


From desert fathers to Ghanaian pilgrims: Sacred space and ecology at Abeisua mountain



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The heaps of waste generated at prayer sites in Ghana lead to questions about whether patrons of these sites go to feast or worship. It is paradoxical when compared to the habits of early Christian monks and nuns who paid considerable attention to their surroundings which attracted many visitors to the monasteries for various benefits. Today, Ghanaian Christians who visit sacred sites do not care for the environment and as a result, desecrate the surroundings. This article evaluates the environmental interests and impacts of patrons of sacred prayer sites in Ghana especially at Abeisua (Atwea) mountain and the early Christian monasteries. This historical and comparative study reveals that whereas the early Christians saw themselves as stewards of the environment, and thus properly conserved it, most Ghanaian Christians today only admire the flora around the sacred sites but do not feel responsible for their upkeep, thereby engaging in indiscriminate littering.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article argues for considerable education on environmental stewardship and collaboration between the managers and stakeholders of the sacred sites while exploring the establishment of structures as a tool for ecological sustainability.

Keywords: sacred space; environmental stewardship; asceticism; monastic; monasticism; Abeisua (Atwea) mountain.

Introduction

After a programme at any sacred prayer site in recent times, the state of the surroundings would leave one wondering whether environmental stewardship has eluded Christians today. Influenced by Proverbs 12:10 that the righteous is kind to animals and Deuteronomy 23:24, where God admonishes the Israelites to keep their camp clean, as He does not want to see anything unclean among them when He visits. This command has prompted various inquiries into how the Early Church approached environmental care, especially when contrasted with the modern Church's apparent disregard for its ecological surroundings. When Christianity stabilised in the Early Church, internal opposition and negative expressions of the faith gave way to ascetic and monastic practices (Boamah 2022; Ellingsen 2015; Lynch 2010) that described the ascetic practices of the monks as the new persecution and martyrdom. This was because, whereas the persecution and martyrdom were external, the ascetic and monastic practices were self-inflicted. Christians who chose the ascetic life did so because they did not want to compromise their faith at any point after Constantine's Edict of Milan (Chrysavgis 2008). According to Burton-Christie (1993), some early Christians retreated to desolate places because of 'gnosis'. The quest for knowledge, therefore, drove asceticism and flight from the socio-political and economic activities of the then Roman Empire; hence the adoption of a new form of martyrdom (Burton-Christie 1993; Ellingsen 2015).

Gnosis derived from the Greek is translated as 'knowledge', which implies spiritual knowledge. In the context of early Christian asceticism, 'gnosis' was a profound, mystical understanding of divine truths. This desire for 'gnosis' motivated many early Christians to retreat to solitary places, engaging in ascetic practices to deepen their spiritual connection. The seclusion and rigorous ascetic lifestyle away from the distractions and corruptions of society were avenues to purify the soul and attain higher spiritual enlightenment. In so doing, they adopted an intense prayer lifestyle, engaged in fasting, adopted voluntary poverty and observed silence with deep prayer (Burton-Christie 1993). During their spiritual journey, Wortley (2019) added that the Desert Fathers consciously tried not to sin even in the mind before it manifested in the flesh or before it was made physical. By so doing, they fought against anything that became an impediment to their progress (Wortley 2019). According to Saint Augustine of Hippo (1998) in *The City of God*

(book XIX, Chapter 10, 19), another purpose that motivated the monks was the search for God with one's heart and soul. Cogan (2024) in *The Desert Fathers and Mothers – Who are they?* revealed that Abba Pachomius, for instance, established some rules for living in the desert including specific and extensive periods of prayer, obedience to the community leader, discipline, the practice of silence and regular fasting as well as manual labour to keep the environment and to get the best from there. Virginia Burrus (2005) affirmed the establishment of rules for monasteries in 'Late Ancient Christianity' by citing some of the rules governing Abba Pachomius monasteries.

It is striking to find scholarly works on how the early monasteries took deliberate care of their environment while building their spirituality and defending the Christian faith. Given the attention they paid to caring for the environment, they got the best from their plants and animal farms as well as their crafts and built a home for many inhabitants and guests. They created an ecosystem that was beneficial to their religious expression and which benefited others as well. It is also clear today that the 'increasing numbers of pilgrims, as well as religious and secular tourism, pose serious challenges to several famous monasteries' (Mallarach, Corco & Papayannis 2014:374) and sacred sites in this case.

