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**MISSION FROM AFRICA: A CALL  
TO RE-IMAGINE MISSION IN  
AFRICAN-LED PENTECOSTAL  
CHURCHES IN BRITAIN**

**LEADERSHIP TRAITS  
AND PRACTICES:  
INSIGHTS FROM  
AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGIES**

**LOVING THE BRITISH FOR  
THE SAKE OF MISSION**

**CELEBRATING THE  
LIFE AND LEGACY OF  
BISHOP AJAYI CROWTHER**

**MISSIO DEI:  
AN AFRICAN APPROPRIATION**

**EDITOR: HARVEY C. KWIYANI**

# *Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Bishop Ajayi Crowther*

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### **Abstract**

It has been 150 years since the consecration of the first African Bishop in the Church of England, Samuel Ajayi Crowther. This momentous occasion deserves celebration, but much more than that, a review in order that we can access some new insights for the mission of African Christians in Britain. The mission of African Christians in Britain is an indirect product of the pioneer missionary work of Ajayi Crowther. This is because modern African Christianity in Africa and in the Diaspora owes its development to the work of Ajayi Crowther. This essay explores what African Christianity in Britain can learn from the missionary work of Ajayi Crowther. It suggests that, in learning from Crowther, African Christians in Britain need to (1) develop a strong theology of mission relevant in the secular British context and (2) intentionally disciple second and third generations of Africans for the sake of mission in their generations.

**Keywords: Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Church Mission Society, Nigeria, postcolonial.**

### **Introduction**

Sunday, 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 marked 150 years since Samuel Ajayi Crowther was ordained as the first African bishop in the Church of England in the Canterbury Cathedral. As we celebrate this historic occasion, we must take time to understand Samuel Ajayi Crowther's life and learn from his pioneering role. Crowther can be regarded as one of the fathers of modern African Christianity as his Bible translation work on the continent set the stage for the flowering of African indigenous Christianity and by extension African theology. A lot has been written about him and his legacy. This explores two implications of Crowther's legacy for African Christianity in Britain.

## Life of Ajayi Crowther in Context

Samuel Ajayi was born in a small town called Osogun, now in Oyo State, Nigeria, in 1810. His parents gave him the name Ajayi as a symbol of importance. They also consulted the *Ifa* (Oracle of Divinity) to find out which of the four hundred Yoruba traditional deities he would grow to worship. The *Ifa* priest warned them not to dedicate him to any idol, foreseeing that he would worship the Almighty God.<sup>1</sup>

On one sunny bright afternoon in 1821 when Ajayi was 12, his town was raided by 2,000 strong men on horses who were slave traders. His father was probably killed during the raid as the young Ajayi never saw him again after that. Ajayi, himself, was captured together with his mother and siblings. His family with thousands of other enslaved people were taken to a nearby town called Iseyin. Here, Ajayi was exchanged for a horse and was separated from his family. He tried to commit suicide after constant mistreatment in the hands of slave owners and traders. Later, Ajayi was exchanged again for tobacco leaves and English wine. He was finally sold off to the Portuguese slave traders at the Lagos slave market. As the Portuguese prepared to leave the coast of Africa, their ship was intersected by a British anti-slavery warship. The Portuguese ship was attacked and destroyed, leaving 102 people alive out of about 189.<sup>2</sup>

Ajayi was one of the people rescued, and they were taken to Sierra Leone in 1822.<sup>3</sup> He was treated very well and was placed in a Church Missionary Society (CMS) school where he learned to read and write.<sup>4</sup> Ajayi had a great passion for learning and applied himself to learn everything that he could. Within six months of his arrival in Sierra Leone he became a teacher in a local school.

Ajayi also began to learn about God and believed God had won his freedom for him, therefore he decided to devote himself to God's service. Ajayi believed that he was not only saved from slavery but also from sin. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1825, Rev J.C. Raban baptised and named Ajayi after the vicar of Christ Church, Newgate, London (Reverend Samuel Crowther who was one of the pioneers of CMS).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Akinyele Omoyajowo, *Makers of the Church in Nigeria (1842-1947)*, (Lagos, Nigeria: CSS Bookshop Ltd, 1995), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Omoyajowo, *Makers*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> David Killinary and Joel Edwards (eds), *Black Voices: The Shaping of our Christian Experience*, (Nottingham, England, Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Omoyajowo, *Makers*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Festus Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*, (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 26.

