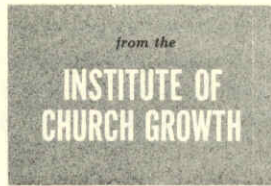


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Notable Mission Leaders on Church Growth

A CASE STUDY IN EFFECTIVE EVANGELISM IN WEST AFRICA by the Rev. A. C. Krass,
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assigned to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana.

In 1964, in the extreme northeast part of Ghana, the congregation at Chereponi consisted of about forty communicant and non-communicant members. Slightly more than half of these were Southern Ghanaian Christians in government service, teaching, or trading. The remainder were young Chokosi men who had become Christians while at middle school in the town of Yendi, 56 miles away, and some of their wives and acquaintances. (9)

Prior to my coming, Chereponi area had been part of the large pastoral district of Yendi, and the pastor stationed at Yendi, sixty miles away, usually a Southern Ghanaian, visited here once a quarter for a few days. The general work of the area was in the hands of an evangelist at Chereponi, a native Chokosi.

The evangelist regarded his work as ministering to the town congregation, recruiting additional members, and teaching the children in the local primary and middle schools. Occasionally a foray was made into the villages, but without much regularity. The purpose of such visits was that of recruiting additional members for the town congregations. The evangelist, though a Chokosi himself, did not anticipate the development of Chokosi congregations in the villages. (3)

Chereponi District had a population of about 20,000 people, in 122 villages and Chereponi town had 1,300 inhabitants. Socially and economically, Chereponi was far from representative of the area as a whole. The townspeople were traders, government workers, craftsmen and teachers of many Ghanaian tribes, whereas the village population was almost one hundred percent agrarian, and solidly Chokosi. The townspeople were either Christian or Muslim, whereas the local people were almost all animists. Many in the towns were literate, but illiteracy was the general rule in the villages. (1)

As I surveyed the situation, it seemed to me that the concentration of evangelistic effort on the town and the town congregation was too one-sided and, in

addition, too likely to be sterile as an approach to the village population. It did not seem likely that illiterate Chokosi villagers would feel happy in a town congregation whose members--even the Chokosi members--sang European hymns in Southern Ghanaian vernaculars, dressed in a foreign style, and worshipped in English, Ewe, or Twi. (4) The tribesmen needed biblical instruction in their own tongues. Nor did it seem likely that the town congregations would be happy to worship in the Chokosi language or use African-type hymns.

It therefore seemed best to continue the Chereponi worship services and church work much as they were, with some minor cultural adaptation (such as the regular inclusion of a good Chokosi summary of the sermon), and to run concurrently a vital program of evangelism in the villages aiming at the formation of Chokosi congregations wholly independent of the town congregations. (4)

At this point I may be accused by some of an unwillingness to take seriously the possible role of the town congregations in the evangelization of the villages. I was unwilling. I had well-founded doubts as to whether the town congregation was ready to embark on such a program. No barrier is greater in the Northern tier of West Africa, and perhaps farther south as well, than that between the educated and the illiterate. The townspeople are not spiritually or emotionally equipped to make the identification across cultural barriers necessary for real evangelism. (4) This has been the failure of the Muslims in their attempts to convert the village animists: they looked down upon them as "uncivilized" and "pagan." Whatever efforts they made were made with a sneer, with a deprecation of the native culture and its values, or with a sense of paternalistic condescension.

So we embarked on a weekday program of village evangelism. (5) We made introductory visits to a number of villages, asking the chiefs or headmen to gather their people for a meeting early in the morning on an appointed day. Usually our services were held about 6:30, before the men had gone off to their farms. In the first meeting we would preach a sermon, sometimes in the form of a dialogue with the villagers, setting forth the whole of the Gospel from creation to the coming of the Kingdom. We would ask whether they were interested in hearing more and, if so, set a regular date once a week on which we would come and preach. Soon we had six villages, one for each day of the week. Generally at the first meeting all the people of the village would attend and attendance would drop off to half of the people in a few weeks.

We would always speak to the village as a whole. We never made an approach merely to individuals. We never referred to "those who might accept our teachings." We never, in fact, raised the question of acceptance or rejection. We simply said, in effect, "This is the gospel. This is how God has acted on your behalf. This is how God is speaking to the people of Famisa. This is what God wants the people of Famisa (or any other village in which we might be preaching) to do." Prior to our coming, the village had always acted as a village, and we assumed it would act as a unit with respect to our preaching. (6)

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church has a rule that inquirers shall receive regular Christian teaching for a period of at least one year before baptism. Therefore, we did not have to raise the question of acceptance or rejection, or of baptism, the sign of such acceptance, until at least one year had passed. By that time many of the villages had sufficiently understood our teaching and we assumed they would accept it. By hearing the Word, by participating in prayer, and singing simple hymns they were already taking part in the redemptive community.

