
From West to West

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Abstract

This paper deals with the journey of West African Ghanaians to the Western Hemisphere. For the second and third generation, the movement is from immigrant to national. I will explore the challenges and struggles that Seventh-day Adventist parents face in rearing their youth spiritually in an alien culture.

Introduction

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Italy, speaking with a group of youth and the secretary of the General Conference at the time. I had arrived two days before, following an overly eventful trek that had started in London, passed through Rome and ended in Naples. As the youth speaker for the camp meeting, they requested my input on the topic of how church could be made more relevant to the experience of the young people. The participants at the meeting represented England, Holland, Italy, France, and Germany, but they were all Ghanaian by birth. This paper is birthed from the ideas shared in that meeting, and my own observations and experiences as an immigrant Ghanaian who has transitioned from West Africa to the West.

Immigrating from Ghana to the West

Ghanaians are hardworking people by nature. This natural penchant for hard work increases when faced with unknown conditions and strange circumstances. The country of Ghana is a strong Christian nation with almost 85% of its 24.7 million people claiming Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour (CIA, 2011). Ghanaians that move to America or to Europe feel a sharp contrast in the religiosity of their native land in comparison to their new surroundings. For example, church attendance in America in 2011 is 40% - less than half the amount of the country of Ghana (Barna Group, 2011).

Immigrant parents usually make sincere efforts to integrate within their immediate faith community, but many find the service and liturgy different from

“back home.” Some never adjust and they seem unable to shake off the feeling of being different. Like many other immigrant groups, Ghanaian worshippers become proactive and begin their own church. It may start as a branch Sabbath School or experimental gathering. But by catering to one’s native culture, language, and worship style and music, it continues to grow, primarily with the arrival of more immigrants from the same culture.

Immigrant parents find the church a helpful grounding mechanism for their children. Keeping the homeland culture alive helps them to resist total cultural assimilation and preserve their sense of identity. Parents appreciate the reinforcement of their lifetime culture.

The children, on the other hand, don’t have such a clear identity. Their new environment challenges them to give their full attention to what works here rather than where their parents used to live. With identity being a key formation task during adolescence, immigrant parents promote the culture left behind while their children immerse themselves in their new world. In a sense, a child can quickly achieve a new identity that differs from one’s parents simply by fitting in to the new culture. But that new culture would be different from the immigrant-preserving church. Even if peace takes precedence over conflict, second-generation Adventist immigrant youth find themselves with somewhat of a hybrid identity in their new country (Olupona & Gemignani, 2007).

Life for Youth

Church. A cursory glance at Ghanaian churches gives the impression that there is little to engage young

people. On Sabbath they tend to be excluded from the church liturgy and are rarely seen on the platform. But this can be misleading. In most Ghanaian churches the youth are very active in Pathfinders, bible studies, and Sabbath afternoon AYS programs. Second-generation immigrant youth form strong bonds with each other and stick together through their experience.

Evangelism. Young people find themselves confronted with the challenge of interacting with non-Ghanaians all the time, whether at school or at work. While they learn to live with multiple ethnic groups, their Ghanaian Church is mono-ethnic rather than multicultural. Not surprisingly, young people are hesitant to invite their American or European friends to their Ghanaian church. In a typical Ghanaian church the whole service is translated from Twi (one of the major Ghanaian dialects) to English, and many times it is only the sermon which gets translated. The other parts of the program are left behind so they become unintelligible to visitors. Guests may feel warmly welcomed, fed and cared for, but when they leave, it's with the sense that they are on the outside looking in. Most non-Ghanaian visitors do not return on a regular basis. If they do, few actually become members. The church grows from immigration, not from community evangelism.

Education. The educational system in Ghana couples the British system with Ghanaian ways of teaching. Students receive information from teachers who expect them to replicate that information accurately during examinations. The American education system encourages questions more than memorization. Teachers expect students to challenge them regarding the information taught. Instead of mastering a body of information, American education seeks to develop a process of thinking and discovery. This fosters skepticism as well as analytical skills. Rewards go to students who ask probing questions and who raise new problems that need new solutions.

In contrast, Ghanaian young people find their church promotes behavioral modifications with little opportunity to cogitate upon the reasons behind the requirements. This stifling of questions and discovery frustrates the youth. Once age or distance gives them the opportunity, they either find other congregations to worship with or leave with many unanswered questions.

Society. Second-generation immigrant youth find that they have moved from a conservative society to a

comparatively liberal country. As a Christian nation, Ghana places many strictures upon young people in which society at large mirrors the norms of the Christian churches. Young people who have issues with their religion are less likely to cast it aside in a society that is 83% Christian.