Ajayi made his first visit to London in 1826. This trip left a strong impression on him. He attended St Mary's School on Liverpool Street in Islington before returning to Sierra Leone in 1827. When he returned to Sierra Leone, he was appointed by the government as a schoolmaster. He married another freed ex-slave girl called Asano. She was an educated African who could read and write. She was baptised with the name Susan Thompson after conversion from Islam. They got married and lived together for about 50 years. They were blessed with six children; three sons and three daughters. One of their sons, Dandeson Crowther, became an Archdeacon in the Niger-delta mission while one of his grandsons, Herbert Macaulay, was a nationalist and politician who was involved in the struggle to emancipate Nigeria from colonial rule.

Following his return, Ajayi also enrolled as one of the first set of students at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone in 1827. Fourah Bay College was founded in 1827 and was the first higher institution and Bible College started by CMS in West Africa. Ajayi later taught Greek and Latin at the same college.

1841 marks the beginning of what is popularly known as the Niger Expedition. CMS was interested in expanding its mission work in the Niger-delta region in Nigeria, and so Reverend James Frederick Schon a CMS missionary was sent with Ajayi and a company of other missionaries. The mission did not succeed due to malaria disease which affected many of white missionaries. In addition, was the lack of trust and rejection of white missionaries by the local people. Reverend Schon recommended to CMS that Africans should be used in evangelising their own people. To this end Ajayi, was invited to London in 1843 and was trained at the Anglican College in Islington as a Church of England minister, and was ordained by the Bishop of London in 1844.<sup>6</sup>

Ajayi went back to Sierra Leone and was given a rousing welcome. He preached his first sermon in English and another in Yoruba.<sup>7</sup> He went to Abeokuta in Nigeria with Rev Henry Townsend and began missionary work among the Ijebu people. Ajayi developed interest in African languages and became a linguist. He evolved the orthography of the Yoruba language and embarked on the translation of the Bible into Yoruba. He was assisted by Thomas King, another African scholar and a product of Fourah Bay College. In 1852, Ajayi published and revised his version of Yoruba grammar and vocabulary and the translation of four books of the New Testament: Luke, Acts of the Apostles, James and Peter. Ajayi won the moral confidence of the locals through his gentle character and wisdom. This led

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<sup>6</sup> Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Omoyajowo, *Makers*, 32.

to the evangelisation of the people in Abeokuta and the surrounding areas. Crowther became the main catalyst used in evangelism by the CMS as he was accepted by his fellow countrymen.

In 1845, Crowther learnt that his mother and sisters were living in a nearby village in Abeokuta. He sent for them and with lots of tears was reunited with his family after almost thirty years of separation.<sup>8</sup> During another visit to England in 1851, he was invited by the British Prime Minister, John Henry Temple, 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount Palmerston, who learnt a lot about West Africa from him. Queen Victoria and her husband also invited Crowther to Windsor Castle where he explained the situation of things in West Africa by using maps. At their pleasure he was also asked to recite the Lord's Prayer in Yoruba.<sup>9</sup> Ajayi seems to have defied the then-popular view that black people were not intelligent, as the majority of the time people were shocked by his wisdom and learning. He later addressed the students at Cambridge University, encouraging them to come and serve in Africa.<sup>10</sup>

The work that Ajayi and others started in the Niger-Delta area in 1841, although a failure due to malaria, scepticism and rejection of white missionaries by the locals and other factors, nevertheless continued and now needed the supervision of a Bishop. Henry Venn, CMS Secretary, expressed that Ajayi would be a good man for the job. Venn's peers such as Henry Townsend who worked with Ajayi in Abeokuta countered that African clergies should never be made bishops because they are inferior and would not be up to the task. However Venn recommended Ajayi be consecrated as Bishop of the Western Equatorial Africa. Ajayi himself refused, arguing that he was not seeking any honour and only wanted to serve Christ. After lots of appeal and persuasion from Venn, Ajayi accepted and was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury as the first African Bishop on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1864 at Canterbury Cathedral.<sup>11</sup> The same year, in recognition of his immense contribution to missionary work in West Africa, the University of Oxford conferred on him an honorary doctorate degree.<sup>12</sup>

Ajayi, now working in Nigeria's Delta region as a bishop, faced racism from some white colleagues who would not submit to his bishopric. Other problems he faced included tackling the customs and practices of some of the natives such as human sacrifices, killing of twins and idolatry.<sup>13</sup> He preached against these practices, demonstrating the light of the

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<sup>8</sup> Adotey Bing, Jonathan Derrick and Godwin Matau (eds) *Makers of Modern Africa: Profiles in History*, (London: Africa Books, 1991), 169.

