

## **Pilgrimage Drive: The Case of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

Spiritual development is a core value in religious worship. For this reason, churches are not averse to individual petitioning and supplication. However, it has become questionable if these are the only reasons for pilgrimage activities in search of spiritual development. Pilgrimage activities have become not only popular but also an annual religious interest in Ghana, particularly the Methodist Church, Abasua prayer centre, Effiduase Diocese in Ashanti Region. This study therefore interrogates the reasons behind this urge and the expectation of pilgrims at the end of such pilgrimage journeys. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative research methods, data was gathered on the motives of the Methodist pilgrims who visit. Using the 'drop and pick' convenience sampling approach, a total of 250 questionnaires were circulated to determine the views of pilgrims about their faith, motives as well as spatial image about the Abasua. 158 copies of usable copies were received and analysed. Findings reveal that pilgrims go beyond the church's designed intention for spiritual empowerment and growth to chase after breakthroughs for existential and mundane needs. This paper therefore recommends proper dissemination of information about the Church's vision of building a vibrant and spirit-filled Church. The Church must be at the forefront of evangelization and societal transformation at such renewal programmes.

**Key Words:** Abasua prayer centre, Pilgrimage Drive, Wesleyan Methodist

### **Introduction**

In recent times, there have been a number of concerns expressed by some church members, both laity and clergy in the Methodist Church Ghana (MCG) on the church's pilgrimage drive, its related issues of pilgrims' expectations and activities that take place at the pilgrimage centres. This paper, addresses some of these concerns. But the main

attention is on the structured pilgrimages of the MCG, with specific focus on the particular orientation given to the church members who embark on these pilgrimages and how their perception about the pilgrimage phenomenon conforms to the church officialdom's position. To appreciate this concern fully, one can observe that structured pilgrimages had not been part of the Methodist Church Ghana's tradition during the first hundred years of its existence. It was rather the District now Diocesan or Circuit camp meetings, which were adopted as the means of introducing revival into the church, for both corporate and individual development.

The past two decades, however, have witnessed institutionalized pilgrimages, organized by the Church at the Connexional level, taking church members to one of its most prominent prayer centres in the Effiduase Diocese, in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The Centre itself, prior to this time, witnessed self-organized pilgrimages. Popularly referred to in Ghana as the Atwea Mountains, the Abasua terrain is carefully structured out into eight main camps with the Methodist site being camp number three (3), despite the fact of it being the first to operate there (Ampaw-Asiedu 6). Looking at the statistical data on the yearly returns of pilgrims, which is kept at the Abasua centre, it is obvious that large numbers of pilgrims thronged the Abasua Centre, even before the MCG institutionalized the pilgrimage activities at the centre. Both Methodists and non-Methodists, in self-organised pilgrimages visited the centre in hordes.

Giving the kind of religious activities that take place at the camp three, the MCG's structured pilgrimage raises very pertinent questions. The most fundamental one can be captured thus: 'is Saul *also* among the prophets?' (1 Sam 9: 10ff). Then secondly, why the massive involvement of a certain class of people if the structured pilgrimage is for the entire church? What could have precipitated the attraction of such hordes to the Centre and still does? Is the general orientation held by the laity about the Atwea Mountains and its pilgrimage activities in tandem with the official position on the practice? These are the underlying problems and to put it more succinctly, has the church officialdom made its position clearly known to the entire populace of the church?

In consideration of the foregoing questions, this article aims at examining church members' motives for embarking on the institutionalised pilgrimages of the Church and then analyse these

motives and their implications for the entire spiritual growth of the Church. The core structure of the paper therefore includes background information on Christian pilgrimages, a review of existing views on pilgrims' motives, and an analysis and discussion of the results. The conclusions and recommendation then follow suit.

### **Pilgrimage**

The act of pilgrimage is a global phenomenon with structural similarities found in many different cultural and historical contexts. Though no single meaning can be imputed to this phenomenon, the general conception is that they are journeys made by religious devotees to places believed to be capable of ushering people into the transcendent realm. The question is how did this whole phenomenon begin? Being a paper in Church historical studies, there is the need to place the discussion in a proper historical context. Also, since the church exists in a continuum, such an emergent phenomenon in the history of the MCG ought to have due recognition in the written works of the church. Hence, what follows here is a brief historical survey of scholarly views on the origins and development of the phenomenon, and its emergence in the MCG.

### **Historical Origins**

A quick glance through church history reveals that the phenomenon takes its bearing from biblical times into contemporary times. Beginning with the call of Abraham in Gen 12:1 'Get you out of your country and your kindred... to a land that I will show you...' This directive from God caused Abraham to become a sojourner in some other parts of the world and the verse was often quoted in late antiquity by pilgrims who chose to wander from place to place in order to seek a much purer way of living for God.

