

# MARY SLESSOR'S LEGACY: A MODEL FOR 21ST CENTURY MISSIONARIES

By

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## **Abstract:**

The story of Miss Mary Mitchell Slessor is not a story of a clairvoyant legend who existed in an abstract world but a historical reality that worked around the then Old Calabar estuary and died on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 1915 at Ikot Oku Use, near Ikot Obong in the present day Akwa Ibom State and was buried at “Udi Mbakara” (Whiteman’s grave) in Calabar, Cross River State. Mary was one of those early missionaries that went to villages in the then Old Calabar where few missionaries dared to go in order to bring hope and light to the people that were in darkness. Through her evangelistic efforts, schools and hospitals were erected on her initiative, babies and twins saved from death, barbaric rites and customs stopped because of her undaunted love and passion for God and the people. After a centenary of death, one can easily conclude that what immortalizes a person is not what he does for himself but what he does for others. Mary Slessor’s name, work and care for twins can never be forgotten even in another century to come. The tripartite purpose of this paper is to first examine the stepping out of Mary Slessor from her comfort zone to Calabar (her initial struggle), her passion for the people of Old Calabar and her relational method of evangelism that endeared her to the heart of the people.

## **Introduction:**

This year the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2015 in collaboration with other partner Churches particularly the Church of Scotland, celebrated a centenary memorial thanksgiving service in honour of one of the greatest missionaries whose sacrificial life and commitment ended some barbaric practices that existed in the then Old Calabar of Eastern Nigeria. The generosity of her spirit, her unyielding advocacy, her humanitarian services in stopping the inglorious and barbaric killing of twins and all other heathen cultural practices epitomizes her legacy and her core Christian values which speaks for her even after 100 years of her earthly existence. Indeed, what immortalizes a person is not what he does for himself but what he does for others. Her legacy is embedded in pages of world history and her footprints boldly written on marbles.

## **The Initial Struggle:**

As a young Scottish missionary, Mary Slessor sacrificed the comfort of the civilization she was born into and opted to find fulfillment in evangelizing a people who presumably were in darkness and needed a light of the gospel. Though she is popularly known for putting an end to the killing of twins and their mothers, she did more than that; she assisted widows, orphans and the handicapped. She converted the natives to Christianity, discouraged slave trade, and taught the natives how to read and write. Geoffrey Hanks, the author of the book *70 Great Christians* assert that Mary Slessor came into the missionary scene when it was essentially a male preserved idea. According to him, “married men who were called by God to foreign mission took their wives with them, but the thought of a single woman being called to mission work was unheard of”(193). But by strong passion, determination and prayer, she overcame all obstacles and lingering fears and applied to join the Calabar Mission in 1875 then known as the “white man’s grave”.

Her interest in missionary work developed at an early age when a sermon by a missionary from Calabar created a deep impression on her. Sam Wellman in his book *Mary Slessor: Queen of Calabar* gives us the scenario and the hero that captured the heart and mind of young Mary to volunteer her missionary work from her homeland to Africa. The work and life of a great Scottish missionary, David Livingstone had a great impact in the life of Mary which she constantly read from *Missionary Travels and Missionary Records*. Over a period of time she had developed a great passion and interest for Calabar that it is recorded that “it seemed as if she had lived in Calabar longer than Dundee” her home town (11).

Elizabeth Robertson confirming the above assertion in her book *Mary Slessor* also opines that:

Her whole family monitored the progress of the missionaries abroad (Africa) with intense interest, never missing opportunities to be present when a missionary on furlough regaled audiences with hair-raising accounts of adventures in faraway lands. For some it was pure entertainment, but yet for the Slessors, who looked to the future when John, the second boy, might take the place of his brother Robert in the mission field. But this was not to be, for John died prematurely. Mary’s desire to become a woman missionary took root from this point and it was nurtured by the example of David Living stone who had himself been a missionary in Africa (8).

