

# **“I experience serenity and convenience in the forest” - Achimota Forest turned sacred space to confront the vicissitudes of life**

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## **Abstract**

Finding sacred space in an urban world, a crowded city such as Accra, can be a daunting task for emerging and established religious groups. Some prayer groups in Accra surmount this hurdle in creative ways such as worshipping in the forest. Leaders and members of informal prayer groups gather at Achimota Forest in Accra daily, except Sundays, with more than 1,000 worshippers on a typical Saturday. Prayer group members have transformed the forest from a recreational park, its intended purpose, into sacred space. This paper investigates how the forest fulfils the need for a place for self-expression and individual attention to personal problems in a sacred space that allows believers to transcend denominations in the expression of their common religious beliefs and practices.

**Key Words:** Achimota Forest, Prayer Groups, Recreational Park, Sacred Space.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the name of God, and by the authority he has given us, we break the chains of the devil that make us captive; we break the power of the enemy, the wrath of sickness, barrenness, and poverty... (Group Member, 10-06-09).

These words were part of a prayer said by one of the members of the prayer groups that gather in Achimota Forest in Accra. The occasion was 10th June 2009 when my research team and I made our maiden visit to the forest to seize it up as our study site and joined some of the groups as participant observers. We were interested in discovering why a forest has been turned into a massive place of prayer. Obviously, the prayer above speaks to the sense of alienation or dislocation that the composer and perhaps other people feel in the city; the daily vicissitudes of ailment, childlessness and poverty, among others, that plague people. At least those gathered in the forest had found a place in which to voice out this feeling along with a longing to conquer the constraints of their lives.

Not least of the problems alluded to in the prayer may be part of what drives them to the forest, in the first place. Like many a city in the developing world, Accra is growing at an alarming rate. The 2010 Population and Housing Census Report published in May 2012 by the Ghana Statistical Service shows an increase of 30.4% over the 2000 census population of 18,912,079, bringing Ghana's population to 24,658,823. Greater Accra is the second most populous region, after Ashanti, with a population of 4,010,054 (16.3%). While the Greater Accra and Central regions recorded the highest population growth rates (3.1%), Greater Accra is the most densely populated region with a density of approximately 1,236 persons per square kilometre compared to 895.5 persons per square kilometre in the year 2000 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). A significant part of this growth is due to the fact that Accra, the capital of Ghana, is the fastest urbanizing city and the largest melting pot of rural-urban migration. Obviously, such growth comes with consequences such as pressure on housing, social amenities, and even the struggle for

space. The inability of most migrants to find jobs also increases the precarious economic situation in which most dwellers in the city live.

It is against this backdrop that the practice of individual residents of Accra moving into Achimota Forest to pray presents an interesting research subject to social scientists. Achimota Forest Reserve is a park that remains the only existing greenbelt in Accra of any significant size covering an area of 360.29 Ha<sup>2</sup>. Sandwiched by Achimota College to the West, Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) to the East, Christian Village to the North and the George Walker Bush Motorway to the South, the Forest Reserve was constituted in 1929 to serve as a buffer and provide fuel wood for Achimota School<sup>3</sup>. The forest also serves as a park for a few animal species, a zoo for monkeys, a place for relaxation, and above all the lungs of the city. The land is, however, competing with city dwellers and seems to be losing its battle particularly to prayer groups, which is why it becomes an important study site to unearth what attraction it holds for the pilgrims to the forest and the meaning of their activity.

The paper argues that unconstrained by social pressures to be orderly and quiet within walled, urban churches, prayer group members in Achimota Forest experience the forest as a sacred space in the urban setting, where the Holy Spirit can more easily touch their souls and where ties of true fellowship among believers emerge. The prayer groups are not churches but members of various churches who gather in the forest to pray in the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, showing the grip this tradition has on Christians in general in Ghana. After all, Pentecostal-Charismatic churches consist in the fastest growing Christian group in Ghana with 28.3% of the population, compared with 18.4% Protestants, 13.1% Catholics, and 11.4% other Christians (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012: 40). In 2005 the Registrar General's Department in Ghana had data indicating that 443 new religious organizations of the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition were registered in the country that year alone (Okyerefo, 2011b: 210). A search in the same department on 7th January 2015, however, revealed that currently concrete data regarding the registration of these

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<sup>2</sup> See Map in Appendix.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a Department of Forestry Officer, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2013.

churches is blurred with that of NGOs since churches that register are captured as such, making it almost impossible to distinguish between purely religious organizations and civil society organizations. The historic churches (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic) do not register in Ghana, having contested the Religious Bodies (Registration) Law of 1989 (PNDCL 221) by standing up to the military government at the time and refusing to register (Dovlo, 2005: 642-643).