Jerome (347-419[420]) who lived the last thirty five years of his life in Jerusalem, in one of his remarks that tended to validate the propriety of pilgrimages said 'it is only in Palestine that the true understanding of scriptures would be gained' and in a letter to his friend Marcella written in 386 A.D. immediately upon his arrival in Palestine, expressed his feelings and the purpose of his journey by quoting the verse Gen. 12:1. Jerome by so declaring, was not only legitimizing his behaviour, but also pointing to the ancient biblical roots of this pattern of religious behaviour. In effect, Abraham served as the prototype of sacred mobility.

The practice is further buttressed with the injunction for all male born Israelites to appear before God three times in the year. In this, the Jews would visit the temple of Jerusalem during three annual festivals, as prescribed in Deut 16:16 Passover or Pesah (in remembrance of the beginning of the Exodus from bondage in Egypt), Shavuot (marking the giving of the Law to Moses), and Sukkoth (recalling the temporary shelters used by the Israelites who fled from Egypt). In the New Testament times, Jesus and his disciples maintained these three yearly festivals among others. It was during one of such yearly visits, the Feast of Weeks, that the disciples experienced the Holy Spirit baptism. Referring to Jesus' involvement in these Jewish sacred journeys, scholars, who have written on the debate about the Christian attitude towards pilgrimage, its propriety or otherwise, often quoted John 4:24 as a passage from Jesus to pursue the heavenly Jerusalem, and to worship God in spirit. This dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman constitutes a whole discussion and thus cannot be contained in this paper (Keener 231).

Scholars who rely on the John 4:19-24 argue that Jesus enshrines the new revelation now (Harold Turner 10). And perhaps to Peter's request in Matthew 17:1-8, during Jesus' transfiguration, that they should make three booths, one for Moses, Elijah and for Jesus, God's response could be explained that the days of shrines are no more, 'this is my beloved son, listen to him'. With this understanding from the New Testament, precisely from the time of Jesus, pilgrimages and its activities have been in the process of being supplanted. Now, true worship of God is in the sincere believer's heart and not sacred places.

It seems obvious that the idea behind the Old Testament pilgrimage practice still lingered on in the post apostolic times. It was however given a new meaning and Walker lends credence to this by saying:

If the new and exciting demands of a Christian empire caused the church to seek out its historic roots, to test out its new identity with the yardstick of its original identity, what was more natural than to look once again to Palestine, the place of the church's origin, in order to receive as it were, a new mandate which was both authentic and original. If the eschatological hope of the persecuted minority gave way to a sharper historical sense a new desire to find and locate God in this world

rather than in the next, what was more natural than to increase veneration for 'holy sites' and relics, things which could mediate God to the believer not from above, but from below? Above all if Christians now desire to affirm 'this world', if they sensed that they were now at home in the world, and not merely called out of 'from the world' what better place to celebrate it than to focus on the locality of the incarnation that event which more than any other might legitimate such an affirmation of this world (Walker 12-15).

The post-apostolic period, being the era of ease, however, saw Constantine's attempt to identify the Church with its origins. Palestine became the obvious choice and going there meant receiving afresh the original mandate which required the Jews to present themselves three times before God. It is observed that pilgrimage became much more pronounced during this era.

Most church historians endorse Constantine's official recognition of the pilgrimage phenomenon as the period of the phenomenon's inception in history. Within the constraints of this paper, let it suffice just to mention in passing some of the arguments raised in support of Constantine's era as the period of inception. Firstly, Constantine's wide, magnificent and spacious basilicas in the holy land, especially the Holy Sepulchre (Ousterhout 67-81). Secondly, Eusebius' affirmation of the pilgrimage situation in A.D 320, that Empress Helena, Constantine's mother, was the first pilgrim to the holy land after the Christianization of the Empire. Thirdly that Helena's journey in 327 gave the whole phenomena an official character which might have awakened people's interests in the phenomenon. Furthermore, Euthropia, Constantine's mother-in-law's visit to the Oak of Mamre, and her call for the replacement of the Pagan cult there with another basilica. Though all these views support the claim that the royal family during the era of recognition contributed to the official sanction of Christian pilgrimages, there are scores of arguments which throw out of gear Constantine's official fiat on pilgrimages.

There seem to be an unending debate about the actual historical origin of the pilgrimage phenomenon; hence, it will be prudent to adopt another popular argument which is the phenomenon's spontaneous emergence in Church history. According to Wilkinson, many individuals like Melito, Bishop of Sardis, Pionus of Smyrna, Origen, Alexander and Firmilian visited the holy land out of their own

volition during the third Century (Pierre 56 <http://www.ttk.gov.tr/data/2002/dop56.htm>), Sumption 89, Taylor 227).

The phenomenon, according to Wilkinson and others, is a God-given instinct and hence naturally in-born. That being the case, 'God Himself will satisfy the craving he has created (*in man to seek him*), (Kevin. "New Advent: Catholic Encyclopaedia").