When the news of Livingstone’s death came through in 1873, it tore Mary’s heart and she knew that a vacuum had been created. According to Wellman, Mary is quoted as saying: “That good man and his great work in Africa finished? Who could replace Livingstone? Not ten missionaries. Not one hundred” (11). “Should a woman like me go to a far-off country to do missionary work among the savages?” (15). She wrestled with these thoughts for a while, thinking she had nothing to offer, but whenever she prayed, the word “Calabar” came back to her mind. Comparing her life with that of Livingstone, Mary is quoted as saying, but:

He was a Scot, just like me. He was the second oldest of seven children, just like me. He had been poor, just like me. He had even worked in a textile mill many years, just like me. Then why cannot I be a missionary just like him? Yes, to Africa just like him (9).

Wellman reports that as she kept praying her mind was constantly drawn to the great commission “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Obviously not all encouraged her, even some in the Church begged her not to go, reminding her of the many missionaries that had died in their first year of arrival and how the tropics were white people’s grave but for her, the burden, the passion and the zeal was greater than the fear and the danger. Before she finally applied to the Board of Foreign Mission, she prayed and said: “Yes, I have decided on Calabar in what may be my own stumbling way, but now I realize You must decide, Thy will not mind Oh Lord”.

Again during this struggling period, Elizabeth Robertson reports that what settled the score in Mary’s heart was a piece of write up from David Livingstone that came with his obituary announcement. The write up seemed too personal for Mary to ignore even though it was not a personal note for her. “I direct your attention to Africa...Do carry on the work I have begun. I leave it with you” (9). This was the statement that dismissed every fear and indecision in Mary. Deeply rooted in her conviction, she volunteered her services and applied to the Foreign Mission Board of the United Presbyterian Church for service in Calabar and on the 5th of August, 1876, Mary Slessor left Liverpool for Calabar and arrived Calabar on September 11, 1876.

### **Calabar At the time of Mary’s Arrival:**

On arrival, Mary was overwhelmed by the new sights, new sounds and new smell especially the unpleasant rotten vegetations from palm oil. Aye informs us in his book, *Old Calabar Through the Centuries* that before the creation of airports, the most popular links between Old Calabar and other communities were through land, sea or creeks. These routes served as commercial links and as transit camps for the migration of people to and fro the communities. Four important rivers made the accessibility of Old Calabar easier to the outside world and its neighborhood than others. These were the Cross River on the West and the South, the Calabar River, the Great Kwa River and the Akpayafe in the East. These were the sea routes that opened up Old Calabar to the outside world during the period of slavery and colonization.

According to Aye:

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Old Calabar in the nineteenth century the Efik people were polytheists by religion, that is to say they worshipped several gods and goddesses to whom they offered periodic animal and human sacrifices.... Individual families and Houses also had their patron gods and goddesses.

Indeed, Efik people were ignorantly in bondage without knowing, and yet they guarded their traditions and customs very jealously. They boasted in their heinous cruelty and ghastly crime to

the amazement of the missionaries. The social system among the people encouraged servitude. Free men were ready to sell their birth right to wealthy Chiefs for a pottage, just to gain their protection. Every infringement or violation of the native custom was a crime and every crime ended either in death or slavery, if the man was unable to buy his immunity. Troublesome slaves were flogged or drowned or mutilated with devilish ingenuity.

Old Calabar was dominated by some high secret cults among which “Ekpe cult” was the most revered, most renowned and most powerful in the whole of Efik kingdom. They coroneted their king by it, buried, swore, judged, killed, promised and consulted it on difficult matters whether politically, socially, economically or religiously. Indeed, for Efik people, Ekpe was their all in all. Their laws were sacrosanct and to defy Ekpe was a capital crime. It is this belief that makes Efik people to derogatory boast that, it was “Ekpe cult” that took God to the Mission house (Ekpe akada Abasi odok obot”. The implication being that if Ekpe had not accepted the missionary through their Chiefs or if Ekpe cult was diabolical they would not have accepted the missionaries. The fraternity played a great role in regulating trade between Efik people and the white merchants and the acceptability of the missionaries. Aye reports that the “trust” system of trade prevalent in Old Calabar between European and Efik traders was made possible because of the executive as well as the judicial power of Ekpe fraternity. The fraternity helped the Efik society to curb the excesses of some wealthy oppressor against the weak and poor and also gave everyone a sense of justice and equity. It gave the society its cohesion and bound all Efik communities together under its supreme authority whose mysteries were only known to the initiates. According to Robertson, “for all practical purposes, the Ekpe order was the supreme political power in Old Calabar, it exercised not only executive and legislative functions but was the highest court of appeal in the land” (12).