In any case, existing evidence shows that religious groups, NGOs or civil society organizations of any kind need to have premises and an address in order to be registered. Some of the churches have several branches, mainly in urban areas. They have huge edifices to their credit since churches in Ghana mainly worship in church buildings. However, the huge edifices also serve as symbols of the success of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. They organize crusades in open parks on special occasions such as Easter but the noise generated by a continued worship in open public spaces, such as fields, meets with complaints from the populace, as illustrated by the case of the University of Ghana below, exerting public pressure on the churches to be orderly and quiet. The first quarter of 2013 saw senior members of the university engage in a long debate on their internal email system regarding the noise generated by prayer groups in open spaces on the university campus, particularly the Mensah Sarbah Field. The university security had to be deployed to curb the activity, which is thought to have been infiltrated by outsiders from the city of Accra. Consequently, the university issued a formal statement on 18th February 2013 entitled “Use of Academic Facilities for Religious/Social Functions” in which the expectations of the university are expressed while providing some confined interim space (lecture halls) for religious purposes when lectures are not in session at weekends (University of Ghana, 2013). The country itself has laws regulating noise-making and churches know they could be prosecuted for contravening noise abatement. Evidently, the laws and regulations relating to noise nuisance are also linked to the protection of the environment as depicted in the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to, among others, “issue notice in the form of directives, procedures or warnings to such bodies as it may determine for the purpose of controlling the volume, intensity and quality of noise in the environment”

(Act of the Republic of Ghana, 1994: Part 1, Section 2, g). The Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462) invests in District Assemblies the power of enforcement against nuisance.

To the pressure on churches to curb noise-making is added that of population density. With an average annual intercensal growth rate of 2.5%, the Ghana Statistical Service believes that at this rate the population of the country will double in approximately 28 years. The highest population growth rate (3.1%) was recorded by the Greater Accra and Central regions. This “increase in population density implies more pressure on the existing social amenities, infrastructure and other resources in the country” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012: 2). Particularly in the most densely populated Accra, makeshift “dwelling units such as tents, kiosks, containers and attachment to shops or offices” are on the increase, constituting 6.2% of the dwelling unit in Accra (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012: 14-15). In the face of such obvious struggle for space, prayer groups’ dash into the forest appears to be an ingenious move.

What the prayer groups in Achimota Forest engage in is, therefore, unique and significant in character since they avoid the pressure to gather in walled churches in the city, which is the norm, as well as preempt chastisement for noise making. The non-existing space in the city makes it increasingly difficult to acquire land for structures. What is more, the prayer groups do not constitute churches but fellowships of individuals from various churches who believe they encounter God in the forest.

**The Religious Landscape Obviously**, religion is an important social factor in Africa in general and Ghana in particular as evident in existing literature on the subject. However, the popular adage that Africans have been called incurably religious (Parrinder, 1969: 235; Busia, 1967: 1, 4, 7) has been vigorously challenged by Platvoet & van Rinsum (2003) as myth emanating from the “‘religionism’ of African Christian liberal theologians examining the native religions of Africa in Christianising ways at the time of Africa’s transition from colonialism to independence” (2003:1). The authors cite John Mbiti as a foremost proponent of the myth while Okot p’Bitek was the first African scholar of religions to challenge it. Platvoet and van Rinsum point out that their critical treatise on the view that Africans are incurably religious is neither proof nor disproof of the positions held by Mbiti and p’Bitek. More than that, Platvoet and van Rinsum (2003: 22) believe that such a generalization, whether by European or African scholars,

derives from “more ideology than fact” emanating from “particular developments in Western intellectual history”, thereby concluding that “it seems prudent to hold that, however much the trajectories of the religions of Europe and Africa actually differ, Africa was, is, and will basically be no more and no less a religious, and religiously indifferent, continent than Europe”.

The evidence other scholars of religion in Africa are churning out, however, is one pointing to a continent reeling in intense religious activity. Marshall (2005: 2) says “the religious landscape of Africa has changed dramatically” over the past half century “with sharp increases in adherents of many faith traditions”. The trends point to “a major upsurge of religiosity”, a “religious revival”, “the mounting importance of Africa in global faith institutions”, and “in no other part of the world are faith institutions as directly involved in providing social services to people: by some estimates over 50 percent of all health care and a large part of education across Africa is provided in faithrun institutions”. Walls (1996) and Jenkins (2007) have both sounded a note that there is a dramatic demographic shift of Christianity from the global north to the global south while Europe, which had “two-thirds of the world’s Christian population” in 1900 is home to “less than a quarter” today, with the figure expected to “fall below 20 percent” by 2025 (Jenkins, 2007:2). Both new and old Christian denominations are growing in the global south but it is the new tradition of Christianity that is strikingly becoming “the standard Christianity of the present age” (Fyfe and Walls, 1996:3). This new Christianity, the Pentecostal-Charismatic brand, is what Gifford (2004: 23) refers to as the ‘newcomers’ in comparison with the historic mission churches. Maxwell (2006: 7) estimates that the Pentecostal movement has about a quarter of a billion members. It is the gathering of this group of growing Christians in Ghana to pray in Achimota Forest that this paper investigates.

Again the 2010 Population and Housing Census Report shows that 71.2% of the Ghanaian population profess the Christian faith, Islam (17.6%), traditional religion (5.2%), and only 5.3% not affiliated to any religion. The report further asserts that “[A]part from the Northern region where Islam is the dominant religion (60.0%), higher proportions of the population in the other nine regions are reported to be Christians” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012: 6). Greater Accra being the most densely populated region,

as pointed out above, has undoubtedly a remarkable religious landscape, with a growing presence of Pentecostal Churches that are overtaking the mainline Christian denominations. This development, which I have analyzed elsewhere under the title 'Pentecostalism in the City of Accra: a Blossom on Functional Appeal and Urban Fecundity' (Okyerefo, 2011a) owing to its urban character corroborates earlier observations by scholars in the field. According to Meyer (1995: 237), for example, Pentecostal churches are extremely popular in Ghana, are mostly urban based, describing themselves as "born again", and have a great appeal for young, middle class Ghanaians, embodying "a popular Christian culture". Thus, the skyline of Accra continues to be dotted with mega-churches of Pentecostal descent frequented by mostly young, middle class Ghanaians while a more varied population across the various social strata is more comfortable with the mainline churches.