The development of the phenomenon during the medieval period, beginning around 350 -1450 A.D, saw pilgrimage assuming varied forms. This was the height of the cult of the saints. Pilgrimages were set down as punishments for certain offences. During the era of the Patristic, even disputes were settled at the shrines of saintly persons. Also tomb sites were temple of righteousness and places to acquire divine illumination. Augustine's position on this phenomenon is discussed in a letter he sent to the church in Hippo in 402. He refused to mediate over an issue between a priest named Boniface and a monk named Spes. And suggested they visit the shrine of Saint Felix of Nola, where God will intervene and the truth will be known. For one who loyally adhered to Pauline doctrine on holy space, he affirmed the traditional view, that 'God is everywhere and that he is not confined or bound by any place, because he is the creator of everything', Augustine insisted that the tomb of Felix of Nola was a 'trustworthy holy place'. He affirmed stories of revelations that had occurred at Felix's tomb. Augustine remarked that even though martyrs' tombs abounded in North Africa, not all of them were gifted with the power of healing (Ashkelony 143).

It was also fashionable during this period for bishops to go on pilgrimage to the Holy City. Others visited the Judean and the Arabian deserts, and several other dwellings of saintly people. The focus of pilgrimage shifted from Jerusalem. Relics of martyrs were revered and cherished as a result of the miracles that were wrought by them. Martyrs and saints were then esteemed as guardians of cities, patrons of trades and therefore were invoked upon by their devotees to intercede on their behalf during pilgrimages. To these martyrs were added Christians of exemplary lives and angels, especially Michael. The reverence for the Virgin Mary also became very pronounced (Latourette 20). Shrines were used as sacred buildings because of either a relic or a sacred image buried there. To these places pilgrims visited to obtain indulgence. It was quite fashionable for pilgrims to place gifts at holy sites and send home memorabilia (Stopford 57-72).

The practice then became subjected to several abuses thus exciting scathing criticisms from the reformers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Pilgrimage and the Pilgrimage Centre**

“There is no pilgrimage without a sacred place”. What is pilgrimage, and what qualifies a place to be regarded as a pilgrimage centre? Are all pilgrimage centres sacred places? Historically, pilgrimage was an institutional requirement. The location was regarded as sacred because of its peculiar history, like the birth and burial place of a heroic figure, or its association with some transcendent powers through hierophany (sacred appearance). It is usually considered different from other places of worship, which attract visitors on a more regular basis and from a narrower geographical range. Hence pilgrims were expected to consciously extricate themselves from everyday life in order to embark on these journeys. Participants mostly constituted a part of a religious group or cultural group, travelling long distances to get in touch with another realm beyond them. Comparison was thus drawn between visiting centres within one's immediate vicinity which was regarded as a local worship and the long distance journey which was deemed specifically as pilgrimage (Margry 27-28).

The pilgrimage centre was a place for paying of vows or doing penance. People sought miracles of healing there. It was a place for a divine encounter. Harold Turner asserts that though divine beings have their own realm of existence and are not confined to terrestrial space, the sacred place is a portal that opens up into their realm of existence. Most scholars believe that the sites contribute to: a) learning psychic and spiritual abilities, higher knowledge and wisdom, b) Healing of physical bodies, emotional and spiritual conditions in man either personally or corporately, c) power generation and dynamism to people, etc. In addition to all of the above, some scholars also believe the pilgrimage centre, should afford pilgrims solitude, quietness, and the requisite ambience for effective prayer and meditation.

### **The Methodist Church and Pilgrimage**

John Wesley was noted to have been quite averse to pilgrimage activities in the history of the Church. However, according to Thomas Tweed, Wesley's spiritual descendants maintain commemorative sites. Using the United Methodists in America as a case in point, Tweed points out those historic sites play significant roles in the Wesleyan Methodist Church's religious expression (Tweed 3). Examples include Epworth, the 'Mecca' of the Wesleyans in Georgia, on St. Simons Island. Pilgrims do not expect miraculous healings there; they visit there

because the sites bridge their denominational past. In the light of the foregoing historical accounts and the qualities of the pilgrimage centre, one may ask whether the MCG's practice of institutional pilgrimage is in keeping with the Wesleyan heritage and also what can be said of Abasua, the most prominent prayer centre where the MCG's annual pilgrimage activities is organised.

### **Pilgrimage Centre and the Abasua Prayer Centre on the Atwea Mountains, Camp Three**

Abasua Prayer Centre's continuing attraction to many Christians in Ghana and beyond is the myth that its founder was transfigured on that mountain, which he was drawn to through divine audition in the mid-1960s. The incident of the transfiguration was in February 1965 during the maiden visit of the founder, the late Rev. Abraham Osei-Assibey, a Methodist priest. Geographically, the Atwea Mountains form a part of the massive long range of ridges from the Akuapim - Volta ranges, Kwahu Plateau, and the Ashanti Uplands. The average elevation of the plateau is about 750 meters, rising to a maximum of 982 meters above sea level. Despite its height, almost every day, pilgrims are found praying there. On a daily basis, the least number of people found at the Abasua camp alone would be fifty. The highest attendance is from between December and February and between July-August which is about four thousand'. The Atwea Mountains is currently the famous mountain on which many Christians from all parts of Ghana and beyond lodge for prayers.