Our preaching was always positive, setting forth the drama of salvation, the work and teachings of Christ, and the revealed will of God for man. Only by

presenting Christ as the all-sufficient Lord could we later make clear that animistic observances were superfluous and unnecessary for the Christian. We did not start by saying "All these observances are fruitless and blasphemous." We let them draw their own conclusions.

Well, what happened? At the end of the first year of preaching we raised the question of baptism and church membership in the three villages which we felt were most ready for it. They accepted our invitation in quite a natural fashion. Then we began catechetical instruction. At first we tried to limit catechetical teaching to two to three months, in order to avoid the impression that baptism was a graduation from Christian teaching. We taught the people that they would continue to learn Christian truth after they were baptized. All that we felt necessary in the pre-baptismal instruction was to make clear the nature of baptism as the enlistment as disciples, and to outline the basic nature of Christian practice. If the catechumens could demonstrate their understanding of the fundamentals of the faith and we could insure that they knew what the consequences of Christian faith were, then we felt we had discharged our obligations to them. Subsequently, we would regard them as full brothers and sisters in the faith, learning with us at the foot of the cross.

It turned out that many of the catechumens were not, in fact, ready to make the decisive break with animism on the basis of such short instruction. More detailed discussion was necessary, more consideration of the issues they would confront, more time to learn a catechism. We have now composed a catechism in Chokosi, which catechumens are expected to learn, and we take about six months for catechetical training.

At any rate, two whole villages and the majority of the third were baptized and took their place on the Sunday congregation-oriented program. This left three gaps in our weekday program, and we were able to begin work at first in three other villages and later, when a new evangelist had been assigned to our area, in six other villages.

Concurrently with this work, we began a leadership training program in Bible and literacy for young men from the villages in which we were working. (8) This has provided leaders in weekly worship for the new churches, some able men who served in the evangelization of other villages, and has educated one segment of the church membership in depth. Two of the trainees have now become assistant evangelists, six others have become literacy instructors, and one has gone out to serve as a missionary among Chokosis and Konkombas in an area 100 miles away. (7)

We now have work in thirty-five villages out of the Chokosi area, have six congregations, with 689 baptized persons, and are progressing rapidly. There will be two pastors this October, in addition to the four evangelists, and we will also be getting an agriculturalist to do village extension work, and hopefully, a nurse. (2)

It would not be too much to expect that, in ten years or so, the entire Chokosi nation will have been disciplined for Christ. (10)

We cannot claim to be without problems, nor can we present the Chokosi church as faultless. What we can say is that many Chokosi villagers have now come to regard themselves as Christian, and that they continue to learn day by day, through their experiences in the light of their study of the Word, what it means to be disciples of Christ.

In summary, we can say that the most important aspects of our work have been:

- (1) an approach to the village as a social unit, trying to claim the village as a unit for Christ,
- (2) positive preaching of the good news of God's love for man in Christ,
- (3) immediate training of indigenous leaders,
- (4) weekly preaching and teaching on a set day,
- (5) a short catechumenate.

COMMENT by Donald McGavran

This extraordinarily luminous article by Mr. Krass is replete with lessons for missionaries all over the world, but particularly for those in Africa. I trust the article will be read, passed on to others, and reprinted in missionary magazines both in English and the vernaculars. It would make good sense in Swahili, Kikongo, Amharic, Malayalam, Hindi, or Telegu.

To make sure that the lessons are discerned and their importance realized, I have entered ten numbers in Mr. Krass' article and proceed to comment on them one by one.

(1) Note the clear sociological analysis. Once one has read it, he can see the situation exactly--the townspeople, the solidly agricultural and animist country folk, the tight tribe, the loose town, and the exact numbers in various groupings--forty communicant and non-communicant Christians, about twenty-two of them a mixed bag of various tribes, and about eighteen converted Chokosi youth and their wives. In the town of 1300 there were only forty Christians. The rest of the townspeople were Muslims. This is typical of West Africa where the trader towns are largely Muslim and the tribal villages are still largely pagan. It is well to fix these facts in mind and then read the article again. Church growth understanding begins in seeing clearly the various groupings of the population.

(2) The 18,700 Chokosi who lived in 122 villages proved to be highly receptive. We conclude this not because they were animists (plenty of animists are highly resistant) but because, when the Gospel was proclaimed to them in a form in which they could accept it, they became Christians in considerable numbers, and set about winning their relatives and friends.