Also prevalent during this period was the killing of twins, human sacrifices and jungle justice meted on some people either as a result of religious beliefs or their tradition. For instance, the killing of twins was purely base on religious mythology. Efik people during Ma Mary Slessor time believed that a twin was a cursed and also an evil omen. It is believed that the mother of twins had been visited by an evil spirit or slept with two men (the husband and the devil) and since it is difficult to identify the child fathered by the devil, the two must be killed. One of Mary’s most outstanding achievements was the stopping of killing of twins in the then Old Calabar. Though Mary had no biological child of her own, she was a mother of multitude. She rescued hundreds of twin babies thrown into the forest to die. For this reason, her house was filled with orphans upon whom she lavished motherly love and undivided attention to each; tenderly pointing them to Jesus.

Robertson describes the joy that overwhelmed Mary when she heard the news abolishing the killing of twins, human sacrifice and the administration of the poisonous bean ordeal (esere beans). “...all twins and twins-mothers could now live in the town and if anyone murdered the twins or harmed the mothers, he would be hanged by the neck” (19). In some occasion, she had had the opportunity to attend trials where severe punishment were meted out and she had had the opportunity of challenging the chiefs decision and was able to save some from being put to death. The men were amazed at the way she confronted their chiefs and witch doctors and attributed it to

the power of her God. This act of boldness and courage endeared her to the people and made it possible for her to win them for Christ. This was not just a momentary breakthrough but a legacy that she is still known for, today. Her name is kept alive through the numerous hospitals, schools, streets and monotype named after her particularly in Calabar and Nigeria in general.

### **Her Initial Problem:**

Mary Slessor came to a traditional society that had been torn apart by slave trade. A society where witchcraft, human sacrifice and killing of twins were prevalent, it was a society that treated women as second class citizens only to be seen and not to be heard. In the weeks that followed her arrival, Mary's duties included teaching young boys in school and in Sunday school and also working in dispensary and visiting families. Robertson reports that Mary enjoyed working with children and happily measured out medicines and treated bodies covered in sores with great care. It was in the course of her visiting the people in their compounds, that she discovered the Calabar practice of "fattening houses". A traditional practice that separated adolescent girls into fattening houses where they were fed on the richest of food to prepare them for marriage market, where prospective husbands could make their choice, with the belief that fat was beautiful as far as choosing a wife was concerned.

With the challenge of communication, she quickly determined to learn the language and with the help of Rev. Huge Goldie's Efik dictionary and Bible she was able to overcome this obstacle. Mary is said to have studied the language so intensely that her fluency surprised the people. Again, the testimony of her colleagues that 30 years effort harvester only 174 converts did not impress Mary and so with the mastery of the language she decided to move upriver, where the way of life was simpler and her idea of working in the interior was born. Robertson posited that "she felt her time was wasted in a place well served by missionaries, with so great a need elsewhere" (17). Surrounded by warring tribes that were governed by witchcraft and barbaric rites, Mary went where few dared to go in order to bring hope and light to the people that were in darkness.

As soon as Mary settled down she developed an evangelistic method that was different from that of her colleagues. She was not willing to spend 30 years only to harvest 174 converts. She quickly had to overcome the language barrier in order not to waste her time in a place that had already experience missionary impact when there were great need and shortage of manpower elsewhere.