In some cultural traditions, people acknowledge hierarchies of sacred places, with the more superior ones believed to be providing greater avenues for deeper spiritual development. Hence, such places attract pilgrims from the local as well as international fronts. Such has been Abasua's significance. But, specifically, its popularity, apart from the myth of transfiguration, rests in the fact of the numerous miracles that have occurred and continue to occur there. Some of the captivating stories associated with the place are as follows: a man from Germany, 'Burgher' in Ghanaian parlance, visited the site with a swollen stomach as if he was pregnant. Sensing that a curse had been placed on him the Evangelists who prayed with him had the divine direction that he should scoop and eat some of the soil at the place of transfiguration. He did that and he was cured. Testimonies about AIDs patients receiving



their healing are common place. Barren people receive their miracles and become pregnant.

A number of Ghanaian gospel Artistes and Evangelists, it is believed, have all received their inspiration and gifts on that mountain. It is not surprising therefore that there is a predilection for the Abasua prayer centre, of all the prayer centres in Ghana. Especially in light of the fact that the guiding scripture or message from God to the Rev. Osei-Assibey, the founder, at that moment of his transfiguration was Isaiah 2:2-3; 'In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.'

#### **The Methodist Church Hierarchy's Perception on Pilgrimage**

The Church Officialdom, expressing their views on the institutional drive, declared that the essence is to promote ecumenism among sister churches that are involved in similar programmes. To seek Spiritual transformation and growth for its members and to prevent the drift of its youth; to give character and meaning to certain practices and to authenticate them as real Methodist practices as well as to expunge others.

#### **Scholarly Perspectives on Pilgrims' Motives, Via-a-Vis the Methodist Pilgrims' motives**

Most pilgrims have one or more secondary motives: the beauty of the scenery, tourist aspects, the sociability of the collective journey, etc. But if that is all there is, then there is no question of pilgrimage; the journey is for tourism or other motives. Obviously, this does not alter the fact that sometimes individuals – tourists, passers-by, etc. – visit shrines without any religious motivation, but are in fact affected by the sacred place once they are there (Margry 29).

The above statement from Peter Margry illumines the fact of multiplicities in pilgrims' motives even though it is agreed that normally pilgrims find it quite difficult to formulate their motives. It is believed that in the mid-fifth century, Theodoret of Cyrrhus presented a long and impressive list of requests and benefits that believers had solicited through the intercession of the martyrs (Ashkelony 146). A sociological research carried out on pilgrimages to Amsterdam, Lourdes and Wittem (Netherlands) by Paul Post, Jos Pieper and Marinus affirms this. The repertoire of pilgrim motives gleaned from the research was striking. Sometimes the number of motives was as high as twenty (20). Of significance was the fact that, besides the usual

pious desires for ultimate salvation, the secondary motives had elements of earthly aims and other secular interests. Is this fact (and possibly others like it) different from pilgrims' motives of the MCG? In this segment, scholarly views on pilgrims and the reasons why they embark on pilgrimages are discussed in the light of the Methodist Church experience.

### **Pilgrimage versus Tourism**

Jan's statement above speaks to pilgrims' motives, yet the view also buttresses Victor Turner's often quoted quip that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (Turner and Turner 20). And this is the position Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman champion in their concept of 'intersecting journeys'. The two scholars assert that rigid dichotomies between tourism and pilgrimage are no longer tenable. What the two consider as 'intersecting journeys' should apply to both the tourist and the pilgrim because one may not necessarily have any religious inclinations or motives for embarking on a 'secular pilgrimage but the sacredness of a terrain with its religious experiences may impinge so heavily on a tourist's heart to get him/her 'carried away' consciously or unconsciously. Roseman and Badone are swift to point out that this carrying away does not blur the lines between pilgrimage and tourism for them to be interchangeable. But, if the maxim of being a pilgrim amounts to being half a tourist, then the converse certainly applies. The condition is likely to affect most pilgrims. The Methodist pilgrims cannot be exempted.

### **Crystallizing the memory of the Sacred Terrain**

The Concept of Hierotopy presents a key and a fundamental motive for pilgrimage. The relationship between hierophany (a mystical appearance) and Hierotopy (the creation of space around a hierophany) is the desire to etch or concretize the memory of a religious experience. The concept is carved out of Jacob's dream about the Ladder connecting the Earth and the Heaven, the construction of the memorial altar at the spot and the re-christening of the place as 'the house of God and the gate of heaven'. (Gen.28:12-22). According to Alexis Lidov, this drama constitutes the foundational discussion of hierotopy and the Jewish patriarch Jacob the prototype in the creation of sacred places. In relation to Abasua and the pilgrimage activities, it is observed that the founder began a ministry at the site after his divine

encounter. The subsequent visits by the Church affirm the claim of concretizing the memory of that experience.

