

The Gold Coast mission

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In 1828, the Basel Mission sent its first missionaries to the Gold Coast, the stretch of the West African coast between the Ivory Coast and the Slave Coast, where European powers had maintained forts for the trade in gold and enslaved people since the fifteenth century. The first missionaries were sent to Christiansborg, the Danish fort at Osu near Accra, at the invitation of the Danish authorities. Most of them died within months of their arrival, of fever and other diseases, a fate that the region's reputation as the white man's grave anticipated.¹

The mission survived through the persistence of a few missionaries, among them Andreas Riis, who arrived in 1832 and in 1835 moved the mission inland to Akropong, in the hills of Akuapem, where the climate was healthier. In 1843, to strengthen the mission, the Basel Mission recruited a group of Christian settlers from Jamaica, descendants of enslaved Africans who had been freed by the British abolition of slavery, and brought them to Akropong, where they helped to build the mission settlement and introduced new crops and skills.² The arrival of the West Indian Christians, who returned to the continent of their ancestors after the abolition of slavery, is one of the remarkable episodes of the history of the African diaspora.

The Basel Mission in the Gold Coast developed a distinctive approach. It founded schools, in which it taught in the local languages as well as in English and German. Its missionaries studied the languages of the region, above all Twi and Ga, wrote grammars and dictionaries and translated the Bible. Johann Gottlieb Christaller, a Württemberg missionary, produced a dictionary of the Twi language and a collection of Twi proverbs that remain standard works.³ The mission also founded workshops for carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing and other crafts, to train converts in skills that would allow them to earn a living.

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The church founded by the Basel Mission became the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, one of the largest churches of the country, and its schools, among them the teacher training college at Akropong, trained generations of Ghanaian teachers, clergy and leaders. The legacy of the Basel Mission in Ghana is thus considerable. In Ghana it is viewed with a mixture of gratitude and critical reflection on its role in the colonial period.

1 Notes

1. On the beginnings of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast (arrival of the first missionaries at Christiansborg/Osu in December 1828) and the high mortality of the early missionaries, see the literature on the history of the Basel Mission in Ghana. To be verified. ↩
2. On Andreas Riis (1804–1854), his move to Akropong in 1835 and the recruitment of West Indian (Jamaican) Christian settlers who arrived at Akropong in 1843, see the literature on the Basel Mission in Ghana. To be verified. ↩
3. Johann Gottlieb Christaller, A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi), Basel 1881; A Collection of Three Thousand and Six Hundred Tshi Proverbs, Basel 1879. To be verified. ↩

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