By contrast, American society places no such restrictions upon dissatisfied, second-generation Ghanaian youth. If they chose to question their Christianity, their schools will not help them reclaim their faith. Their peers will not walk with them through the experience to a positive resolution. In actuality, they will be encouraged to throw off the shackles of a restrictive religion and just live as they please. This problem deepens when a second-generation Ghanaian young person sees Adventism as the foreign religion of one's parents; something potentially useful in Ghana but with little relevance to life in America.

Church Life for Parents

According to Tettey and Pupilampu, parents struggle with an "attachment to a geographically distant yet psychologically and emotionally proximate space" (Tetty & Pupilampu, 2005, p. 170). In other words, although they are separated from their homeland by thousands of miles, mentally and emotionally it continues to be a very present reality. It defines and validates their sense of being Ghanaian, even as they successfully navigate within mainstream parameters in other aspects of their lives. The struggle becomes even more pronounced when parents try to raise their children in America while, in their mind, they are still making comparisons (valid and invalid) to Ghana. In general, parents anchor themselves in their past experiences and stay in church; but this is not the case for the next generation.

In his blog "Mono-Ethnic Ministries & Multi-Ethnic Churches," Mark DeYmaz noted the following from pastors of migrant family congregations: 1) The parents (1.0s) have both feet firmly rooted in the mono-ethnic church; 2) The youth born in their native land (2.0s) will likely have one foot in and one foot out; and 3) The youth born in the migrant country (3.0s) will in most cases have "two feet out" (DeYmaz, 2011).

The 1.0's are made up of qualified professionals who may find it difficult to locate jobs in the host country since they are new and might have language challenges. In such situations the church provides a venue for

personal validation and an opportunity to be respected and accepted among peers. With such strong support, the 1.0s are not likely to leave. The 2.0's begin to expand their horizons and accept the host culture's validation as much as their country of origin. Don't be surprised if the 3.0s have never even visited the country of their parents, have a weak grasp of their parents' language and do not strongly identify (if at all) with Ghana.

Youth Leaving Church

As mentioned earlier, Christianity describes the dominant culture in Ghana. Figure 1 (Pew Forum, 2011) illustrates this. Note that atheism doesn't even register in the country, unless it can be found in the one per cent labelled "other."

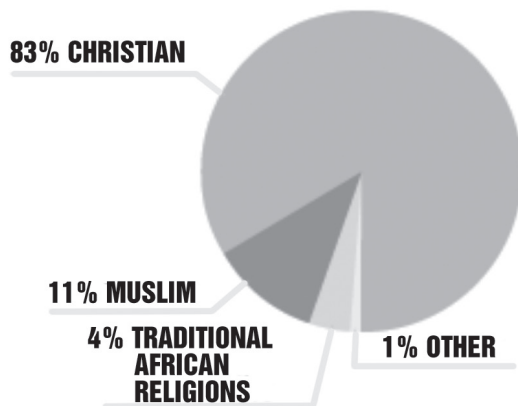


Figure 1. Religious Affiliation of Survey Respondents in Ghana

Contrast religious affiliation in Ghana with that in America, where propositional truth has been relegated as an idea only backwards and bigoted people accept and force upon others. Americans live in an age in which atheistic polemicists such as Richard Dawkins pontificate, "Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence" (Gomberg, 2011, p. 146). American culture ridicules traditional ideas of religion and even legislates against it in the public sphere. A 2.0 and certainly a 3.0 Ghanaian young person can feel very lonely, confused, and even hostile in a Ghanaian church. The question must be asked, "Are parents and Ghanaian congregations adequately prepared to grapple with these questions?"

Some parents work two or three jobs to make ends meet and allow their youth to achieve the quality of life

these parents dreamed for their children. Unfortunately, as that financial investment gets dedicated to the youth, the lack of time investment in spiritual nurture breaks the links in the chain of their youth's commitment to their church and possibly to God as well. The youth become sceptical about religion ("It offers nothing for me and I know it") and then cynical ("The church is full of hypocrites, no one cares for me, and I know this"). Once they reach the second stage, the young people look for reasons to leave rather than reasons to stay. Very few can be recovered at this point.

Ethnic specific churches tend to lose their second and third generations over time. They find themselves ill-equipped philosophically or practically to serve the needs of youth growing up in the West, going to school in diverse environments, speaking English and becoming acculturated adversely against their parent's religion (Yeboah, 2008).

A Response

In light of this, how can we respond? During our meeting in the hotel lobby I heard comments that are reflected in the following statements:

"We are not meeting the total needs of the youth; we need more programs, social events and concerts to attract people today."

"We have to go back to the old days and do things like we did them then."