Attempt to find out the rationale in choosing the site for the annual pilgrimage of the MCG revealed that a Methodist found the place. Abasua is now recognised as a historical site by the church hierarchy. But beyond that, the terrain affords the necessary ambience for deep meditation. Alexei Lidov, the main proponent of the concept of Hierotopy perceives in Jacob's drama another core impulse for pilgrimage. Lidov believes that there is an urge in humans to always revel in and perpetuate the memory of a divine encounter. It is either that people visit these sites poised to receive similar encounters or they go there believing that they could bask in the effulgence of the pervading original experience. Does the Methodist Pilgrims share in these perceptions? How do we interpret their massive involvement? Judging from the foregoing this is a foregone conclusion.

### **Healing and Transformation**

Victor Turner presses home the view that pilgrims achieve both healing and renewal during the stage of *Communitas* (community). During this period of communal bonding at the pilgrimage centre, the totality of the pilgrim's health is inextricably bound to the peace and harmony that exudes from the community experience. Healing is thus associated with all the activities carried out at the sacred centres. In Ghana, besides being indigenous initiatives, African pilgrimages are all directed towards a single end, which is healing. The forms of healing, Asamoah-Gyadu explains, are 'spiritual, social, communal and material wellbeing'. The spiritual, physical and emotional healings required are discerned in the motives of the research participants in the current study.

### **Need-Driven Pilgrimages**

Because of sickness and the need for healing; they go there because of financial and economic problems; they go there because of lawsuits; they go there because they are struggling with drunkenness and they want to overcome it; they go there because of educational issues; they go there because they are in need of accommodation, a place to lay their heads; they go there because of the problem of bad or frightful dreams; they go there because of alleged problems with demons and witchcraft ; they go there because of social expectations,

particularly the need to provide for their families (Larbi 407).

The above quotation by Kingsley Larbi projects the African mentality for visiting prayer centres. And most scholars see these types of pilgrimages as need-driven, although it takes place within an institutional context and it should be for devotional purposes and ultimately enhances individual spiritual growth.

Among Africans of the south of the Sahara, R.E.S. Tanner lends his voice to this school of thought. Tanner identifies three categories of pilgrimage foci, namely, the sacred location, the cult object or the ritual specialists. The criteria for such classifications could be geographical and social distance, devotion to the sacred centres, devotion to the sacred practitioners and the level of institutionalism at work. In all of these categories, pilgrims' needs are uppermost in determining the particular one to choose. In affirmation to African's physical or spiritual quests, J. Paris states that distance is never an issue when it comes to the exact location a need could be sought. In the MCG, members have the opportunity to meet with various Evangelists in the connexion, but this cannot be compared with Paris's frantic search that some Africans engage in.

Tanner's classification reflects the inclinations of most adherents in the MCG. The particular need determines the particular site to visit. The annual connexional visit brings Methodists from even the remotest corner of Ghana to the APC.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

To achieve the purpose of this research, the annual pilgrimage of Methodist Church Ghana, was selected as case study. Accordingly, data was obtained from the church members who embarked on pilgrimage to the Abasua Prayer Centre, precisely Abasua 2013. The study used the exploratory research design with both quantitative and qualitative approaches, reflecting primary and secondary collection of facts. With the main tool being questionnaire, pilgrims' views were sought on the expression of their Christian beliefs, feelings, motivations, behaviour and experiences. In the first part of the questionnaire, pilgrims were asked personal details such as age, educational background particular Diocese, number of years in the Church, position held in the church, number of visits to the prayer centre. In the second part, the pilgrims

were asked how they would describe themselves in terms of their Christian commitment, and what their motivations for the pilgrimage were. The pilgrims were also asked about their sense of 'spatial perception' of the Abasua centre. The 'drop and pick' convenience sampling method was adopted, and it produced 158 usable completed questionnaires after distributing 250 of them. This was done on one of the pilgrimage events. The data collection took one week to complete with the questionnaires distributed to pilgrims who were ready and available for the data collection. The qualitative approach also paved the way for an interpretive approach on meanings of pilgrims' motives as put forward by various scholars. This was brought to bear on that of the Methodist pilgrims.

The main objective of the research, motives of pilgrims was discussed in the light of the Church authorities' rationale to show how they relate with each other. The quantitative data, constituting primary data, was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages). The qualitative data, which mainly corroborates the statistical findings, was obtained from scholarly literature as secondary data source. Below are the demographic variables of pilgrims sampled from sixteen Dioceses present at the Abasua prayer centre at the time. The demographic variables included age, gender, educational background, professional background, and number of times of participating in pilgrimage. Majority of the pilgrims were aged below 45 years as can be seen in Table 1.