It is against this background that this paper observes that rather than allow social pressures to constrain them be orderly and quiet within walled, urban churches, which is generally expected of all churches, prayer group members experience the Forest as space for free self-expression. What is more, they see the forest as sacred space, where the Holy Spirit can more easily touch their souls and they can empty their spirits where ties of true fellowship among believers emerge than they experience in the anonymity of the urban setting. This belief in the sacredness of the forest has antecedents within traditional religion, as well as within Christianity. In Ghana some of the famous shrines of deities in the African Traditional Religion are situated in nature (Sarpong, 1974: 15). The shrine of NTOA of Sasaman, near Nkoranza, (Sarpong, 1974: 81) is a good example. And the fact that Christian religious groups find sacred space in a natural environment is not new to Ghana as the case of famous Catholic grottos at Loudres or Fatima are known and replicated in the country. In this light, the Kpando Agbenoxoe grotto in the Catholic diocese of Ho is a well known example. Thus, African Christianity, whether Pentecostal-Charismatic, Independent churches, or even historic mission churches incorporate some elements of traditional religion into their fold by seeing the forest as sacred space.

Anthropologist Turner (1991) talks about liminality and how liminal spaces allow some kinds of transformations, or breaking down of boundaries, to occur. In the present study such breaking down of

boundaries takes place in one and the same space at the same time, viz., the forest space, in which the ordinary and extraordinary coincide, effecting a transformation of the profane by the sacred. The former is not completely eroded for it still remains forest space in which a process of transition takes place whereby prayer group members claim to enjoy a special experience. Turner's concept of "liminal personae" or "threshold people" (Turner, 1991: 95) can well apply to worshipers in a forest who go through a process of transformation from a profane to a sacred experience but rather than die eternally in order to have new life in the said process, they revert to the ordinary, profane life when the forest experience is over, returning to it as frequently as they can. Thus, on the one hand, prayer group members seem to fulfill Turner's dialectic, the "passage from lower to higher status" (Turner, 1991: 97) but, on the other, a return to a lower status when the experience is terminated at the end of the day. In both cases, however, Turner's idea of *communitas* holds true since the "homogeneity and comradeship" (Turner, 1991: 96) so generated subsist among members and extend beyond the confines of Achimota Forest.

The case of Achimota Forest, thus, makes for a peculiar and interesting sociological investigation. No special religious experience is reported to have taken place in the forest and the Christians who gather there do not claim to replicate any such important religious space. Worshipers do not profess that the Christian God can be limited to the forest. However, Achimota Forest presents them with space where they pay to worship. The willingness of prayer group members to pay and pray in the forest underscores the importance the forest space holds for them as liminal space, in the view of Turner, that allows breaking down of boundaries between worshipers and God as well as among themselves. The informal space of the forest transforms a conceptually 'vertical' relationship between prayer group members and their God into an informal approach to a God that can be met anywhere as expressed in the 'horizontal' relationship among prayer group members. Indeed, even in African Traditional Religion where the Supreme Being is not approached directly but through the lesser deities or ancestors, Sarpong (1974) has argued that in circumstances of desperation an individual can address the Supreme Being directly "with empty hands and in any place ..." (Sarpong, 1974: 12). Prayer group members make this experience, thanks to the circumstances of an urban need, which pushes these residents into the forest.



## Method

This cross-sectional, largely qualitative study of leaders and members of the prayer groups in Achimota Forest is a formative research that provides information on how recreational space is transformed into sacred space for the purposes of fulfilling spiritual and material needs sought by adherents of the group. As Table 1 shows, The Forestry Commission of Ghana recorded 248,698 total number of visits to prayer groups at Achimota Forest in 2009, with an average of 20,000 visits per month. Saturdays attract the largest numbers, typically around 1,000 visitors.

Table 1: Number of Worshipers of prayer Groups per Month in 2009

Month	Number of Worshipers
January	20,275
February	21,050
March	21,050
April	19,950
May	24,125
June	20,200
July	20,430
August	22,200
September	21,778
October	21,850
November	18,540
December	17,250
Total	248,698

Source: Forestry Commission

Our feasibility study was in June 2009. But the main study was carried out from June to August 2010. Data was collected by deploying semi-structured questionnaires among group leaders and members

in the forest as well as conducting in-depth interviews with 23 key prayer group leaders. Overall, 117 group members were interviewed in this study. 35 of them were group interviews, made up of 110 participants, with a minimum of two and a maximum of eight people in a group. Seven individual interviews were also conducted. Participant observation was used as well to observe the religious expression of the groups in the forest, which prayer group members believe to be the most ideal space to commune with God.

Table 2 below shows the general demographic characteristics of interviewees. For no particular reason apart from rural-urban migration, the majority of interviewees who stated where they originally came from mentioned the Eastern Region. The Eastern Region shares a border with the Greater Accra Region so perhaps it is easier to cross over into Accra. Also, an overwhelming majority of members of the religious groups were female, most of them having had merely basic education and being traders do not enjoy the new middle income status of Ghana and so can be said to be struggling economically. Most of interviewees were between 25 and 40 years old, probably an age bracket in which they believe they should have made landmark achievements in life, at least attained economic independence. 88.4% of the prayer group members interviewed report they belonged to the “new churches” (Pentecostal-Charismatic churches), while 9.3% belonged to the “old churches” (Catholic, Methodist).