(3) Note that the Chereponi congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana had neither missionary insight or passion. Individually the members were no doubt good Christians; but collectively they could have continued for a hundred years without growing much and watched the Chokosi become Marxists, Moslems, or materialistic pagans. The Chereponi congregation was just another small sealed off congregation of educated Christians. It "sang European hymns in Southern Ghanaian languages, dressed in foreign style, and worshipped in Ewe, English, or Twi." Missionaries assigned there would normally have devoted themselves to the educated community or to the 'future leaders of Ghana'! They might have spent their time teaching Muslim youth and adults to read and serving them quietly in Christ's name with medicine and friendship.

As a matter of fact, till Mr. Krass came the mission (the Church in modern jargon) had been "concentrating evangelistic effort on the town", i.e., on the Muslims. Had this been continued among the Muslims, the spiritually hungry Chokosi would have starved to death while the resistant Muslims would have had the rich services of the Christian congregation and its assisting missionaries--Ghan or Eurican. There are scores of mission stations all across that part of the continent of Africa, where Muslim and pagan meet, which are doing just that. The missionaries live in the Muslim towns. The people whom they can reach most easily are Muslims. Missionaries learn to speak the trade language, which the Muslims speak well and the pagans speak poorly. They live in the midst of a pagan land; but the accident of living in the Moslem towns diverts them from the responsive pagans.

(4) The cause of the town congregation's spiritual impotence was a culture gap. They were much better educated, cosmopolitan and highly paid than the country people. Many missionaries feel that this is exactly the sort of Christians who can evangelize the country people. They can read. Some of them have been Christians for several generations. They are government servants, craftsmen, and teachers. Since Ghana is ruled largely by Christians, it would seem to be a reasonable assumption that these leaders would commend Christ to the pagans. If the leaders become Christian, the followers will come in too. If the educated are won for Christ, the country will in time follow Him too. All such superficial thinking fails to reckon with the culture gap.

The culture gap is a most common cause of churches which literally cannot win their neighbors. In America some ardently missionary churches find they cannot draw people from the other side of the tracks into their church. In Liberia the very fact that the Americo-Liberians who number about 100,000 have been Christian and literate for generations has prevented the spread of Christianity to the 900,000 pagan tribesmen in the interior. The culture gap, according to Mr. Krass, affects the Moslems also--though they are much closer to the Chokosi villagers than the Christians.

What is the solution? Many missionaries would work, pray, and agonize over the forty Christians, trying to get them to be better Christians, realize their salvation more, fill them with the Holy Spirit, get them revived and vitalized. Occasionally this does result in the spread of Christianity to a receptive village population. But for the most part it does not. The revived still "worship in Ewe, English and Twi," and sing more lustily than ever "English hymns in Southern Ghanaian languages." They still wear English clothes and think of themselves as very much above the rural Chokosi.

Mr. Krass's solution to the problem is one which has worked hundreds of times. He simply by-passed the town congregation and started a new pattern among the Chokosi. He did not abandon the town congregation. He made provision for it. He and his family doubtless lived in town, and the forty Christians were their close friends and neighbors; but he did not spend eight days a week "working with them." He refused to be tied to them.

(5) Note how Mr. Krass "began work" among the Chokosi. Many national ministers and missionaries would have distributed literature, taught illiterates to read, served the Chokosi with medicine, started an agricultural center to minister to the felt needs of these simple people whose life was the soil, or done some other helpful work. "You must be seen to be socially useful before your words will carry weight. The Gospel is just words till you validate it with service" is often said. But Mr. Krass just "set forth the whole of the Gospel." He was not carrying on mission or church work. He was openly and unashamedly planting churches.

He had no evidence at all when he began that the Chokosi were receptive. In the Northern Territories in Ghana very few have become Christian. Six or eight Chokosi youth had gone to the middle school at Yendi and become Christian. With their wives and families they numbered about eighteen souls in the midst of 18,700 unconverted Chokosi--scarcely enough to hazard a guess that the Chokosi were receptive. And the converts showed no zeal to convert their kindred. In fact, the Chokosi evangelist himself "did not anticipate the development of Chokosi congregations in the villages."

Mr. Krass did have one great advantage, however. He was starting on fresh ground. He had a clean slate. He seems to have been able to carry out his own program and implement his own insight.

(6) Mr. Krass assumed that the whole village would hear, learn, and declare for Christ. This seems very simple and easy, until one contrasts it with what most men in his position would have done. Instead of prejudging the issue, being sure that most of the pagans would reject Christ, and believing that the Holy Spirit would pry loose a few converts from the pagan village, he assumed that the whole village would decide for (or against) Christ. Had he expected individual decisions against the social current, against the old men of the village, against the fathers and uncles, that is what he would have gotten. This expectation would have colored his preaching, his prayers, his counsel to individuals, his program, and every aspect of his missionary endeavor. When he noted that "Prior to our coming, the village had always acted as a village and we assumed it would act as a unit with respect to our preaching," he was taking a giant stride toward turning the village responsive.