Consequently, most of the pilgrims constituting 43% were youthful, aged from 30 to 34 years. This was followed respectively by those aged from 35 to 44 years (28%), 25 to 29 years (19%), and much later, those aged from 45 years and above (6%). However, only 4% of the pilgrims were aged 18 to 24 years. From these facts, the pilgrimage was dominated by worshippers in the middle age group with life expectancy at 70 years. Pilgrims in early adult stage or later in old age featured less in the pilgrimage. Furthermore, results from Table 1 provide the information that there was a female majority (86%) over males (14%) among the pilgrims at the Abasua Prayer Centre. An observable phenomenon in Ghana is that women form the majority in many religious activities at prayer camps, and other places where there is fasting and prayers.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of pilgrims**

Variables	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	6	4
25-29	30	19
30-34	68	43
35-44	45	28
45 and above	9	6
Total	158	100
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	22	14
Female	136	86
Total	158	100
<b>Educational background</b>		
Basic Education	11	7
SHS/MSLC	85	54
MVIT	29	18
Tertiary	33	21
Total	158	100
<b>Number of times of participating in pilgrimage</b>		
First time	49	31
Second time	55	35
Third time	54	34
Total	158	100

The results obtained on gender distribution of the pilgrims reflect this. In terms of education, relatively fewer pilgrims had formal education with only 21% possessing a tertiary educational background. 54% of the pilgrims were Senior High School (SHS) leavers or MSLC, while 18% had MVIT education and 7% had Basic Education. In general, the pilgrims can be described as semi-literate. For majority of the pilgrims constituting 69%, this Abasua pilgrimage was not the first time of their pilgrimage experience. In particular, while 34% and 35% of the pilgrims had frequented the Abasua Prayer Centre three times and two times respectively, only 31% had come to Abasua Prayer Centre for the first time. This indicates that the pilgrimage to Abasua Prayer Centre was not a novel phenomenon to many. On their Christian commitment, about 75 % were older church members. 25% were new members in their various Dioceses and 5% were accompanying their relatives or friends. Being older church members was not enough to authenticate strong commitment in the Christian faith, but that was rather the perception of all those who claim they were not new in the church.

#### **Reasons for embarking on the pilgrimage**

The study enquired into the various reasons held by the pilgrims for embarking on the pilgrimage to the Abasua Prayer Centre. After obtaining the reasons from the respondents, they were classified into fourteen (14) categories, namely:

- Spiritual upliftment
- In search of spiritual gifts or divine power/divine encounter
- Enhanced prayer life (personal transformation)
- Moments of self-meditation or soul searching to understand one's place in the world
- To understand the Bible
- Interventions for health needs
- Marriage
- Fertility
- Financial breakthrough
- Travel needs
- Career/business needs
- Educational needs
- Sightseeing/joining/accompanying friends
- Restfulness

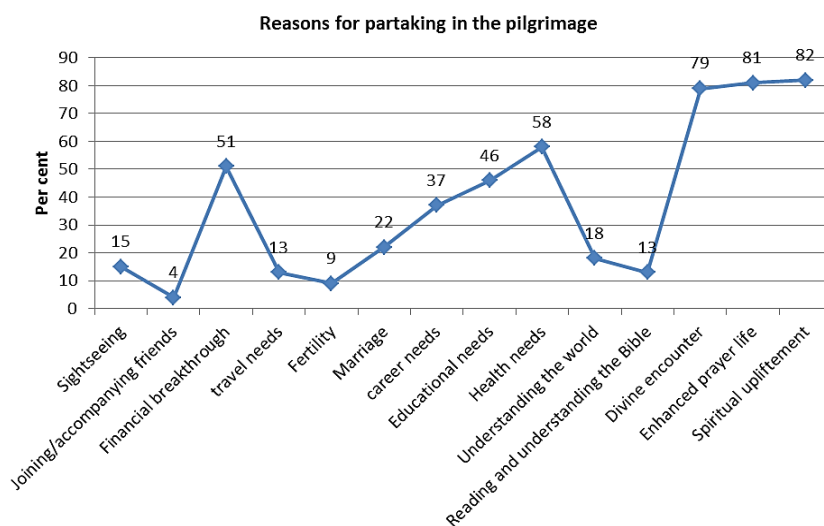
Every respondent or pilgrim to the Abasua Prayer Centre on this pilgrimage event of the Methodist Church Ghana had at least one of the reasons in the 14 categorisations.

In the line graph (Figure 1), the reasons for partaking in the pilgrimage have been arranged based on their conceptual meaning from the most physical and worldly to the most spiritual ideal. The fact is that when the reason had to do with something outside the immaterial part of the person; it was regarded as a physical or worldly ideal. These were sightseeing, joining/accompanying friends etc. When the reason originated from the immaterial part of the person, it was seen as a spiritual ideal.

Figure 1 displays the line graph of what the respondents' reasons actually were. Of course, majority of the respondents embarked on the pilgrimage for spiritual upliftment (82%). A lot of the reasons given by the respondents undoubtedly surround a spiritual purpose. For example, enhanced prayer life and divine encounter (81%, 78%) respectively were some reasons for partaking in the pilgrimage. Adding a little bit of variation to the above reasons, 58% and 51% of the pilgrims indicated 'health needs' and 'financial breakthrough' respectively, as their reasons for partaking in the pilgrimage. Very rarely did the pilgrims go to Abasua for the reason of 'getting to understand the Bible'; only 13% had this reason. Very few respondents (4%) also went to Abasua because they wanted to join/accompany their friends. 1% of pilgrims needed rest hence the visit. The graph paints the general idea that issues surrounding material ideals; health needs, and financial breakthroughs were aspects of human life which made the respondents embark on the pilgrimage.



