

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"NACKABAH": THE CHURCH OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES

1. Introduction

The present ministry under discussion, which in all probability was the first indigenous church in Ghana, has been variously christened. Sometimes it is called "The Church of William Harris and his Twelve Apostles." At times, it is designated simply as "The Church of the Twelve Apostles."⁷² In the Western Province of Ghana — the birth place of the Church — it is better known by its nickname: Nackabah.

2. Objectives

At the end of the chapter you should be able to have a full grasp of the origin as well as the development and salient practices of the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Ghana.

3. Content

(a) *Rationale for the names*

There are reasons for each of the names given to the Church. It has the *praenomen*: Church of William Harris because it arose as a result of the preaching of the Liberian Grebo Prophet William Wade Harris. Following the visit of Harris in Axim and the Apollinia districts, the Church was started by two of his earliest converts: Grace Tani (Thannie) and John Nackabar.⁷³

It is also nicknamed Nackabah after the co-leader and founder of the organisation: John Nackabar. While Grace Tani (Harris' wife) was the stirring figure in the Church who catered for the needs of members through divination, and healing — her role being essentially a charismatic role; somehow Nackabar seemed to have been recognised as the *de facto* leader.⁷⁴ This is probably because he was a man and also because he was solely responsible for the administration of the Church: He was therefore more notable to the general public. The nick-name has still not been dropped even after the appointment of a successor, John Hackman who became the Bishop of the Church after the death of Nackabah.

Before Hackman died in June 1957 he appointed his nephew, a minor Prophet, Samuel Kofi Ansah as his successor and the next Bishop of the Twelve Apostles. During Bishop Ansah's tenure, some senior prophets also called themselves Bishops and accorded Ansah much less respect as the leader of the Church. After the death of Bishop Ansah who made no concrete arrangement for heirship, the heads of the various districts declared themselves practically independent of the headquarters at Kadjabir.

(b) *Beliefs and Practices*

We will discuss a few of the fundamental beliefs and practices of the Church.

(i) The training of disciples: Baeta remarked that the educational standards in the Church "are the lowest of any non-pagan religious body in Ghana."⁷⁵ He also observed that virtually all the prophets

⁷² Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, p. 391.

⁷³ Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana*, (Accra: Waterville, 1967), p.273.

⁷⁴ Debrunner, *Ibid.* See also P. B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 147.

⁷⁵ Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, p. 62.

and disciples were stark illiterates. In Baeta's survey of the educational standards of the leaders of the Church in the Ahanta District, he noticed that only one could read English.

By reason of this apparent weakness, all would-be disciples only learn by observing and practising what their leaders do. Instructions are passed on by word of mouth to the devotees who are expected to discipline themselves by spending more time in solitary prayers in the Church Garden and keep fasts regularly.

(ii) Doctrine: The Church does not attach much importance to creeds and dogma. Converts are not taught any systematic doctrine either before or after baptism. The Church seems to stress solely the anointing of the Holy Spirit which enables them to predict future events, cast out evil spirits, speak in new tongues, and heal the sick.

(iii) Sacred Objects: Two objects seem to be in a special class of their own. These are the Bible and the gourd-rattle. Even though the-Bible is less frequently read, a leader is always armed with one. It is always placed on a patient's head as a prelude to a healing exercise. The Bible is also often used to rub the abdomen of a woman to drive out the spirit of barrenness. The second object is the dancing gourd-rattle. This is an African drum made from calabash netted with strings of beads. (Among the Yoruba, it is called *sèkèrè*, and is often netted with strings of cowries). Like the Bible, all the leaders, minstrels and regular members are expected to possess a gourd-rattle.

The Church leaders hold that the genesis of the use of this instrument is traced to the Old Testament where Miriam, the sister of Moses, had the inspiration to use the instrument to celebrate the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea. Prophet Harris always carried one. It is firmly believed that the rattles are particularly effective in chasing away demons and performing healing of various kinds.

(iv) Marriage: The Church tolerates polygamous marriage and there is no objection to remarriage with fellow members in the same local congregation or even with nonmembers. There is also no coercion on members to bring their spouses into the Church. This is apparently because most full participants in this congregation are women and children.

