

THE CHRIST REVIVAL CHURCH: A SHORT-LIVED SECESSION IN WINNEBA

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Elsewhere I have described the growth of the Pentecostal churches in Ghana, using as the central focus the intertwining careers of two of the movement's pioneering leaders, Peter Anim and James McKeown.¹ Looking back over the events recounted in tracing the careers of these prominent figures, one is tempted to regard the history of Pentecostalism in Ghana (as in a good many other places) as the history of internal dissensions and schisms, interspersed with numerous attempts to establish affiliations with, or obtain sponsorship from, overseas evangelical bodies of one kind or another. The various secessions described in my earlier paper involved disputes and conflicts within the central leadership of the Pentecostal movement. And although doctrinal issues were raised and disputed in these conflicts, they were, essentially, power struggles between intelligent, forceful and ambitious men.² Here my purpose is not to re-examine some of these battles of the Titans but to look instead at a kind of secession which, one suspects, occurred far more frequently than we may imagine but which, because the secessionists were not members of the central leadership group, may not assume a prominent place in the "official" histories of the churches concerned. I refer, of course, to the secession of a local branch or assembly from the main body of the church.

The secession I shall describe took place in Winneba and concerned the local assembly of the Apostolic Church and its relations with the church's ruling body in Ghana, the National Council.³ The town of Winneba occupies an important place in the history of the Apostolic Church in Ghana, for it

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was at one time the headquarters of the Apostolic Church mission in the country. Originally sited at Asamankese, the headquarters was transferred to Winneba in 1938 by the Apostolic missionary, Pastor James McKown, following his quarrel with Peter Anim, the unofficial leader of the converts at Asamankese. From 1938 onwards the Winneba assembly was a flourishing one, even after the headquarters was transferred to Accra and despite the introduction of branches of rival Pentecostal churches in 1939 and 1953. By 1966 it was the largest Pentecostal assembly in Winneba, with over one hundred and sixty members.

The dispute which tore the local Apostolic Church assembly apart in 1967 may be traced to a decision made two years previously by the National Council, when it agreed to a request from the Asasewa assembly to postpone the transfer of Pastor H.T. Coffie from Asasewa to Winneba. Pastor J.B.K. Bondzie, a native of Winneba, was sent to his home town early in 1966 as a temporary replacement for Coffie.

In September of 1966 the National Council decided that it was now possible for Coffie to leave Asasewa and go to Winneba. This decision, however, met with determined opposition from the Winneba assembly, for it meant that Pastor Bondzie would have to leave them and take over the assembly at Asasewa. In a letter signed by eight elders and four deacons, the Winneba assembly appealed to the Chairman of the National Council to grant a postponement of Coffie's transfer.⁴ This letter cited the previous postponement of Coffie's transfer from Asasewa as a precedent and asked that Bondzie be allowed to remain in Winneba until certain planned undertakings had been completed. In reply, the Chairman of the National Council rejected this appeal and reminded the Winneba assembly that the decision had been taken by the National Council and ought therefore to be accepted as being the will of God.⁵

This argument failed to impress the leaders in the Winneba assembly,

who then appealed directly to the National Council, repeating the arguments they had used in their first letter.⁶ At the same time they took the somewhat unusual step of writing to Cofie at Asasewa, advising him that they could not accept him as their new pastor, taking care to point out that they bore no animosity toward him personally and assuring him that he would be most welcome in Winneba after Bondzie had completed his (unspecified) tasks there.⁷ Cofie did not reply, but the Chairman sent a gently-worded but firm letter on behalf of the National Council, emphasizing the finality of the decision and advising the Winneba assembly not to hinder Pastor Cofie when he came to Winneba.⁸ This evoked a bitter reply in which the Winneba leaders complained about the tendency of pastors to exert pressure on the National Council to have them sent to stations they found attractive and went on to remind the Chairman of the importance of Winneba in the history of the Apostolic Church, going so far as to suggest that the national headquarters should have been in Winneba and not in Accra. The letter also presented the National Council with a clear ultimatum: Bondzie must be permitted to stay or the Winneba assembly would secede from the national organization.⁹