### **Her Evangelistic Method:**

One major characteristics exhibited by Mary was her patience and humility. Religious superiority was not part of her ministry. She became all things for everyone so that she might win them. In studying the evangelistic method of Mary Slessor, I see a tripartite structure playing out in Ma Mary Slessor style of communicating the gospel vis-a-vis teaching, relational and recovery method of evangelism though the emphasis here is going to be on relational and recovery methods.

### **Relational and Recovery Evangelism:**

Relational evangelism is a form of evangelism modeled after the pattern of God's patient in working out His purpose for our lives. It is a pattern of evangelism that cares enough to walk patiently with people towards a shared purpose. It is a form of evangelism that operates more by grace than by efforts, by the Holy Spirit than by works and by prayers than by preaching. It is evangelism by lifestyle. Some writers call it "friendship" "one-on-one" or "personal" evangelism. Other writers, stressing our attitude in these relationships, call it "contagious Christianity" "lifestyle evangelism" or "affinity evangelism". Regardless of what it is called, all of them are encouraging an intimacy that attracts even the most hardened sinner to Christ after a period of some affinity.

One reason why Ma Mary Slessor was able to penetrate and win the heart of the savage people was because of her relational approach. She was friendly and accommodative. Her lifestyle was not discriminatory; she ate what the people ate, walked barefooted like the people, went to the same market and drank from the same stream or river. In the words of St. Paul, she "became all things to all people that [she] may win them to Christ" (1 Corinthians 9: 20-21). To the kings of Efik people, she became a queen in order to win them. To the slaves who were under the law, she became one so she can win them. To the free born, she became free. To the weak, she became weak, to the strong, she became strong and to the outcast, she became one, so that she might win them. Indeed, she became everything to everybody in order to win them for Christ and indeed she succeeded to the glory of God.

This approach stresses the need to form a basis of friendship on which evangelism can take place. Friendship evangelism is a lifestyle. It is evangelism by showing others what it really means to live with Christ our Lord and Saviour. It is a form of evangelism that opens up to an unbeliever, in genuine relationship. These relationships can be built in many ways, at different levels. The key factors, however, are that relationships must be built on time spent listening to each other, and must be ongoing. Relationships cannot be built at once-off programmes. Our whole evangelism strategy must be built around allowing time for friendships to grow. Patience and endurance is the bane of any lasting relationship. The Gospel is powerfully effective to save the uttermost those who have faith in Jesus Christ. For the Gospel is not something men made up by consensus. The plan of salvation is not the accumulation and production of man's thoughts, but the direct revelation of God.

Charles Kraft emphasizing the role of a Christian communicator in a non-Christian environment points out the need to understand the worldview of the receptor. According to him, it is this worldview that acts as a window or a mirror through which one can penetrate the heart of the people. He opines that: "Recognition of the importance of receptors in the communicational process demands that we learn to pay much more attention to their interests and concerns than may have been true previously"(156). He opines that, "much of the training that pastors and other Christian leaders received today tend to be message oriented rather than focus on the need and concern of the people. He argues that "Jesus seldom started with scripture in his interactions with

people. He started instead with the concerns, their felt needs and led them from those to God who could meet them (157).

The gospel is still powerful. However, in the increasing wave of antagonism, skepticism and cynicism that the gospel is now facing, relational evangelism seems to be the best method of evangelism in this post-modern society. It is difficult to talk about Jesus or God if we are not connected with people on issues of the same interest. If we do not identify with the needs, the problems or share in the joy of the people, how can we share the gospel with them? The Bible encourages us to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). We need wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in presenting the gospel to our friends today. Paul became all things for all people that he might win them to Christ. Mary Slessor became all things to all people, so that she might win them. We need this method of evangelism as the postmodern culture moves further and further away from Christianity. It has become increasingly necessary to change the traditional evangelistic approach in order to communicate the Gospel. Today, pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of the postmodern society, a society where there is no official pattern of belief or conduct. A free society not controlled by any accepted dogma but characterized rather by the critical spirit. It is perhaps on this basis that new methods and new ways of making Christianity acceptable to contemporary thought become inevitable. Our evangelistic methodologies need to change in order to address the culture in a contemporary way.