The article explores the negligence of the environment observed at contemporary Ghanaian prayer sites compared to the early Christian monastic practices. It posits that modern Christians, especially those who visit the Abeisua mountain and other sacred sites, often do not maintain the environmental stewardship that early Christian monks and nuns practised. This neglect leads to broader environmental issues, emphasising the need for education and collaboration to promote ecological sustainability at these sites. Interestingly, Joseph-Maria Mallarach et al. (2014) anticipated that modern Christians, with the benefit of technology, should better manage the environment than the early Christians did. However, an exploration of the situation today as compared to the examples of the early Christians, makes it clear that patrons of prayer sites today are less concerned about the environment and thus unconcerned about its sanctity. Premodern monastic communities exhibited voluntary simplicity and principles of self-restraint that guide contemporary environmental stewardship. The article further explores how these monastic values can be relevant to modern prayer sites, especially emphasising the importance of self-restraint in maintaining ecological balance (Newman 2021; Sheridan 2015).

The article compares the examples of how movements in the Early Church managed the environment to how Christians at sacred prayer sites today manage the environment. Even though in most cases early Christian monastic communities were permanent settlements known by their structured communal living, the Abeisua pilgrimage signifies a temporary and fluid spiritual practice; however, both serve as sacred spaces where humans relate with the environment

in pursuit of the divine. This shared focus on sacred space and environmental engagement allows for comparison. The comparison between early Christian monastic communities and contemporary Christian communities is expected to highlight how these communities relate to their environment. While many early Christian institutions had a different relationship with the land compared to modern ones, monastic communities are essentially known for their religious and cultural practices that exhibit stewardship and care for the land. The comparison highlights the difference between the early Christians and the Christians today with a focus on how the activities of the two epochs affected the environment at sacred sites. It examines the nature and organisation of prayer sites today using the example of the Methodist Camp at the Abeisua (Atwea) mountain, a very popular prayer site in Ghana. In exploring the Abeisua mountain, participant observation including interactions is employed to appreciate the situation at the mountain. Besides these, interviews with persons who have some first-hand information and hold certain key positions that are relevant to the study such as the caretaker of the Methodist camp were conducted. These interviews helped to gather first-hand oral responses on the history and ongoing developments at the prayer site.

An assessment of early Christian examples, participant observation, as well as a thorough review of the interactions with authorities at the prayer sites further confirm that Christians today have much to learn from the early Christians. Christians must appreciate the subject of living as stewards of the environment while they learn to manage the waste generated in their homes and at sacred places such as churches and prayer sites (Golo 2012). It is also crucial that managers of these sites and other relevant stakeholders, including patrons, chiefs and government agencies, are involved in handling the ecological issues at these prayer sites. The article therefore draws on the intersection between Church History and Mission, exploring the environmental stewardship of early Christian monastic communities as a framework for engaging contemporary practices, especially at the Abeisua mountain. Grounded in theological reflections on creation care, it examines the evolution of sacred space management, offering insights into the interplay between historical praxis, missiological relevance and theological imperatives.

Early Christian asceticism and monasticism

Ascetic and monastic practices are believed to have biblical examples from Jesus, John the Baptist and Paul, among others (Brown 2019; Ellingsen 2015). Asceticism is widely found in many world religions and philosophical traditions including Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, the three Abrahamic faiths, Stoicism, Epicureanism and Pythagoreanism (Deezia 2017). However, when the monastic movement started, the Catholic Church did not support it and therefore did not include them in the clergy's hierarchical structure (Latourette 1975). That notwithstanding, by the end of the 5th century, it gained a lot

of visibility and acceptance (Ellingsen 2015; Mallarach et al. 2014) and was described as the 'preferred way towards the perfect Christian life' (Latourette 1975:221). The spread of monasticism was so wide that the appointment of bishops especially in the Eastern Church was based on affiliation with the monasteries during the early medieval period from around the 5th–12th century (Latourette 1975). In the late 6th century, Pope Gregory I, a monk, was chosen to sit on Peter's throne, as the best fit for the position (Latourette 1975). He then paved the way for other monks to be selected to fill vacant positions.