In March of 1967 the matter came to a head when the National Council decided to dismiss Pastor Bondzie from the field staff and communicated its decision in a letter to him that same month.¹⁰ This was followed by a circular letter to all assemblies in Ghana, in which Bondzie's dismissal was reported. The dispute had gone on from September 1966 to April 1967 and in May of 1967 Bondzie announced the creation of his own Christ Revival Church, being joined in this venture by all the elders and deacons who had participated in preparing and signing the various letters of protest and appeal, as well as by some two-thirds of the assembly members. When Cofie arrived in Winneba shortly after the secession he found a much depleted and demoralized assembly awaiting him.

The Christ Revival Church rented an old, dilapidated building (formerly used as a cinema house) as its meeting-place and Bondzie quickly established

small out-stations at Apam and Mumford. At first all went well with the new church, despite the fact that Bondzie appeared in court on a charge of appropriating Apostolic Church property for use in his own church. The district magistrate ruled that the matter was one which ought to be settled out of court by agreement between the two parties. In practice, however, it proved impossible to get the two sides together, Coffie insisting upon an Accra meeting to be attended by representatives of the National Council and Bondzie rejecting this proposal firmly.

Throughout 1967 and during the early months of 1968, the Christ Revival Church appeared to be holding its own and it was the remnant of the Apostolic Church assembly which appeared to be in difficulties. During this time I attended services in both churches and there is no doubt that those in the Christ Revival Church were better attended. But from about April onward there began a slow but steady drift of secessionists back to the Apostolic Church and as they returned Pastor Coffie developed the practice of bringing them to his table during services and publicly welcoming them back to the fold. Some of these scenes, which I witnessed, were most moving in their simplicity and there can be little doubt that the sight of sincerely repentant men and women being warmly welcomed back into a church to which many of them had belonged for several years did much to encourage others to follow. There was, however, no mass exodus from the Christ Revival Church, nor was there any sign of popular dissatisfaction with Bondzie as a person or as a pastor. The steady trickle of members back to "the Mother Church", as many called it, seemed to be prompted by genuine feelings of remorse at having acted hastily and having seriously threatened the existence of an assembly toward which they held very strong positive feelings.¹¹ By the middle of 1969 the Christ Revival Church was reduced to about twenty-five members and Bondzie advised them to return to the Apostolic Church. In a sense the real victim of the episode, Bondzie left Winneba to join the ministry of a Spiritual church

known as the Eden Revival Church.

This short-lived secession shows that a somewhat rigid and inflexible central authority meeting with strong local or ethnic sentiment can produce a highly volatile mixture, especially when this sentiment becomes crystallized in the person of a popular and energetic local pastor. But given the equally strong attachment people feel toward an organization which is held to be "theirs", it is likely that the motive power behind the secession will dissipate, particularly if the central authority, once the secession is upon it, acts wisely by doing nothing further to provoke or threaten those whom it has helped to drive out.

Notes

1. R.W. Wyllie, "Pioneers of Ghanaian Pentecostalism: Peter Anim and James McKeown". Journal of Religion in Africa, Vol. VI, 1974, pp. 109-122.
2. In using the word "ambitious" I do not mean to imply ruthlessness or opportunism on the part of the protagonists, but merely to indicate that these men sought to maximize their authority within their chosen "profession" or, if one prefers, their "calling". Most of them may have been humble before God, but exuded confidence and assertiveness in their dealings with men.
3. Although the National Council was composed mainly of Ghanaians, its Chairman was a European. It is responsible to the Missionary Headquarters of the Apostolic Church in Bradford, England.
4. Letter, 2nd October, 1966.
5. Letter, 16th October, 1966.
6. Letter, 10th November, 1966.
7. Letter, 8th November, 1966.
8. Letter, 28th November, 1966.
9. Letter, 2nd December, 1966.
10. Letter, 27th March, 1967.
11. It would seem that such a reversal would be less likely to occur following secessions from the Spiritual or "prophet-healing" churches. Here it appears that in all save the largest and best established of such groups identification with the local "prophet" or "pastor" is likely to be stronger than the attachment to the church as a whole.