According to John Stott, the greatest tragedy in the church today is that evangelism are Biblical but not contemporary, while liberals are contemporary but not biblical. We need faithfulness to the ancient word and sensitivity to the modern world if we must fulfill our mandate of taking the gospel to the end of the earth.

Mary discarded the formal method of pulpit preaching where the pastor is in the pulpit to deliver his sermon, dressed in a formal way, sedately standing behind the pulpit on a platform distant from the people and elevated above them, exhorting them through a Bible passage that may or may not be relevant to them at that given point but all quietly and politely, listening attentively and silently until he is done. In this monologue method, the pastor is all and all. He does the talking; he proffers the solution and demands the implementation without knowing the obstacles and challenges of the people.

After service, the formal way is over; people interact and respond to a closer life involvement and experience than was done in Church. They share their intimate and personal challenges and problems with friends and those they feel can handle it. It is at this level that transformation is more effective because they may be ready to open up to one another. This relational method seems to be more effective because the message we are called to communicate is far more than verbal message. Mary Slessor's Christian life was a relational life. She did not just preach the word to her convert, but responded to their experiential problems and challenges.

She was friendly and accommodative. Her lifestyle was not discriminatory; she ate what the people ate, walked barefooted like them, went to the same market and drank from the same stream or river. Her informal grass root and relational method endeared her to the people: the Kings and the subjects, the slaves and free born accepted Ma Mary Slessor because she was one of them.

She helped people overcome their hurts, rejection, abandonment, addiction, hang-ups, and ungodly habits. She applied spiritual truths to the underlying hurts and fears that drove people to addiction and hinder their progress in life, breaking down the walls of shame and guilt that isolated them from their people and making them to accept the love of God through His Son Jesus Christ.

Mary Slessor with no medical training except the little experience she gained at Duke Town dispensary on her arrival, which later became an invaluable source of her ministry as she moved to the interior. Robertson records that “Mary enjoyed working with children, and happily measured out medicines and treated bodies covered in sores with great care” (16). Using quinine or painkiller she dealt with everyday ailment with some amount of confidence. Her quick response, reassured by her lack of pretension endeared her to the local people as she became the centre of solution to the people’s problem. Before long she had established small outstations all around the neighbouring villages preoccupying herself with teaching, preaching and dispensing medicine to as many that needed help. As she dispense her mission work, the advice of Hope Waddell to her kept making sense to her “use no native medicine, employ no native doctor, drink no rum, pray to Jesus for blessing and praise him for recovery” (23).

### **Mission in Postmodern Culture: The Mary Slessor Example**

The changing situation in postmodern society calls for a completely different new method in communicating the gospel. In a postmodern world like ours, we need to diversify our ministry in such a manner that people who may not initially be interested in Christianity as it was in Old Calabar at the time of Mary Slessor, would be attracted to it through practical examples of hospitality, relational or recovery method of evangelism, especially in non Christian areas of the world. Dogmatic preaching is no longer yielding fruits as it was in time past.

Questions are being raised about why Christianity should be the only accepted religion in the midst of others. Today Christian theology, doctrine, and beliefs are under critical scrutiny in the eyes of the contemporary world. Dogmatic beliefs and practices previously taken for granted are under serious examination. This therefore calls the church to look back on some of her heritage with the view of telling a single story that is relevant and embraced by our pluralistic society, especially in a society where the dominance of the Christian worldview has been overturned by the rise of modern science.

Therefore as postmodern culture moves away further and further from Christianity, it has become increasingly necessary to change the traditional evangelistic approach of communicating the gospel. If we must therefore, fulfill the Biblical mandate of communicating the gospel to all groups of people, we must develop different method of fulfilling this purpose. One way of doing this is



by creating need based and solution oriented ministries that are relational and recovery in nature as was the case of Mary Slessor.