Asceticism, from its Greek etymology 'askeo', is influenced by athletics which translates into exercise or training (Lynch 2010). This original meaning was expanded to contain the discipline of self-restraint that a 'rational man' might strive to attain (Burrus 2005). Although pockets of monastic and ascetic groups had been started in the Roman empire, it is generally maintained that asceticism emerged around the 3rd century in Egypt by St. Anthony (Chryssavgis 2008; Lynch 2010).

The ascetics lived the simplest life, wore the simplest clothes and took a sparse diet of bread and herbs with no interest in civilisation, and therefore, did not generate a lot of garbage (Chryssavgis 2008). These individuals moved away from the social, economic and political order of the Hellenistic world to explore hidden truths about heaven and earth, and battle the desires of humans (Cow 2017). In Christianity, asceticism is seen as a means through which a believer draws closer to God by submitting the body to strict rules which in turn strengthen the soul to achieve its purpose (Cow 2017). It is a lifestyle characterised by abstinence from carnal pleasures, in fulfilment of spiritual goals.

To be able to live the ascetic life, the ascetics renounce things such as properties and possessions, marriage and sex, and cut down on sleep and food, among many other things (Burrus 2005; Ellingsen 2015). In situations where a person chooses to live outside society, he or she adopts a cautious lifestyle, indicated by the renunciation of material possessions and physical pleasures, and also spends time fasting while concentrating on the practice of religion or reflection upon spiritual matters (Chryssavgis 2008). By doing these, a triangular relationship between the individual, the environment and God is established.

Monasticism, on the other hand, traces its etymology from 'monachos' in Greek implying living alone (solitary), although in most cases, they lived in communities (Ellingsen 2015). It is conceptualised as celibacy or living alone in the sense of lacking a spouse, which is a crucial feature of the monastic life. Monasticism is, therefore, an institutionalised religious practice or movement whose members attempt to live by a rule that requires works that go beyond those of either the laity or the ordinary spiritual leaders of their religions. There are two main categories of the monastic lifestyle based on the choice of the individual – to either go solo or with other persons (Mallarach et al. 2014). Where the

person lives with other persons in an institution, it is termed a *coenobitic* monastic lifestyle, while where the person is isolated from others is termed a *hermitic* monastic lifestyle. Nevertheless, both types complement each other; a person may join a group and then withdraw temporarily, only to reconnect with others later. Around the late 4th century, St. Macarius the Great is said to have combined the two by creating a *lavra*, where they lived individually in caves or huts but close enough to others and sometimes came together for some communal assemblies (Mallarach et al. 2014).

St. Anthony

St. Anthony is referred to as the Father of Asceticism especially from the 4th century (Burrus 2005; Lynch 2010). St. Anthony was an Egyptian Coptic Christian born around AD 251 and, according to Athanasius, he lived for 105 years (Brown 2019; Ellingsen 2015). He was born into a wealthy family but he refused to be educated in letter writing (Burrus 2015). His turning point was when he heard a sermon on the encounter of the rich young man with Jesus. Thus, Matthew 19:21 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me' (Ellingsen 2015). He then renounced his wealth, took his sister to a club of virgins and began his life as an ascetic. His journey of asceticism was a total exclusion from the church and the Eucharist (Ellingsen 2015). He became a hermit in the desert surviving through menial work such as weaving reeds into baskets, ropes and mats. He was committed to prayer, fasting and night vigils, where he recited biblical passages repeatedly in Coptic. He ate a small amount of bread, salt and water once a day. Further to St. Anthony, St. Basil of Caesarea is also noted as the Father of Eastern monasticism (Mallarach et al. 2014).

The first ever communal monastery instituted, was by a former soldier named Pachomius in 320 (Shelley 2008). St. Pachomius, a Coptic-speaking Egyptian, established many of these coenobitic monasteries to help male and female ascetics in their monastic life (Mallarach et al. 2014). His monasteries were regarded as institutions because they provided a well-laid structure and laid down rules, which shaped the lives of the monks and nuns in the monasteries (Shelley 2008).