**Figure 1: Reasons for partaking in the pilgrimage**

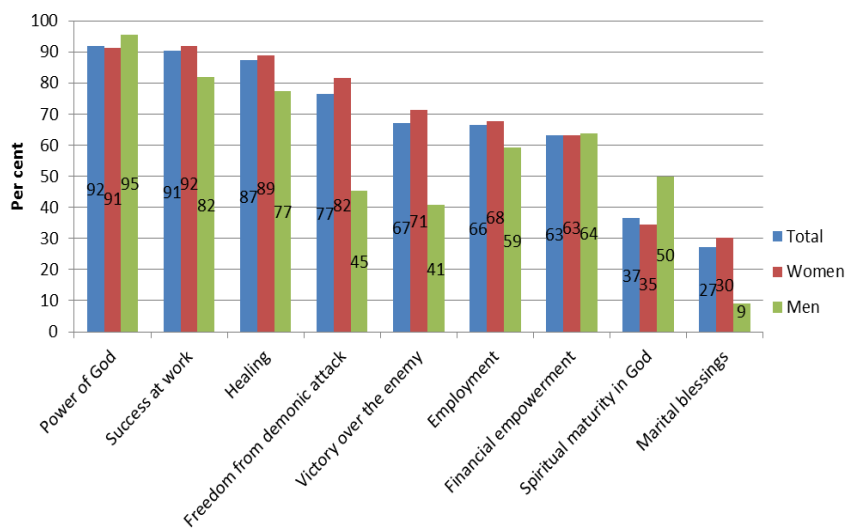


Meanwhile, in a related inquiry when the respondents were asked to state what they expect or hope to achieve at the end of their visit to Abasua, the responses obtained included healing, marital blessings, financial empowerment, spiritual maturity in God, power of God, employment, freedom from demonic attack, and victory over the enemy. Majority of the respondents (92%) expected ‘power of God’ in their circumstances after the pilgrimage. The next expectation worthy of emphasis was ‘success at work’ (91%), followed by ‘healing’ (87%), and ‘freedom from demonic attack’ (77%). Pilgrims’ expectations regarding ‘marital blessings’ and ‘spiritual maturing in God’ were relatively low at 27% and 37% respectively. Figure 2 presents the results in detail.

Except in terms of ‘power of God’ ‘spiritual maturity’, and ‘financial empowerment’, the expectations of women respondents for success at work, healing, freedom from demonic attack, victory over their enemies, employment, and marital blessings were significantly higher than that of the men, as would be seen in Figure 2. This result depicts the level of interest or expectations that women in general can be observed to have in religious or prayer and fasting activities. This trend poses very pertinent questions, whether most men rationalize their problems and for that matter seek more natural means of solution than always praying, and also whether men are spiritually mature than women. Compared to men, more women take part in

religious activities and prayers laden with the hope of relief. It also goes to show that, more than men do, women generally seek answers to various problems in life through religious means.

**Figure 2: Expectations of respondents from the pilgrimage**



**Discussion of Findings**

The Abasua Prayer Centre is believed to be a place of divine encounter to many people. To the extent that the motives and expectations of the pilgrims in this study were all geared towards this sole belief. The data presented give credence to the sacredness of the terrain which, from the world-view of the pilgrims is believed to offer the ritual contexts for God’s intervention in human problems. There was more to their visits than merely concretizing the memory of a hierophany. Many of the pilgrims believed the grounds at the Abasua Prayer Centre have been fertilized by the prayers of many saintly and noble people in the past. Thus, praying there amounted to tapping into the supernatural crucible containing all the supplications that have been made on their behalf in the past. Hence, their renewed zeal in being able to do things they could not do before, for instance praying for long hours.

Among the pilgrims numerous reasons also was the desire for meeting their existential needs. From their world-view getting their existential needs met was attaining salvation as indicated by Kingsley Larbi (Larbi 407). The understanding of salvation to these pilgrims is holistic. It encompasses deliverance and protection from evil and general well-being. It is this world-view, together with the concept of the 'garden- garth' of the traditional religious practitioners and the Twelve Apostles of the African Indigenous churches that have been transposed into the MCG pilgrimage activities. The centre is mystified as a 'religio-magico' terrain or energy field where people keep vigils and seek God's intervention in the problems that beset them (Asamoah-Gyadu 65-86).

The views of Ellen Badone and Sharon Rosman may not wholly be tenable in the MCG's context, and most of the findings of this study make the spiritual position more compelling. Pilgrims of the Methodist Church Ghana embarked on the pilgrimage with pious motives, a small minority however, was there on sightseeing and relaxation. This can be related to tour. In their own words those minority said they have heard so much about the place, its expansiveness and height, hence they were there first and foremost to satisfy that curiosity, but also to pray. Also they have worked all year round, so they need to give themselves a break from that boredom. To these individuals, prayer was not their preeminent desire.