(v) Rites of Neophyte: The Church has special formalised ceremonies for a person who has newly been converted and wishing to be accorded full membership. The first rite is a kind of baptism in which the body of the new adherent would be thoroughly scrubbed with sponge and soap.⁷⁶ (Of course, men are bathed by men and women scrubbed by women). This is followed up with the marking of the sign of the cross on the forehead of the new member. The third rite consists in the neophyte being given a hand of fellowship and welcome into the Church. These are designed to impress upon the new member a new status as an important member of the Church.

(vi) Use of Consecrated Water: Like the Christ Apostolic Church, the Twelve Apostles' Congregation makes profuse use of "holy water." For divine healing purposes, the Church uses only holy water which is usually in a basin stored under a tall wooden cross in the Church garden. Even though the Church affirms divine healing, the prophets do not frown at any patient taking drugs prescribed by doctors. But they turn away any patient who had earlier on conferred with, or in the habit of consulting, fetish priests and herbalists.

(vii) Method of Healing: Healing exercises are held on Fridays. The style and procedure of healing are quite unique. The onus of the cure, they claim lies with the patients. After the initial prayers by the

⁷⁶ Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, p. 391

prophet with the aid of music which may go on for some three to four hours, the patients, who must be naked down to the top half of their bodies will stand before the cross. The patients while carrying a pitcher of water, are urged to dance, twist and swirl until they work themselves into a state of ecstasy. The presumption is that the more severe a person is shaken or shivers when the spirit descends, the brighter the chances of a cure. As the healings take place, there are violent outcries and shouts of joy.⁷⁷ Evidently some reach the point of excitement earlier than others. It is claimed that through these religious exercises, a number of people whom physicians had failed to help received permanent healing.

(viii) Fasting: Either of two fasts may be prescribed by a prophet to a person who needs spiritual assistance. There is the short but strenuous fast during which no food nor water must be taken for three consecutive days. The second type is for a duration of seven days at a time. During the seven-day fast, one is expected to break the exercise in the evenings. It is believed that through fasting, especially the strenuous type, harmful elements are gotten rid of, the body relaxes and thus is freed from many ailments. Spiritually, one who fasts, they believe, would receive visions, heavenly revelations, divine wisdom and meanings of hidden things.

(ix) Church discipline: A member who breaks a rule is punished in one way or another. If the offence is serious, the 'sinner' may be suspended from the fellowship for up to three months. Occasionally the transgressor may be required to perform an act of penance, "ask for forgiveness publicly and offer a packet of candles before re-admission to full membership is conceded."⁷⁸

(x) . Church Garden: Apart from the place of worship which could be a building or a shed, the other sacred place which serves as the nucleus of religious functions is what the members affectionately refer to as the "Garden." It is usually a kind of enclosed churchyard surrounded by flower beds. Some gardens are so large that some structures including sleeping rooms are erected to accommodate those who need spiritual assistance. There is hardly any church building which does not have its own garden. Some prophets even have their own gardens where they hold regular prayer meetings for the sick.

4. Summary

The Church of the Twelve Apostles, otherwise known as Nackabah is one of the foremost Harrist Churches in West Africa as claimed by members. Members also claim with good reasons that it is the first indigenous church in Ghana. The head of the Church is called a Bishop. However, soon after the appointment of the third Bishop, Ansah, who did not enjoy the support of the older and experienced prophets, there were divisions in the Church. Some senior prophets began to use the title 'Bishop' for themselves. Consequently some districts are now practically independent of the headquarters and refuse to go to Kadjabi, the seat of the Head of the Church. The practices in the various districts are however similar. They have the same social regulations, sacraments, religious observances, food taboos, and acknowledgement of some sacred objects.

⁷⁷ Hollenwenger, *The Pentecostals*, p. 458.

⁷⁸ Baëta, *op. cit.*

5. Post-Test

Answer the following questions.

- (i) How important was the life and ministry of Harris to the establishment and development of the Church of the Twelve Apostles?
- (ii) Assess the circumstances which gave rise to schism within the "Nackabah Church."
- (iii) "Our Ghanaian Twelve Apostles belong to those who have remained Harrist, but they developed along their own lines. Although they like to claim the prophet's authority for everything that they do, it is clear that much of their present practices was evolved by their own earlier leaders" (reported by Baeta). Discuss.
- (iv) Describe the characteristic features of the Church of the Twelve Apostles.
- (v) Evaluate the origin and distinctive traits of the Nackabah Congregation.