<sup>9</sup> Omoyajowo, *Makers*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Omoyajoyo, *Makers*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Bing, Derrick and Matau (eds), *Makers*, 169 and Omoyajowo, *Makers*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Bing, Derrick and Matau (eds), *Makers*, 169, Killingray and Edwards, *Black*, p. 47, and Omoyajowo, *Makers*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Ajayi, *Christian*, 215-216.

Gospel. His missionary endeavours were so successful that the chief of Bonny, one of the towns in the region, renounced idolatry and put an end to the worship of the local reptiles. Bishop Ajayi also helped start self-supporting schools in the region, in Lagos and in Freetown, Sierra Leone to educate Africans. He believed that education was very important for the freedom of Africans from religious superstition and to enlighten future generations.

Towards the end of Ajayi's life, he faced more difficulties. Firstly, he lost three important people in his life; his wife (1880), his mother (1883) and his old friend and colleague, Rev Schon (1889). Secondly, from around 1880, mission-educated Africans within Bishop Ajayi's Niger mission and in Lagos and Freetown were discredited by European missionaries.<sup>14</sup> Misconduct of all kind such as drunkenness and embezzlement of funds were reported to the CMS in England. This led to an intense investigation which sidelined the authority of Bishop Ajayi, while his fellow Africans whom he had trained were either suspended or dismissed. Twelve out of fifteen native agents he had trained were dismissed by the commission that was set up.<sup>15</sup> The conclusion of the investigation was that, although the Bishop was a man of integrity and character, the Niger mission was a failure due to his lack of administrative skill and management.<sup>16</sup>

To the Africans, putting the Bishop on trial was putting all of Africa on trial, and to pronounce the great work of Bishop Ajayi in the Niger mission a failure was to insult African intelligence.<sup>17</sup> This led to schism in the Church in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, which gave rise to the Ethiopian Churches or the African Church Movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Bishop Ajayi was broken and disheartened by the whole episode and died after a brief illness on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1891 at the age of 81. However, before his death, in May 1891, Bishop Ajayi set up a scheme to train native pastors. This was called the Niger Delta Pastorate Scheme and was meant to be self-supported by native agencies from Lagos and Sierra Leone.

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<sup>14</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 2009), 176.

<sup>15</sup> Sanneh, *Translating*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Ajayi, *Christian*, 245-249.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914*, (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1966), 216-217. Gabriel Oshitelu, *Expansion of Christianity in West Africa*, (Abeokuta: Nigeria, Visual Resource Publishers, 2002), 108.

## Implications of the Life and Legacy of Ajayi Crowther for the African Churches in Diaspora

Having considered the life and ministry of Bishop Ajayi Crowther, what implications can we draw from his pioneering work? I want to focus on two areas of his legacy. Firstly, his Bible translation work not only led to the development of African missionary agents, which in turn led to the evangelisation of Africans by Africans, but a wider implication of was the birth of African Christianity detached from the influences or bewitchment of colonial Christianity.<sup>1</sup> As Africans began to read the Bible in their own mother languages they began to see that the confusion of the three C's (Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation) which had shaped European missions in Africa was not biblical or Christian. For example, they read that when believers were baptised in the New Testament they did not have to change their names to a foreign name. It was part of this understanding that led David Vincent, a Nigerian Baptist minister, to change his name to Mojola Agbebi as a sign of a cultural reform.<sup>2</sup> Bishop Ajayi's translation work therefore started decolonisation in African minds. This what Bob Marley in the *Song of Freedom* referred to as "emancipate yourself from mental slavery." Fela Kuti, a true pioneer of Afro-beat, termed the colonial mentality as "colo-mentality". As African Christians began to question some of the European church traditions, the more they were decolonised. This process eventually led to the independence of many African nations in the middle of the twentieth century.

To continue this task of deconstruction, African Churches in the diaspora today must engage with post-colonial theologies. These are theologies that seek to address the effects of colonialism on the colonised, and the continual struggle against neo-colonialism. A starting point for African Churches in the diaspora is to engage with theology. This will mean more African pastors studying theology at Bible Colleges and universities. Gone should be the days when an African pastor anointed with the Holy Spirit thinks that is sufficient for ministry. While we want to encourage pneumatic experiences and transformation, we must also encourage people to reflect theologically on their church doctrines and practices. This will result in moving from 'inherited theology' to developing an authentic African Theology in Britain.