This also reinforces the thinking that there is always the possibility of 'intersecting journeys' (Margry 29). It is a state where the transcendence of a place may have an overpowering weight on a tourist to the extent that he/she is swept over into the search of the divine. Luigi Tomasi refers to this state as the 'inner disposition'. He opines that the desire to seek out the sacred or the transcendent drives both the tourist and the pilgrim. Respecting that view, the tourist's search for the transcendent reality might be a latent desire, but at the same time drives him/her to search for all those wonderful and exciting places that glut the eye and satisfy emotions (Swatos and Tomasi (eds) 21, Praeger, Westport. *Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety*, Praeger, Westport). Peter Jan affirms this position as well (Margry 29).

None of the pilgrims mentioned business ventures, but in some pilgrimages, business is really a major preoccupation, sometimes among the organizers. Abasua camp is noted for these too. Relics, T. shirts, caps, badges, even Christian literature are

sold. The MCG efforts for very accommodating auditorium and hostels at the Abasua camp may have this remote inclination, because large numbers could mean weightier offertories.

### **Pilgrims' Expectations**

To fully appreciate the drives and motives for the pilgrimage to Abasua Prayer Centre, it was important to add to this subject the expectations of the pilgrims after the pilgrimage. The prominent drives and motives of the pilgrims were: divine encounter, enhanced prayer life and spiritual upliftment. Their expectations also included: success at work, healing, freedom from demonic attack, marital blessings, power of God (in their circumstances) and spiritual maturity in God. It can be deduced that spiritual maturity in God and power of God are of the spiritual dimension while success at work, healing (or freedom from demonic attack), and marital blessings are of the physical dimension. 'Success at work' and 'healing' respectively emerged the second and third dominant expectation behind 'power of God' while 'spiritual maturity in God' was the last but one in terms of dominance. This nature of the pilgrims' expectations –tapered towards physical needs. This leads to the question as to whether or not the pilgrimage under the auspices of the Methodist Church Ghana is being used the way and manner the Church intended. In other words, the motives and expectations of the pilgrims may not be in consonance with the Churches' motives and expectation for sanctioning the pilgrimage.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the analysis was performed from data obtained from Methodist pilgrims to the Abasua Prayer Centre. The Centre attracts some supernatural awe, a feeling engendered by the story of the transfiguration of the founder. This happens to be the main attraction of the large crowd. This also confirms the concept of hierotopy. The study also revealed that there was more to the pilgrimage than merely perpetuating the memory of a hierophany. The analysis revealed the drives and motives of the pilgrims to the Abasua Prayer Centre as divine encounter, enhanced prayer life, spiritual upliftment, answers to health needs, and financial breakthrough. Providing a full profile of the pilgrims' expectations from the pilgrimage, success at work, healing, freedom from demonic attack, marital blessings, were

predominant. This showed higher preference for things that were directly related to physical qualities rather than spiritual. Pilgrims tacitly expected healing. There is no gainsaying that whatever the motives or expectations from the pilgrimage, the individual looks for an encounter with God. How this is pursued is where there are misunderstandings.

Sometimes, concerns may be expressed for the motives behind pilgrimage. This is more so when such motives or activities in the pilgrimage are not consistent with real Christian motive of 'seeking God first ... for all things to be added later' in Matt 6:33. The implication here is that unorthodox practices could be resorted to at the pilgrimage site when every attempt is made to achieve motives or expectations that made them join the pilgrimage. This inclination of meeting needs through fair or foul means, have been seen as magical by some well-meaning church members. Sad to say, this has really brought into serious disrepute the church's pilgrimage activities at the Abasua prayer centre. To answer the question of whether or not the motives or expectations of pilgrims are consistent with the view of the Church; it is a foregone conclusion.

### **Recommendations**

The Methodist Church Ghana should use the pilgrimage as a means of bringing or enhancing cohesion in the Church. There is need for sensitisation and information provision. There is need for the Church to help the laity to be able to differentiate between biblical and non-biblical practices concerning the pilgrimage. All church members should be encouraged to participate in the church's pilgrimage meaningfully, since this will promote growth and prevent the church from becoming lethargic. The Clergy needs to take active part in the pilgrimage to join forces in stamping out unorthodox practices that seem to 'force God's hands' in providing answers to particular prayer requests. The pilgrimage should serve as a way for the Clergy to avoid burn out. Pilgrims are not debarred from praying for their personal needs, except that they should be made aware that pilgrimage activities should be understood first and foremost as a tool for renewal and therefore intended for spiritual development. And according to the vision statement of the church, the whole church, (not part) is being built into a vibrant and spirit-filled Church to be at the forefront of evangelisation and societal transformation. This is in line with Mathew 6:33 and the great commission.

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