An ethical clearance was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR-IRB CPN 005/10-11).

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees

Resi-dence	Hometown	Sex	Age	Marital Status	No. of Children	Education	Occupation	Church Member-ship
Accra	Accra	F			-			Methodist
Accra	Eastern	M	49	Single	-	Middle School	Pastor	Word of Life Ministry
Accra	Northern	M	60	Married	8	O' Level	Contractor	Jesus Victory
Accra	Greater	F	43	Married	4	Middle School	Pastor &	Solid Rock

	Accra						Business Woman	
Accra	Eastern	F	40	Married	4	Middle School	Business Woman	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Eastern	M	37	Married	1	J.S.S	-	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Eastern	F	30	Single	4	Primary 6	Trader	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Eastern	F	58	Widow	5	Middle School	Trader	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Volta	F	26	Single	-	SSS	Shop Attendant	External Life
Accra	Ashanti	F	31	Married	-	SSS	Caterer	Action Chapel
Accra	Central	F	57	Single	3	Polytechnic	Seamstress	Methodist
Accra	Eastern	F	25	Single	1	Student	Student	Apostolic Church
Accra	Eastern	M	38	Married	2	Middle School	Pastor	Bible Chapel Int.
Accra	Accra	M	34	Married	3	Tertiary	Petro-Chemist	--
Accra	Brong Ahafo	M	30	Married	--	JSS	--	--
Accra	Volta	M	37	Single	-	Tertiary	Engineer	--
Accra	Volta	M	34	Single	-	Tertiary	Technician	-
Accra	Eastern	F	37	Single	1	O' Level	Trader	-
Accra	Accra	F	41	Married	1	Vocational	Trader	Reveal Salvation
Accra	Eastern	F	38	Married	3	Middle School	Trader	God's Ministry
Accra	Eastern	M	45	Married	4	Tertiary	Photo-grapher	--
Accra	Western	F	36	Divorced	3	Middle School	Trader	Assemblies of God
Accra	Volta	F	21	Married	1	Primary	-	Global Revival
Accra	Upper East	F	29	Married	3	Primary	Trader	-
Accra	Ashanti	M	24	Single	-	Tertiary	Student	Catholic
Accra	Eastern	F	25	Single	-	JSS	Trader	Jesus Power Voice

Accra	Accra	F	55	Married	5	Middle School	Trader	Apostolic Revelation
Accra	Eastern	F	23	Single	-	Primary	Trader	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Central	F	38	Married	1	JSS	Trader	Christ Apostolic
Accra	Eastern	F	47	Married	3	Vocational	Trader	Believers Faith-World
Accra	Volta	F	40	Single	1	Middle School	Trader	Action Faith
Accra	Eastern	M	35	Single	2	SSS	Pastor	Living Praise Bible Church
Accra	Eastern	M	42	Married	2	Diploma	Accountant	Christian Hallowed Int.
Accra	Central	F	38	Married	2	A' Level	Pastor	Christian Hallowed Int.
Accra	Volta	M	37	Married	1	Diploma	Business Man	Christian Hallowed Int.
Accra	Central	M	35	Married	1	O' Level	Pastor	Christian Hallowed Int.
Accra	Central	M	35	Married	1	Primary	Pastor	Christian Hallowed Int.
Accra	Greater Accra	M	36	Married	1	Technical Education	Pastor	New Revival Ministry
Accra	Volta	F	37	Single	-	Middle School	Trader	Global Church
Accra	Western	F	30	Married	2	Primary	Trader	Assemblies of God
Accra	Volta	F	33	Married	2	Primary	Trader	--
Accra	Eastern	M	49	Single	-	Middle School	Pastor	Word of Life Ministry
Accra	Accra	F	30	Married	2	None		
Accra	Accra	F	30	Married	2	None		

Source: Field Work June – August 2010

## RESULTS

A typical prayer group meeting takes place in what members describe as one of the Stations in the forest. This is space, usually circular, which is cleared and swept clean that one can only see earth, with trees to provide shade. People bring cloth to roll on the dirt floor so that their clothes are not soiled with dust or mud when they fall into religious ecstasy. They gather in a circle to pray, usually standing. Whenever they sit on the plastic chairs rented from the Forestry Commission, a novel burgeoning economic industry, then it is to listen to a sermon or testimonies. Prayer sessions could last from three to four hours. Thus is secular space transformed into sacred space; Achimota Forest is space that enables religious groups to foster the construction of religious identity that transcends denominational boundaries. The prayer groups consist in communities whose members are collectivities of individuals from various Christian churches. Consequently, prayer groups do not, in essence, see themselves as particular churches. Members of Solid Rock Chapel International led by their Founder and Senior Pastor, the Rev. Dr. Christy Doh Tetteh or Mama Christy, as she is popularly called, do indeed meet as a church at Station 10 in the forest every Thursday for what they call “prayer retreat”. Otherwise the majority of prayer groups gather in the forest not as specific churches. On Sunday members of the prayer groups go to their various churches, which is why the groups meet in the forest from Monday to Saturday. This arrangement corroborates Marshall-Fratani’s contention that the face of Christianity is seen, among other images, in “its multitude of denominational and institutional forms” (1998: 278). Definitely, the phenomenon in Achimota Forest points to changing forms of this image where Christianity in Ghana, as expressed in Achimota Forest at least, suggests a fluidity of believers’ identity and community that go beyond the particular denominations to which they owe allegiance. Achimota Forest is a local expression of the same author’s “fragmentation of the unitary space” (Marshall-Fratani, 1998: 279) of individual Christian denominations, owing to the enormous growth of new churches in Ghana (Gifford, 2004) that promote interaction across the denominational divide. This denotes the erosion of particularism in favour of

