

**METHODIST CHURCH OF NIGERIA IN HISTORICAL  
PERSPECTIVE: THE JOURNEY SO FAR**  
A LECTURE PRESENTED AT THE CENTENARY OCCASION OF THE  
METHODIST CHURCH OF NIGERIA  
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*By*

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**Introduction:**

The year 1842 remains significant in the history of the Methodist Church of Nigeria as it marked the arrival of the Wesleyan Mission into the country. At the insistence of James Ferguson, a Wesleyan convert, the Wesleyan Missionary society sent Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, a Wesleyan missionary in Cape Coast, Ghana to Nigeria. His arrival on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, 1842 marked the beginning of the Methodist Church in Nigeria. Famulusi, in his book, *Methodism in Nigeria* captures the arrival in these words; "In the evening of 23 September, 1842, the schooner 'Spy' carrying the Christian Missionaries dropped anchor. On her deck stood Thomas Birch Freeman, our greatest West African pioneer, and by his side, two devoted African helpers, William De-Graft and his wife. Mr. and Mrs. De-Graft.

**Methodism in Calabar:**

Efik Historian Aye recalled that Calabar's romance with Methodism began about 72 years later when a Sierra Leonian schoolmaster in Calabar Rev. W. G. Nicols in 1914 commenced evangelism in a school hall at Johnstone Street. Earlier on, Methodist members formed part of the Duke Town Presbyterian Church and the Holy Trinity Anglican Church congregation. It was out of fear of being subsumed in these churches and the need to be strengthened in the faith and practice of Methodism that led to the urgent desire for a separate place of worship. The expanding congregation at the Nicols residence demanded a larger accommodation

which made Pa Odwyer offer his zinc store at Ansa and Eton Street junction. As members increased, this accommodation became inadequate and Essessien Etim Offiong came to the rescue by donating the piece of land which now accommodates this permanent structure. The first church building was a prefabricated building which was dedicated on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1925 and until 1932, the Calabar Wesleyan Methodist was administered from Lagos.

Another significant date in the history of the Methodist Church is 1962, the year the British Conference of the Methodist Church granted autonomy to the Nigerian District of the Church as an autonomous community of Christian believers with instrument setting up the constitution of Methodist Church of Nigeria.

For Calabar, the Methodist Church remained a Beecroft Street affair until 1969 when some civil war refugees of the Methodist faith formed a group in a public primary school. Sir Sunday Akpan (KJW) described those refugees as 'a deprived weak and poverty stricken congregation' who in spite of their weakness mobilized resources and acquired land to extend Methodism from its 19<sup>th</sup> century base near the waterfront at Beecroft Street to Atamunu in the heart of the Municipality. Methodism in Calabar began to spread to areas of Odukpani and Akamkpa, thereafter.

The Wesleyan Methodist went through a period of strife which took God's Divine intervention at the "Solemn Reunification Service" in 1990 held at the Hoares Methodist Cathedral at Yaba, Lagos. This event led to a peaceful settlement, revoking of the previous constitution and a new constitution of the Methodist Church of Nigeria (1990). The Church came out stronger and more united from these crises.

An event which made the Methodist congregation proud and the Nigerian nation in general was that which took place between the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2001 at the 18<sup>th</sup> World Methodist Conference at Brighton, England. The auspicious event which was attended by Methodist representatives of about 130 countries witnessed the installation of Prelate Sunday Mbang as the Chair person and Head of the World Methodist Council. Mbang who had earlier in 1984 emerged as the Head of the Methodist Church in Nigeria and later the Christian Association of Nigeria

(CAN) President will be remembered as one of Nigeria's most outstanding social crusaders of our time and a voice of the people.

While there are so many events to recall in the history of the Methodist Church in Calabar in particular and Nigeria in general, yet I deem it fit to go beyond chronicling some major landmarks/events and x-ray its contributions to the society, in a bid to further encourage its congregation. History is about the past and it is only when we look back at our past that we can be encouraged to do more.