Bishop Joe Aldred, a Black theologian in the UK has this to say about hand-me-down theology: "Black Church doctrine tends to rely upon prescriptions agreed upon by people

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Beckford, *From Maintenance to Mission: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity* in Phyllis Thompson (ed) "Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (London: SPCK, 2013), 32-48.

<sup>2</sup> Ayandele, *The Missionary*, 206-207.

so long enough ago that present day leaders have not had to have to think them through.”<sup>3</sup> The result of this is that we often end up with inherited church traditions and doctrines that are not relevant to the present context of ministry. If theology is meant to be answering our questions about God, then inherited church traditions which have answered the past generations’ questions will not necessarily be sufficient to deal with the existential realities of the present. I fear that some of our inherited church traditions and doctrines were actually answering questions posed during the enlightenment period of which our ancestors were not a part. In essence, some of our inherited church traditions were answers to other people’s questions. When are we going to ask our own questions and find our own answers? This is why it is imperative for the African Churches in Britain to develop an African Theology in the UK context.

Secondly, Bishop Ajayi’s consecration as the first African Bishop and his emphasis on education inspired a whole new generation of African clergy and elites. It was some of these clergy who led the first wave of African Churches or Ethiopian Churches that seceded when Bishop Ajayi’s work in the Niger-Delta was pronounced a failure. The secession happened in West Africa, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria; in East Africa, especially in Kenya and Uganda; and in South Africa. The African Churches separated from Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptists and Congregational churches. For example, the following churches seceded from the Mission Churches in Nigeria:

1. The Native Baptist Church separated from the Lagos Baptist Church, which belonged to the American Southern Baptists, in 1888.
2. The United Native African Church (UNA) was formed by members of Anglican and Methodist Churches in 1891.
3. The Bethel African Church seceded from CMS St Paul’s Church, Breadfruit, Lagos in 1901.
4. The United African Methodist Church, Eleja, Lagos also seceded from the Methodist Church in 1917.<sup>4</sup>

The task of the above churches was the struggle to indigenise Christianity among their people, and they did this through the encouragement of local dialects in services, wearing of native dress to churches and reading the Bible and preaching in local languages.

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<sup>3</sup> Joe Aldred and Keno Ogbo, (eds), *The Black Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 226.

<sup>4</sup> James Webster, *The African Churches Among the Yoruba (1888-1922)*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 61-90 and Israel Olofinjana, *Reverse in Ministry and Missions: Africans in the Dark Continent of Europe*, (Milton Keynes: Author House, 2010), 21.

However, despite the secession of these churches from the Mission Churches, their organisational structures, styles of leadership, doctrinal positions, rites and rituals remained identical with that of the Mission Churches. It took another wave of African Churches, known as African Indigenous Churches (AICs), to complete the task of indigenisation of Christianity in Africa.

For African Churches in the diaspora today, how do we model the relevance of African Christianity to second and third generation Africans who are British and often do not want to have anything to do with the faith of their fathers? In order for this to happen, we have to contextualise African Christianity in Britain. Exporting African Christianity from Africa to the UK without contextualising and making it relevant to the British culture will cause second and third generation Africans born in the UK to seek and attend churches such as Hillsong Church in London or New Frontier Churches. There is nothing wrong with these churches, but in essence what I am articulating is, how can African Churches move from being mono-ethnic churches to multicultural churches that are relevant to people in the UK today?

In conclusion, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther remains an iconic church leader in Africa and beyond due to his pioneering role as the first African bishop. He operated at a time when black people were seen as inferior based on the pseudo sciences of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. He challenged this perception and ideology by his literature, Bible translation work and character. He was a humble man who saw the goodness of God in redeeming him twice from slavery. While he believed that Africans needed African clergy to evangelise, he always respected and spoke highly of European missionary efforts to Africa.

He was the bridge between Africans and Europeans and was, for most of the time, misunderstood by both. His lifelong goal was to serve God and that he did. Part of his legacy was the emergence of the African Church Movement in the nineteenth century and the development of an African Theology in the middle of the twentieth century. It is in memory of his pioneering of African Christianity and mission that the Church of Pentecost, Centre for Missionary from the Majority World, Birmingham Christian College, Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) collaborated with *Missio Africanus* on a on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2014 at Crowther Hall, Birmingham Christian College in Selly Oak to celebrate his consecration as the first African Anglican bishop.

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