pluralism without contesting denominational loyalties. This perceived reality regarding the religious groups in the forest, however, is a challenge in itself, not least in whether prayer members could proselytize, i.e., convert already baptized Christians of some denominations to their own. On another level, denominational loyalty does not preclude some leaders' hope or ambition of nurturing the prayer groups into full fledged independent churches. Thus, interaction with both members and leaders of the prayer groups reveals that the argument about universal Christianity works only for prayer group members, not prayer group leaders, many of whom do want to start churches and see themselves as serving an apprenticeship in the forest. One prayer group leader, for example, said that all great prophets have their beginnings in Achimota Forest. (Group Leader, 07-06-2010). So the perspectives of members and leaders seem different in this respect.

What is at play in Achimota Forest, then, is a religious bricolage, a creative and resourceful transformation of recreational space into sacred space, and a delocalization of Christian denominations for the purposes of addressing the pressing spiritual and material needs of individuals that the anonymity of urban space compounds. Achimota Forest is patronized by a relatively large number of the public (800-1.000 individuals daily) and includes a variety of denominations. As Englund (2002: 137) observes with respect to Lilongwe, capital city of Malawi, the "city is rarely thought to provide an adequate place for belonging". Indeed, there is a significant amount of literature on the city as a place of loneliness, of isolation, of non-belonging. Beti's *Ville Cruelle* (1954) depicts the individual trapped in an oppressive social milieu (cruel city) but at the same time refuses to become or is incapable of becoming fully engaged in the struggle to change it. Again estrangement and entrapment find expression in Nuttall and Mbembe's edited volume *Johannesburg: The elusive metropolis* (2008) in which the authors venture beyond the city's overwhelming historiography of capitalism, exploitation and segregation to project it as a place where lives are steeped in cosmopolitanism, civilization and imagination. Survival in such a city of gross inequality demands great imagination and creativity on the part of its inhabitants. Such interpretation sits well with Walter Benjamin, a man of letters, literary critic and philosopher, whose thesis, in the true spirit of 'classical sociologists', is that personal histories can be traced only in the

context of social milieus, economic forces, technological shifts, and historical events (Bullock and Jennings, 1996).

Finding space in a crowded city is not a difficulty that is unique to religious groups. However, belonging to a religious group can provide space, social as well as spatial, for self-expression and individual attention to addressing personal problems. Corten (1999: 105), perhaps the most distinguished scholar on Pentecostalism in Latin America, asserts that "... it is in the peripheral zones of large cities that it thrives best. Pentecostalism, it is stressed, is produced by the 'relative overpopulation' ). This observation best characterizes the religious groups that meet in Achimota Forest. The groups have found a creative way to surmount the difficulty of finding space in the city of Accra which, as pointed out earlier, is characterized by an intense struggle for space, with mounting expectation, at the same time, that churches worship within walled edifices, be orderly and quiet, in respect of the law. The University of Ghana's response to outdoor religious activities underscores society's reaction to non-compliance with the law.

In view of the above, many group members we interviewed saw the forest as an opportunity where they could express themselves freely and as space that offered them more prayer and counseling time with their leader unlike the walled confines of a church, which they cannot acquire easily, in the first place. What is more, some of the interviewees believed that the leader or pastor has less time with his or her congregants in walled churches. Some prayer leaders had this to say:

*People don't often have time to pray during the week so we come here as a fellowship to create time to pray. It saves us the trouble of finding space in the city and money to build a Church. (Group Leader, 19-06-2010).*

To some prayer group members:

*There is no difference [between the walled-church and prayer groups]. But the leader has more time to pray with us here. And you meet people from different churches. (Group Interview, Husband and Wife, 17-06-2010)*

*Yes, this is a prayer meeting. We come here because of the serenity and here we have more time to pray. (Group Interview, 06-06-2010)*

*Sometimes praying at home causes confusion because of other tenants who complain about the noise we make. At prayer groups the pastor can help you solve individual problems and undertake deliverance which a pastor at church will not have time to do. (Group Interview, 10-06-2010)*

*Church auditoriums are situated in towns and there is the tendency of disturbing people. But here we don't disturb and we can communicate freely with our Father. Moreover, this man [Prayer Group Leader] is special and God has opened his eyes to see visions, which is why we like this place. (Group Interview, 25-06-2010)*

*Yes, because of the belief in corporate anointing (praying for each other) which does not occur in church. Even though you pray on your own, praying together the Holy Spirit reveals and people prophesy about others. (Group Interview, 15-07-2010)*

*There is a difference in that Jesus separated himself from his disciples to go and pray. So we also as a family must separate ourselves. (Group Interview, 15-07-2010)*

It is clear that their inability to find space in the city, such as in walled churches, is a key driver to the prayer groups' flocking into the forest. This fact is expressed in their own words, such as "it saves us the trouble of finding space in the city and money to build a Church", "other tenants who complain about the noise we make", or "Church auditoriums are situated in towns and there is the tendency of disturbing



people. But here we don't disturb and we can communicate freely with our Father". By implication they no longer are under the pressure of the law on noise-making. The prayer groups find, once in the forest, that it rewards them with serenity that is conducive for their spiritual activity. An added advantage is that the group leaders or pastors have time for individual participants who are numerically less than a typical church would have at a particular worship.