"We need to be more up to date and change our beliefs to keep up with the times."

The comments are valid, but I believe they miss the point. They are the branches and not the root of a problem that faces not only second-generation Ghanaian immigrant youth, but all Christian youth.

Identity. The prophet Nehemiah told a group of apathetic, transitional second and third generation people that they must be aware of their identity (see Nehemiah 9). His plea to them, in a nutshell, can be found in Psalm 78:2-4 (NLT), "I will teach you hidden lessons from our past— stories we have heard and known, stories our ancestors handed down to us. We will not hide these truths from our youth; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the LORD, about his power and his mighty wonders." Nehemiah refreshed their memories regarding

the stories of God's goodness and his work for them as a people in the past.

In order for a second or third generation young person in a foreign environment to be able to weather the storms, they must be grounded in the identity that God gave them before their Ghanaian identity. I fear unless we take explicit actions steps to address this very real issue, many more young people will leave.

Parents and church leaders could engage Ghanaian youth in a discipleship series that deals with the question of Christian identity as an immigrant youth. Parents should also consider learning from their children about the society and culture in which they find themselves. If youth are bullied into accepting a culture that they do not identify (in this case, the Ghanaian culture), it will only hasten the inevitable departure from the culture and anything associated with it once they have the power to choose. If parents better understand the educational system, the societal norms, and the expectations that their children develop because of it, they will be better equipped to meet their needs. Parents certainly do not need to accept everything in the host culture, but they must be familiar with it.

Belief. Another important lesson that we learn from the remnant in the book of Nehemiah is the importance of believing and practicing a biblical lifestyle. The children of Israel lived contrary to the expressed commands of God. They intermarried with their neighbors and sacrificed to the local gods. The prophet countered in chapter 13 by deploying readers of the law throughout the land to instruct the people in the way of the Lord. Admittedly, a mental assent to the truth by no means guarantees correct action. But without instruction we can expect only a very shallow and uninformed experience. Second-generation immigrant youth must know what they believe and why they believe it.

In light of the structures within Ghanaian churches it would be difficult to change the worship services to be more engaging for the youth, but perhaps a small group with the specific task of inculcating the core beliefs of the church would be a first step. It would also be a good opportunity for leadership and parents outside of a church setting to share with the young people. There are often too many barriers between young people and adults in church, and this certainly describes Ghanaian churches.

In America, research from the National Study of Youth and Religion noted that the premier social factor in

shaping the religious lives of young people is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents (Smith & Denton, 2005). If this is the case, then parents have within their grasp the opportunity to intentionally take the time to model a Christian faith for their young people that is biblical and rooted solely in Christ. Ghanaian culture has many wonderful facets, and when used wisely, adds to the experience of young people.

Passionate Dedication

Young people can tell if someone is "faking it." If they are part of a church and they do not feel loved and cared for, the battle is already lost. Nehemiah's zeal in Bible times would be labeled fanaticism today. He excluded the foreigners from the assembly (Neh 13:1-3). Those who violated the Sabbath laws he threatened with bodily harm (Neh 13:20-21). And he physically reprimanded those who violated the marriage laws (Neh 13:23-27). Certainly I am not suggesting screaming, scolding, and slapping as a way to show youth our passionate care for their lives, but they must know without a doubt that they are loved and valued.

Nehemiah's reforms in his community provided the fortitude to withstand the later attacks of the surrounding nations. Additionally Proverbs 27:23-24 (NIV) admonishes us, "Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; for riches do not endure forever and a crown is not secure for all generations." The more informed parents are about the unique circumstances that their children are facing as second generation, immigrant youth, the more likely they will be able to work with their children through their challenges.

Concluding Thoughts

Being the parent of a second-generation immigrant Ghanaian youth presents many challenges. These include the frenetic round of work, home, and school. Then you can add the frustration of raising children who are seemingly bent on questioning your every wish. Such challenges are real and seem to never cease. In addition to these pragmatic concerns is the issue of spirituality in the youth.

If I were to be given a 1-minute platform with parents and church leaders, and asked to distill my own personal experience and research into a statement it would be as follows: In order to see more success in influencing, engaging, and retaining the second and third generation immigrant youth, we must experience a reformation

in discipleship. Parents must be taught and given the tools necessary to be able to properly disciple their own children. They will have to make changes in order to invest more time in them.

I would also counsel elders and other church leaders to look at their liturgy and structures and ask if these meet the needs of those who were not born “back home.” Most Ghanaian churches cater to the ensconced, monolithic, power minority of immigrants rather than to the majority of second and third generation Ghanaians. Only when we accept this rut and radically address it will we see increased success in dealing with the challenges of ministering to the youth.

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