better than them...into the way
which is right., so I humbly beg of you that be
good and kind, and take pity on us, and send us
one servant of Christ to instruct us... sir, the,
governor of Badagry sends compliment to you
and he is very glad to hear the word of God...
Please let nothing delay you except sickness.

The letter of Ferguson received positive response when Thomas Birch Freeman was sent to Nigeria. Freeman arrived Badagry on the 24th September, 1842 with two devoted African helpers, Mr. & Mrs. William De Graft. Freeman and his helpers had a warm welcome at Badagry.

The initial problem the missionary encountered was accommodation. This was solved as Freeman decided to live in his compact travelling tent temporarily, while the De-Grafts squeezed themselves into bamboo store of Captain Parson of Gold Coast, (now Ghana) a trader in Badagry. The next day was Sunday, there was no convenient place to hold service, but a handful of "English" Africans gathered round the missionaries and they managed to have a fellowship in Freeman's tent. The LORD made the ministry of Freeman to bear fruit as He continued to add to the number of believers, "those who were being saved", to the extent that Freeman's tent did not contain the members, The increase in number of worshippers made the members to hastily build a bamboo cottage. This became the first church in Nigeria.

Just as Methodism came to the Western part of Nigeria through Badagry by a letter of appeal, likewise Methodism entered the Eastern part of Nigeria through another letter of appeal. In August, 1869 an English ship "The Elgiva" anchored in the harbour of Santa Isabel, the port at Fernando Po. The captain of the ship was Williams Robinson. He had with him James Hands, a Carpenter. Both of them were devoted Primitive Methodists attached to the Church at Boundary Street in Liverpool, Britain.

In obedience to the command of the Great Commission they witnessed Christ to a small group that gathered at Mama Job's house. They were converts of the Baptist Mission, whom the government policy expelled out of Fernando Po in 1858, These Baptist converts were greatly impressed by the preaching of Williams and his Carpenter. When the ship was returning to England, the little flock wrote a letter to the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society asking that a Minister be sent to them. The letter was dated 20th August, 1869 and it reads:

Sirs, the object of my addressing you now is to crave your help and sympathy on behalf of the inhabitants of this Island. And this place was once occupied by the Baptist Missionary Society, but they were expelled after the arrival of the Romish Church on the Island, in 1858. Happy to state that the present laws of Spain have granted liberty of worshipping God according to the Protestant creed to everyone of her subjects in all Her colonies, and the people here have the same liberty given them, and may invite a minister of any denomination to come and settle with them. For some reasons, of which I am not aware, the inhabitants do not wish to recall the Baptist Missionaries amongst them anymore.

In response to the "Macedonian Call" the General Missionary Committee of the Primitive Methodist Connection sent Rev. R.W. Burnett and Henry Rose to Fernando Po. In 1890, the Primitive Methodist Missionary Committee resolved to extend their

proselytizing mission beyond Santa Isabel, In a bid to implement this decision. the Kev. R. Fairley, the minister in charge of the missionary operations in Santa Isabel, carried explorations to a number of estuaries and creeks located east of the Island in search of a suitable place for the establishment of a mission.

Two towns, Oron located on Rio Del River and Archibong town located on the Aqua Effey Kiver were visited. Archibong town was finally chosen. When all necessary arrangements for establishing a new mission station was completed, the Rev. J. Marcus Brown and a Bubi Christian couple, Mr. and Mrs. Knox, were sent out from Fernando Po in December 1893 to found a Mission Station at Archibong Town. Thus, Archibong Town in the land of the Efik became the first Primitive Methodist Mission Station in Nigeria.

These two brands of Methodism amalgamated in Great Britain in 1932, giving rise to two separate Districts that operated as Western and Eastern Districts under the care of the British Conference.

The step towards what we now know as Methodist Church Nigeria was taken in 1961. The Western District (Wesleyan Methodism) and Eastern District (Primitive Methodism) jointly wrote the Methodist Church Britain (the rock from which we were hewn) to grant the Church in Nigeria full autonomy.

The request was granted and Methodist Church Nigeria emerged on 28th September, 1962 and became autonomous with the deed of Foundation of Conference signed in the old building of Methodist Church of the Trinity, Tinubu, Lagos. The first Principal officers appointed under the 1962 constitution were Rev. J. O. E. Soremekun as President of the Conference, Dr. E.U. Eyo Moma, as the Vice President of the Conference and Rev. G. Egemba Igwe Secretary of Conference.

Methodist Church Nigeria adopted Episcopal system of Church government in 1976 with a Constitution signed into law. The Church adopted Corporate Episcopacy rather than its monarchical form. The new system brought in some changes in the administrative style of the Church. The nomenclature of the Spiritual head of the Church changed from President to Patriarch, District heads ceased to be called Chairmen but Bishops while Superintendents were changed to Presbyters in charge of Circuits. The Vice President of Conference became Lay President and this also applies to the Diocesan level.

On the spiritual side, genuine efforts were made to develop indigenous liturgies that cater for all ethnic groups for the spiritual growth of the members. These efforts contributed towards the indigenization of Christianity in Nigeria. Indigenous songs which are rich in African idioms, forms, philosophy and theology came into being and young members were encouraged to candidate into the ordained ministry in efforts to cope with the growing membership. The Church also began the ordination of women as Deaconesses in 1981 and as Priests in 2005, in appreciation of gender sensitivity in the vineyard of God.

These administrative changes brought internal crisis into the Church that lasted till 1990 when the issues were resolved. Another Constitution came into being on 24th May, 1990 with changes on the title of the head. Patriarch was changed to Prelate and the style of addressing him changed from His Pre-Eminence to His Eminence. The remaining faction fused with the Church on 24th May 2011 at a well attended service at Umuahia in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) has been at the forefront of spiritual and social transformation through spreading scriptural holiness and investing in medical-health services and social economic welfare of the people.

The Church has established various Institutions like the Leprosy Centre at Uzuakoli, Mentally ill-destitute Centres; Motherless babies homes and an Orphanage for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. These Centres reach out to the rejected and less privileged members of society. They also ensure reintegration of those previously treated as outcast and subjected to various societal abuses.

In the area of health, MCN has established the Wesley Guild Hospital, Itu Mbang Hospital and other several Methodist Hospitals spread across the Country which continue to provide healthcare services in their environments. In addition to all other services, MCN has from the beginning placed a very strong emphasis on education. Throughout the country the Church established numerous schools, from Nursery Schools through Primary to Senior Secondary Schools and Theological Institutions which have produced men and women who have contributed and are still contributing very significantly to all spheres of human endeavour. The Church also established a fledgeling University: Wesley University of Science and Technology (WUSTO) in Ondo, South-Western area of Nigeria to meet the yearning technological needs of the country.

Methodist Church Nigeria is headed by the Prelate who presides over the Conference, the overall governing body of the Church. Conference meets every two years to deliberate and take decisions on all issues affecting the life of the Church. The Conference area is divided into Archdioceses and each Archdiocese is composed of not less than four Dioceses over which an Archbishop presides at the Archdiocesan Council meetings. The Dioceses are made of a number of Circuits and headed by a Bishop who presides over the Annual Synod. The Constitution of the Church provides for Lay participation in the leadership of the Church from the Local Church through to the Conference level. Methodist Church Nigeria is indeed a democratic Church which believes in the Priesthood of all believers.