Many worshipers bring their health and other problems to the prayer groups, believing they could be cured of all kinds of infirmities. The development in the forest is aided by the speed with which Pentecostalism is sweeping through Ghana (Okyerefo, 2011a). Thus, the geography of Achimota Forest, free open space surrounded by a densely built-up city, provides a natural setting for group meetings. Not even the state institution responsible for the forest could make this space less attractive to use as religious space for when the Forestry Commission raised the entrance fee from GH 50 pesewas to GH¢ 1.00 members of the religious groups demonstrated against it. The vociferous rampage achieved its desired result because the Forestry Commission reverted the charge per head to GH 50 pesewas.

The majority (43.5%) of the twenty-three group leaders interviewed said they felt instructed by God to found a prayer group in the forest. Others (34.8%) said that by founding prayer groups and teaching their members they would correct distortions in Christian teaching by 'the church'. By 'the church' the prayer group leaders point accusing fingers at the older Christian denominations such as the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. More than one-fifth (21.7%) wished to have fellowship with God by starting a prayer group in the forest. This desire leads the group leaders to outline the main reasons why they go to Achimota Forest to pray as follows: "I encounter deliverance and receive answers to special needs" (17.4%), "I have the opportunity to spend long hours at prayer" (21.7%), and "I experience serenity and convenience in the forest" (60.9%). The pattern of group members' responses is similar, generating 12.8%, 26% and 84.6% of members in favour of the aforementioned responses respectively. It is worthy of note that these responses, generated through a questionnaire, depict the prayer group members as focused on their needs, spiritual or temporal, for which they pray in the forest. But what really drives them into the forest, in the first place, which is the struggle for space in a densely

populated city, was expressed during the focused group discussions mentioned earlier, where they had time and gained the trust of the interviewers to talk out their entire experience more freely. The participation of interviewers in the group sessions over the period of the study led to the building of trust, unlike the questioners that were deployed briefly.

To this end, obviously, both group leaders and group members give priority to the forest as space to commune with God because it provides a quiet, serene atmosphere, coupled with the convenience to gather there without undue constraint. First, the practice illustrates the difficulty in finding alternative space, such as a hall, which is usually exorbitantly priced, even if one could be found. Second, the forest is an escape from the bustle and noise of the city, at the same time preventing any complaints from neighbours who might feel disturbed by noisy prayer and singing, as the case of the University of Ghana illustrates. Third, the practice is in tune with both traditional religious and Christian practice of communing with the divine in nature, and fourth, some prayer group members claim they feel their prayers answered in the forest, and not necessarily in walled churches.

No wonder the forest as a natural or even mundane space is of enormous significance to the prayer groups. Its importance ranges from finding sacred escape in a crowded city to discovering quiet and separate space, a place set apart where, in the words of some of those interviewed, people can share their secret and personal issues so that they can be assisted in prayer (Group Interview, 10-08-2010) and at the same time enjoy confidentiality when they talk about private issues (Group Interview, 10-08-2010).

Also, the encounter of the divine that would deliver believers from the vicissitudes of life such as ailments looms large on the minds of prayer group members. They look to experiencing God in a space where they can be free to express their concerns and hope to be delivered, to be cured. Such an attitude smacks of the relationship between space or place and health, which has been central in the work of medical geographers, for example, (Kearns and Gesler, 1998: 5). The authors argue that health must at once be situated in tangible, negotiated, and experienced realities of place; hence a place of hot springs very easily gains a reputation as a healing place. Following their “appeal for reformed medical geography and the encouragement to engage with public health concerns”, medical geography has become

“re invented as geographies of health and healing”, giving rise to “a significant body of research focused on the relationship between place and varied therapeutic processes” (Smyth, 2005: 488). Williams’s definition says “[T]herapeutic landscapes are those changing places, settings, situations, locales, and milieus that encompass both the physical and psychological environments associated with treatment or healing” (1998: 1193). These are places Gesler (1993: 171) believes have “enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental, and spiritual healing” ). Thus, is an ordinary, profane space turned into an extraordinary, sacred space, which prayer group members hope would answer their health and other needs. In bringing their health problems to the forest and hoping or believing they would be cured, no link was discovered between the traditional function of the forest where healers went to find medicinal plants and the investment in the forest by new religious groups. These groups make no use of any plants they could find there during prayers. Their single weapon against all infirmities is prayer, for which, they believe, the forest space is more conducive.

Prayer group members do not regard their Achimota Forest groups as substitutes for their churches. Instead, they regard them as special intercessory sites where their individual problems might receive more attention than they would at their home churches. Prayer group leaders, on the other hand, occasionally have another agenda: about half of them are hoping to found their own churches and see their Achimota groups as fledgling churches. God, for the Christians who gather in Achimota Forest then, cannot be compartmentalized into the formality of ecclesiastical space any longer. He can be approached anywhere and hears the cry of the believer. By this lived religion in a forest prayer group members simply express the belief that God is omnipresent and have forgotten the constraints of the city that pushed them into the forest.