Monasteries that existed between the 3rd and 6th centuries were made of people from both rich and poor backgrounds. The infrastructure of the monasteries in the Early Church was constructed with wood or stone (Mallarach et al. 2014). A feature of the monasteries was the rules and manual labour laid down by Pachomius and St. Augustine to shape their respective monasteries. Pachomius' law stated that the treatment of monks should not be based on their social status or families before they joined the monasteries; instead, it should be based on entry point, thus seniority (Burrus 2005). Augustine's rules likewise stated that people who had possessions in 'the world' must 'freely consent to possess everything in common in the monastery', because they were practising communalism as was done during the time of the Apostles (Burrus 2005). Similarly, Bishop Basil of Caesarea's

monastery also contained people who were craftsmen and farmers as well as the educated (Lynch 2010).

Both male and female monasteries existed, reflecting Paul's teaching (cf. Galatians 3:28) that in Christ, there is neither male nor female (Brock & Harvey 1998). The women in the nunneries excelled in their journey as ascetics and made significant contributions to monasteries at the time as also did the men. Notable among these nuns were Mary, Euphemia, Melania the Younger, Syncletica, among others (Boamah & Apaah 2024). It is therefore very clear that the monastic movement in the early church was made up of people of different social strata and gender. It is interesting that although seeking a spiritual awakening, the monks and nuns made the environment their greatest concern of all.

The monasteries and their environment

It is worthy to note the contributions of Carlyle (1827) who looks at the environment from the German term 'Umgebung'. It was through this word that the word 'environment' found a place in the English lexicon, which Williams (1983), traces the shifting meanings and its sociocultural implications over time. Carlyle used it to reflect a broader philosophical understanding of the concept emphasising situations and circumstances that affect human experience and existence. For Carlyle, 'Umgebung' affects not just the physical surroundings but also the economic, social, cultural and historical contexts of humankind.

Furthermore, the term 'environment' is influenced by the French term '*environner*', translated as 'to surround'. This signifies a transition from the simple spatial concept to a more complex understanding of the interconnected surroundings. Worster (1994) also highlights how evolving ecological interests have influenced ideas of the environment beyond its physical aspects. This article further compares the early monastic movement with contemporary patrons at prayer sites and provides meaningful insights into how both contexts emphasise the significance of the environment in their spiritual practice. This evolution highlights the Christian theology of environmental stewardship, which calls for the care of creation and accepts the responsibility to nurture the world around it, reflecting the relationships between early monks, their patrons and the sacredness of their environments. Conradie (2006) defines Christian ecological theology as integrating scriptural mandates and practical environmental responsibilities in contemporary faith expressions. Pope Francis (2015) affirms the interconnectedness between human well-being and ecological sustainability admonishing Christians to see environmental care as a Christian responsibility.

The monks and nuns, influenced by the concept of Christian environmental stewardship (Golo 2012; Mallarach et al. 2014) were very considerate of the environment. The monks held the position that as men, they were responsible for the right

management of the environment for their benefit and judgement. The biblical injunction in Genesis 1:28 which indicates that a man should develop the earth and govern provided great motivation for the monks and nuns' reception of the earth. Jason Brown (2019) defined monastic spirituality as 'land-based' given their reception of the environment and treatment of the earth as what provided them with the conditions for their disciplines. He cited Jerome who argued that 'the desert loves to strip bare' and Belden Lane who suggested that the conditions of the desert and mountains allowed them to attain the mortification of the body to reach the spirituality they sought to attain (Brown 2019). This then gave the monks and nuns the responsibility of maintaining harmony with the environment in trying to keep it in its natural state. In affirming 'land-based' theology, Joseph-Maria Mallarach, Josep Corco and Thymio Papayannis suggested that 'from the earliest times, the ideal of monastic life was closely linked to the aspiration of a return to a terrestrial Paradise...' (Mallarach et al. 2014:355). They sought to create a paradise out of their habitation given the divine mandate from the inception of man. A French hermit observed that 'hermits live a cosmic experience of communion with nature' affirming the bond between the ascetics and their environment (Mallarach et al. 2014:355). The monastic communities were self-organised with 'a continuously positive impact on nature conservation' (Mallarach et al. 2014:357) because they were guided by identifiable principles of environmental sustainability goals even during their time. The environment served as farms, places of training, cemeteries etc to help them reach the height they needed. In some cases, they even associated certain virtues with some of the trees influenced by Isaiah 41:18–19 (Mallarach et al. 2014). This is very essential because it shows the level of reverence they attached to the trees in the forest. It seemed quite close to dendrolatry, but here they did not see the trees as gods but as virtues to be revered, not worshipped.