## **The Wesley Methodist Church and The Nigerian Society**

### **Education**

In the field of education the Church has in no small measure contributed to manpower development for various sectors of the Nigerian economy through its establishment of institutions both at the secondary and tertiary level. The Wesleyan University of Science and Technology, Ondo, which was established in 2008 is a worthy example of an institution that will go places having being built on the foundation of God. Moreso, the University, the Vice Chancellor maintains, places emphasis on the moral regeneration of students. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized especially in this era of moral decadence. Furthermore, by founding outstanding institutions like the Methodist Boys High School, Oron; Methodist Girls High School, Lagos; Wesley Comprehensive High School, Ogbomoso; Methodist High School, Urua Etuk; the Church is one of the leading body of Christ that has contributed in improving the literacy rate in the society. It has produced several professors, public servants, ministers and accomplished individuals. The first Premier of Eastern Nigeria was a proud Methodist. Our own dear Rev. Prof. Olu Lawal of the University of Calabar is also in this category.

The Methodist Church has also produced ministers of God and leaders of the church through the establishment of various theological institutes like those at Umuahia and Sagamu. His grace Archbishop Effiom Ekpenyong is a worthy example.

In order to meet up with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Church updated its curriculum in its theological colleges and introduced a 5 year Bachelor of Theology. A frontline Methodist Sir Remi Omotoso, maintains that the Church has blazed the trail on the social re-engineering of Nigeria through the introduction of western education, modern health care and youth training development.

In this era of gross unemployment the Church, through its various institutions and health centres have contributed in creating employment for the unemployed.

### **Evangelism**

In the 70's, the structure of the Church was changed; bringing in the local church instead of society and Diocese in place of Districts. These were reforms that led to church expansion.

Early in the 1990's, the Church accepted the ordination of women into the ministry with the 1<sup>st</sup> ordained female minister being Rev. Dr. Nkechi Nwosu. This decision was a great encouragement to the women folk to partake fully and play leading roles in the Lords vineyard.

In 2000 the Seed of Faith and Tithe were introduced to further increase the financial base of the Church.

In 2006, the Methodist Church attempted a repositioning of the church towards spirituality, evangelism, expansion and church planting, service to God and humanity. The decision to have a full time Bishop for evangelism and discipleship was taken.

Through the various fellowships - Young Men's Fellowship, Ladies and Girls Fellowship, youths have been nurtured in the area of spirituality and trained in the Christian values which the Methodist Church is known for.

### **Health Services**

The Methodist Church, through its health services, Wesley Guild Hospital, Ilesa and other Methodist Health Centres spread over Nigeria, have provided

succour to the sick. The Church in the Eastern part of Nigeria in particular were involved in handling cases of leprosy and caring for the motherless.

## Politics

Methodist leaders like Prelate Sunday Mbang and Sunday Makinde have brazed the trail in condemning bad leadership in Nigeria, corruption and greed in governance. These social crusaders spoke fearlessly and truthfully against the ills of the political class. It will be recalled that in 2005 Mbang led a Methodist congregation in Yaba (with placards) and marched to the Lagos State government house at Alausa condemning and singing against all forms of corruption. Sunday Makinde did no less as he used both the electronic and print media to kick against such vices.

## Conclusion:

The Methodist Church has come a long way. Looking back, the church has achieved much but there are still more to accomplish, especially in Calabar. It is my honest opinion that the Church especially in this era of moral decadence needs to further intensify in evangelization.

The church should also be more open to reforms, train more women ministers in order to create a greater impact in the Lord's vineyard. Let us not forget that in church services/activities, women are always in the majority. If you doubt me, look around.

Finally, the Methodist Church of Nigeria has been built on a solid foundation. It was battered in the past, yet it stands strong and tall. It is not given to materialism neither is it a one man affair. The challenges in evangelism are enormous, but I strongly believe that the Church will always receive God's grace and forge ahead. Congratulations once again on your centenary.

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