The practice of praying in Achimota Forest also sheds new light on the contention that praying “in the bush” characterized the African Initiated Churches in the past in contrast with their contemporary counterparts, the Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, whose “flamboyant leaders of the new mega-churches ... dress in the latest (African) fashion ... drive a Mercedes Benz ... and preach the Prosperity Gospel to their ... born-again followers at home and in the diaspora” (Meyer, 2004: 448). Indeed, 88.4%

of the prayer group members interviewed claim membership of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches rather than the African Initiated Churches, and some of them drive the Mercedes Benz to Achimota Forest. The business men and women or traders among them bring their capital (money) to be prayed over so that their business may flourish and make them rich. At the same time, however, some prayer group members are critical of their leaders in the forest whose ultimate aim seems to make money. The said members argue that although prayer groups help them to “activate” the gifts that God has given them - gifts of prayer and prophecies:

*a lot more people, especially the leaders, are into the ministry [Prayer groups] for their stomachs and driving big ‘benzes’ [to make money]. Some also desire to do wonders for popularity. This leads them to acquire black magic (Group Interview, 07-06-2010)*

Members’ condemnation of black magic is quite unanimous because they seem to contrast Christianity with the traditional religion practised in their villages, so perhaps this is why denomination differences are not so important in the forest. After all many of them saw themselves as trying to protect themselves from village juju or witchcraft, which can cast spells on them; spells of sickness, barrenness, joblessness or poverty, the very problems from which they seek deliverance. While they believe their prayers conquer evil they are still fearful of witchcraft. Subconsciously the forest reminds them of such evil realm in traditional religion so they seek to redefine what the forest represents. They fundamentally reject traditional religion while at the same time there seems to be a blurring of their Christianity and traditional religion, at least in thought and in the power the forest holds for them.

In the temporal space of the forest prayer group members and leaders claim to encounter the sacred in the serenity of nature, thereby giving them hope that their common tribulations can be surmounted “in the name of Jesus” as they are wont to cry out. The common personal troubles of members can, thus, be summed up into financial or health problems, which members divide broadly into the spiritual and the physical. Some prayer group members claim that the economic difficulties they encounter as a result of

“joblessness can be surmounted through prayer to God” who can grant them employment. Others also believe that “barrenness”, for example, can be “a spiritual health problem that may be solved by prayer while physical ailments like headaches can be treated in hospital”. Another typical example of physical sickness many gave is malaria, which is caused by the mosquito. At the same time, however, some prayer group members believe that protracted malaria that refuses to be healed could well be caused by the devil or witchcraft, in which case one should bring it to God in prayer for a cure. By the same token, some distinguished between physical HIV/Aids and spiritual HIV/AIDS. The question of prayer and health in Achimota Forest will be taken up in another paper because of the frequency with which it came up in interviews and prayer group members’ (mis)understanding of ailment. The superstitious beliefs of prayer group members obviously present a challenge to public health.

Ultimately, the consensus among members is that there is no health problem that cannot be handled within the ambience of prayer groups “because of God”. “You simply need faith in God who is the greatest physician”, one of the members asserted, supported by almost all the 35 persons gathered at Station 5 on 24th June 2010. However, it is in the face of the enigmatically insurmountable or incurable diseases that prayer group members are bound together to fight a common enemy, which they describe as spiritual or physical. Consequently, their shared need for space leads them to a common space in which hope can be derived regarding a future that is unknown in the face of their spiritual and physical problems.

In a common space to surmount common frailties, denominational boundaries are broken. 88.4% of the prayer group members interviewed report they belong to what we group together in this study as “new churches” while 9.3% say they belong to the “old churches”. The former consists of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches while the later are the historic mission churches. While 9.3% of them attend their respective churches frequently, 20.9% go often. An overwhelming majority (69.8%) did not respond to this question, which could be indicative of the fact that attending their church may be less important for them compared with attending prayer group meetings because a whopping 83.7% of all members interviewed believe the prayer group offers them something more than their church does. They

enumerated examples of such benefits as “healing and deliverance”, “group leader has more time for members” and “members have more time to pray”. The prayer groups are characterized by the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition which, Meyer (2004: 452) observes, stresses “the importance of the Holy Spirit above biblical doctrines and provide room for prophetism, dreams and visions, speaking in tongues, prayer healing, and deliverance from evil spirits”. A wide range of prayer group members see in these categories the solution to their problems. The attraction the prayer groups have for members of the established Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church also derives from Meyer’s contention that “prayer groups” and the “charismatic renewal” movement are within the confines of these churches respectively, thereby watering the ground for prayer groups to sink roots among members of the said churches. Again, the “nondenominational fellowships that born-again Christians attend without leaving their churches” favour the growth and development of prayer groups across the denominational divide.

The importance prayer group members in the forest attach to the prayer group much more than their own church smacks of a new identity the prayer group confers on them, identifying them simply as Christian. Theirs is Christianity which is lived more freely in a space that blurs denominational barriers. Thus, the forest grants them free space outside but within the city, and free space outside the walls or confines of a church, a kind of pragmatic free lance religion, which serves their needs. The construction of this religious identity has corresponding religious beliefs and practices, to which both leaders and members of the informal prayer groups of the Achimota Forest space subscribe. Their faith that God can cure all ailments, spiritual or physical, is pre-eminent among such beliefs, expressed in the paramount practice of prayer, especially spoken loudly and invoking God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit as suits them. And this may be done at anytime and everywhere, including the forest.