Over the past century, the place and role of Christianity in the world has changed drastically. Perhaps more significantly is the repelling attitude of most people to Christianity. As the world drifts further and further away from God, what is the role of the Church in relation to the will and purpose of God for the world? Is the church in anyway fulfilling this purpose? What is this purpose and how is the church called to fulfill it? How can the church fulfill this purpose in our contemporary world of enlightenment and postmodernism? These and other questions has dominated and awakened a strong advocacy for a new method of understanding of evangelism in communicating the gospel.

The gospel should be presented differently in a postmodern situation. This will entail making the gospel relational, situational and culturally relevant. By “situational” I mean making use of every ‘situation’ or opportunity to share our story and the good news to the perishing world. People may not initially be interested in our version of truth, especially if it is presented dogmatically but they may well be interested in solutions which meet the problem they face in life. It is no longer possible to present the gospel in the way it was successfully preached in the first part of the 20th century. The changing situation calls for a complete different new method of communicating the gospel: Christian values are competing with a vast array of other competing values, and people are either ignorant of the basics of Christainity or misunderstand them. If we must fulfill the biblical mandate of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, we must tackle evangelism in a different way to fulfill this purpose.

Paul’s sermon to the Athens to ‘the unknown God’ is perhaps the best example we have of the kind of evangelism that we now have to engage in, in our own post-Christian culture. He started where the Athenians ‘were at’. He took one of their own belief/interests and used it as a starting place to explain the gospel – a bridge from their world to the Gospel. He also went to where the cultural leaders were – the Areopagus – rather than asking them to come to the Jewish synagogue. Paul became all things to all men in order to reach some – we must do the same, without compromising the message. To ensure this, we need to be rational, friendly and creative in communicating the gospel. We must make use of every opportunity, knowing that the days are evil. Of course, relational evangelism is one of the best methods of communicating the gospel though by no means the only method.

### **Conclusion:**

What immortalizes a person is not what he does for himself but what he does for others. Hundred years after her work in Old Calabar, her legacy lives on. Numerous hospitals, schools, streets and monotype are named after her in Calabar and Nigeria in general. Thanks for the grace upon her to stop the killing of twins and human sacrifice. Thanks for her boldness and courage in challenging some inhuman customs and beliefs of the people. Without exaggeration, she was a name to conjure

with in times of trouble and difficulties. She was bold, courageous, fearless and reliable. She could go where no white man could go, she could sway the people where no one else could sway them. She was admirable, uncompromising, utterly heroic and brilliant. Her influence was felt in the palace as well as in the street, among adults as well as infants, freeborn as well as among slaves. She was all and all for all, no wonder she was nicknamed “Eka Kpukpru owo” (Mother of all).

By her relational method, she ensured that justice was respected and maintained both at the family and community levels. She, like Mother Theresa of Calcutta gave meaning to lives that were at the verge of destruction. Though her life was in constant danger, she won the confidence of the tribal Chiefs and their people with fearless dedication, medical and linguistic skills and a sense of humor. She was a teacher, counselor, community doctor and a pastor without a collar. She lived as a native and became thoroughly conversant with the language, culture, customs and day to day lives of those she served.

The relationship between Christianity and other religions of the world is not only the key theological problem confronting the mission of the church today, but it is also a crucial area with important implications for missionary spirituality and the missionary life style. The main thrust of this paper has been to personally review Ma Mary Slessor’s work and her method of communicating the gospel in a non-Christian area and her success within the 39 years (1876-1915) of her missionary work in Old Calabar. Behind her success was her openness, relational, recovery and dialectic method of communicating the gospel to a people from a predominantly a non-Christian environment.

According to Kraft, we are not to propagate western Christianity; it is not our calling rather the message of the God who came in Christ to redeem those of every society on the bases of their faith relationship to Him alone. This relationship should be expressed and worked out within cultural form and life. Paul sensitive about the culture and community of those to whom he ministered, forsook his Christian liberties in order to clearly and effectively communicate the Gospel.

Therefore as postmodern culture moves away further and further from Christianity, it is important to change the traditional evangelistic approach of communicating the gospel and see how Mary Slessor model could be useful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century missionary endeavor.

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