He preached Christ in a way that the village could accept Him. It is as simple as that. The Eurican way (individual decision against one's kin) works in the madly individualistic society of Eurica; but to Afericasians it appears a traitorous and despicable way to proceed.

(7) Literacy work was confined to villages being evangelized and was geared to producing men who could (and did) lead worship in the new church whose members were yet to be baptized. Apparently the scheme worked well. The full force of the daring and faith of the Krass program can be seen by contrasting it with what a conventional literacy program in a pagan village would have done. Instead of using literacy as an evangelistic means, a vehicle for evangelism or a trellis on which the evangelistic vine would climb, Mr. Krass began teaching those to read who had already put themselves under Christian instruction. Furthermore, literacy was never the main Christian activity in the village. That was teaching the people all about the Christian life; that was preaching the Gospel. Teaching young men to read was part of teaching them to be leaders in churches. This literacy program was a far cry from most. Those in it were not the leaders. The village decision to become Christian was taken by the old men (who apparently were not taught to read).

(8) Of particular note is the leadership training program which Mr. Krass instituted. It ran concurrently with the adult evangelism. It trained villagers to lead village churches. It trained some of them well enough so that they became assistant evangelists and one became a missionary to far distant Chokosi. All this is sound missionary methodology. I question, however, whether the emphasis on young men was the wisest one. In many places, leaders for village churches are trained from among men between twenty-five and forty years of age.

(9) Of particular interest are the dozen or so educated Chokosi men in the by-passed town congregation. They came to Christian faith via the school route. For them, becoming Christian was part of stepping up into modern life. Their parents

could not go through eight years of schooling and get good jobs in towns as teachers and clerks; but the boys could. They became Christian. Not all of them got jobs. Some married uneducated girls.

These few Chokosi are typical of thousands upon thousands who come to Christ via the school. Through them the Church gradually gets a toe hold in the resistant tribe. After fifty or a hundred years maybe five percent of the total population will be Christian. (Often the percentage is much less.) But since something is better than nothing, and the Church which results is literate and cultured and Christians become leaders of their nations, most missions in pagan Africa have used the school approach. Africa is the one continent where the school approach has led literally millions into the Church.

However, it runs into the difficulty which Mr. Krass relates. The school community creates a kind of church which illiterate villagers and animists do not flock to. The pagan tribe is like a can of peas. The school approach is like a can opener. It opens most tribes to the Gospel and creates a small Church there. But once the can is open, the mission should drop the can opener and seize the spoon of adult evangelism. The can opener is a good instrument with which to open the can but a very poor instrument with which to get the peas out. The school approach actually seals off the adults of many pagan tribes. "We cannot learn to read--how can we become Christian. Men become Christians by going to school for eight years or more. Christianity is good for the new generation, not for us." Such are the fallacious arguments one hears from the village adults. Christians, too, who were baptized after a catechumenate of three years or more, are not going to let down the bars for adult illiterates. Missionaries agree. "You really cannot have Christians who cannot read the Bible," explained a lady missionary, forgetting that her own ancestors for a thousand years were illiterate Christians. So from both sides an impasse develops.

The break in most tribes between the town church and the village churches will not have to be as sharp as that Mr. Krass portrays. Then, too, when the Chokosi experiment is a little older, it will probably find that the educated youth of the town congregation furnish an upper echelon of leadership. Certainly, before five thousand Chokosi have become Christian, a goodly number of the youth of the tribe will be in Christian schools. Perhaps the central lesson here is that the school approach is one form of evangelism, good in the beginning but which needs to be supplemented by direct discipling of villages as soon as possible. Certainly a way must be found whereby the non-biblical requirement that only the literate may be baptized will be removed all across Africa. Certainly also, whole villages must be given the option of declaring for Christ and being baptized as soon as they can be instructed and organized into churches.

(10) Mr. Krass, in refreshing contrast to much coming from the mission field, thinks "it would not be too much to expect that in ten years or so, the entire Chokosi nation (tribe) will have been discipling for Christ." This outcome seems reasonable to me, given the faith, courage and sound missionary methods which this article portrays.

Indeed, I wonder whether the procedure Mr. Krass details, cannot be used in many other tribes by many other missionaries and national leaders. Mr. Krass's program has many similarities to that related by Mr. Wold of Liberia in the fall 1966 issue of the Church Growth Bulletin. Details will differ but sound church growth principles can be widely applied. They will often open the door to great discipling.