The prayer groups in the forest do not constitute prayer camps as they are non-residential. Some prayer camps in Ghana have attracted especially negative media coverage of human rights abuses. Some patients suffering various ailments seek treatment in prayer camps. A good case in point regards mental health patients, some of whom are chained in the camps when they become violent while in residence

during the period of treatment. Such cases have come to public knowledge and attracted vociferous criticism. Achimota Forest does not belong to this category.

All members interviewed in the forest believe that prayer groups are becoming popular with Ghanaians. Participants in the study assigned reasons to this development. Such reasons include people's need for the more vibrant mode of worship in the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches unlike the boring liturgies of "old time religion" and the pragmatic approach of the new churches to people's needs. Such pragmatic approach includes healing crusades and giving loans to their members to trade, for example. In the words of some prayer group members and their leaders, prayer groups in the forest are becoming popular with Ghanaians:

*Because of population increase more and more people have problems and they join prayer groups to pray more about their problems. Like me, I had a problem finding a job but couldn't find one till I started coming here to pray (Group Interview, 09-07-2010)*

*...the prophecies that in the end days churches will increase also affect prayer groups. More and more people desire to see the face of God. There is no difference between the prayer groups and church. But sometimes because of time, churches are unable to hold deliverance sessions. Thus prayer groups offer deliverance and extra time for prayer (Group Interview, 10-06-2010)*

Clearly, some of them acknowledge population density and its attendant problems, as well as a lot more personal needs as pushing them into the forest, as information in Table 2 shows. Their generally low level education means that they are less likely to find good jobs while their relatively young age range and the single or widowed status of a good number of them may be indicative of people in need of marriage partners.

The growing number of churches has created corresponding demand for space in the city of Accra. Consequently, some groups use uncompleted buildings in residential areas, warehouses of failed

industries that the churches renovate and refurbish to befit their new kind of service, with their own production and consumption facilities. Prayer is produced while consumption comes in the form of healing, deliverance from evil spirits, and serenity of soul and body. Space is scarce in the city and demand for it is high so Achimota Forest is congenial for fulfilling these needs. And the very serene character of the forest so invites prayer group leaders and members to engage in those activities that would serve their purposes. They sing with vivacious alacrity and dance with verve, as our research team was frequently invited to do during fieldwork. Prayer group members pray believing their prayers will be heard and their needs provided for or their problems solved. While they commune with God they at the same time build a supportive community. In the forest one can indeed find peace outside but within the city at the same time.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main argument of this paper is that unconstrained by social pressures to be orderly and quiet within walled, urban churches, prayer group members in Achimota Forest experience the forest as a sacred space, where the Holy Spirit can more easily touch their souls and where ties of true fellowship among believers emerge than they experience in the urban setting. Following this is the prayer groups' belief in the sacredness of the forest, a belief that has antecedents within traditional religion, as well as within Christianity. The prayer groups in Achimota Forest exhibit these elements of Christianity in space in which members enjoy serenity and forge a collective sense of belongingness.

While the search for space in the city constitutes the structural drive, members' shared social and health problems constitute the personal drive urging them to seek solace in prayer in the forest. Their personal drives are, thus, articulated in a spiritual ambience deriving from the structural drive that soothes the present and gives them hope for the future. It is in this vein that Achimota Forest, which is essentially a secular space of a recreational park, is turned into a sacred landscape. Not only does this landscape



provide autonomy from a sprawling, anonymous city in which there is a struggle for space, in fact, the forest enables individuals to revive their drooping spirits.

Such a creative and resourceful transformation of recreational space into sacred space makes prayer groups in Achimota Forest generate and de-localize Christian denominations for the purposes of addressing the pressing spiritual and material needs of individuals that the anonymity of urban space compounds.

The superordinate faith of prayer group members is that God, the greatest physician, cures human beings of all ailments or infirmities, whether physical, spiritual or material. The prayer groups that gather in Achimota Forest understand ailment or sickness to mean un-wholeness. Infirmities of all kinds render human beings un-whole. Therefore, any kind of pathological ailment, whatever type of suffering or even material poverty are said to be forms of un-wholeness, which only God can make whole. After all he created “us in his own image”, they contend, which he saw as “very good” (Genesis 1-2). Goodness can only mean wholeness. Hence the prayer groups’ firm belief that their prayers can break the chains of infirmities that hold people captive. Freedom is a sign of God’s cure, the restoration of wholeness, as expressed in good health, the acquisition of jobs, success and wealth. This faith is what is poignantly expressed in the prayer introducing this work:

*In the name of God, and by the authority he has given us, we break the chains of the devil that make us captive; we break the power of the enemy, the wrath of sickness, barrenness, and poverty. (Group Member, 10-06-09)*

But it is also obvious from the demographic characteristics of prayer group members that given their level of education and economic stability, such individuals are more likely to be dissociated with society and in desperation seek solace in the forest. The long hours spent in the forest, however, compound the problem of joblessness they pray against. And the more they pray the more this human activity in the forest contributes to the degradation of a hitherto pristine environment. First, the stations have been swept

clean, exposing the soil to erosion. Second, garbage heaps are growing around the stations and those parts of the forest individuals walk to for private prayer. These heaps are mostly made up of small non-degradable plastic packs from which they drink water and afterwards simply throw into the forest. In Ghana, cheap filtered water popularly known as 'pure water' is sold in plastic packs. The Forestry Commission, as an afterthought, has provided garbage bins in certain parts of the forest. Perhaps the prayers are yet to prove effective toward a change of attitude and enforcement of the law.

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# Appendix: Achimota Forest Map