The monks and nuns generally did not only benefit from nature but made meaningful contributions to it. They took very good care of the forests, so even today some of the places where they lived have become protected areas for tourist attractions preserved as parks and gardens (Mallarach et al. 2014). They protected the environment and handed them down to posterity today as heritages. Some of the gardens they preserved have equally become botanical and provide pharmacological benefits to humankind, to date. In addition, about 40 former monasteries have been preserved in Europe as heritage and cultural sites, with 3 of them as natural and cultural world heritage sites (Mallarach et al. 2014). In all these, we may affirm that these monks and nuns added value to their environments by practising self-sustenance in a quest to meet their spiritual needs. Because the monasteries were self-sustaining, they established wine presses to produce wine for the Eucharist leading to the establishment of *Methode champenoise*.

The monks and nuns, therefore, made conscious efforts to live in harmony with the environment. When they ventured into the forest to make it their habitat, they did not destroy its

ecology by their practices. They lived in harmony with the environment such that some monks befriended wild animals, although tragically, this trust occasionally led to monks becoming prey to these same creatures. Their resignation included avoiding activities that would lead to the generation of garbage in order not to disturb the ecosystem. They hardly ate, drank or enjoyed any comfort on earth, thus they did not generate a lot of garbage. Instead, they added value to the ecosystem by tilling the land, maintaining farms and pressing grapes to generate their wine for the eucharist. These improvements have resulted in the preservation of these places, which we now enjoy as parks, gardens, medicinal centres and heritage sites. Their lifestyles and management of the environment have given future generations a sustained environment and a green environment (Brown 2019; Hermit 2015). Monastic self-restraint, based on ethical and philosophical traditions, provides a valuable opportunity for contemporary environmental practices. These principles can lead to sustainable land management and ecological preservation, providing a model for modern users, especially Christians.

Pope Francis (2015), in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, argues that degradation of the environment is a moral and spiritual issue rather than an ecological crisis. He posits 'the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor' (Francis 2015:2). This affirms the monastic tradition of preserving the environment as sacerdotal, admonishing Christians to be committed to caring for creation. Francis stresses that true Christian discipleship also implies 'ecological conversion', because Christians must maintain harmony between humanity and nature. This position is in sync with the environmental concerns of this article, given the way prayer camps are looking these days.

Sacred pilgrimages in modern Christianity

Prayer is a composite part of religious expression with each religion having unique modes. Prayer has, therefore, been an integral part of Christianity since time immemorial and has evolved over the years through different experiences and interpretations. It is sometimes believed that the location of the prayer best answers prayers. That is to say, prayers must be said at places that are considered sacred to receive answers to them. These sites are usually chosen based on their peculiarities. Edwin Bernbaum (2006) in 'Sacred mountains: Themes and teachings' suggested that mountains are the highest and most impressive features of the landscape with an unusual power to awaken a sense of the sacred, giving an implication that, a mountain can be considered for a prayer site because of its unique qualities. Aside from the unique features of a place, others consider a place as a prayer site based on their religious encounters at the place, an example is the history of the discovery on the Abeisua mountain. Although Abeisua and Atwea are different communities, their proximity confuses many patrons and the public. The sacred place of the prayers is located at Abeisua, but often

drivers drop patrons at Atwea and then they hike up the mountain; therefore, they call the place Atwea Abeisua.

The Abeisua mountain

The Abeisua mountain, popularly known to many as the Atwea mountain, is by far the most sacred prayer mountain in Ghana. This mountain is highly patronised and persons who visit this sacred place are deemed to be very spiritual. The account of its discovery differs in some details because of non-documentary evidence by the original people. The accounts differ slightly when recounted by different people. The first account here is recounted by a Methodist minister who has had great connections with the mountain for a long time.¹ He recounted that the mountain, as a prayer site, was discovered by the Rev. Osei Assibey who was a Methodist minister within the Effiduase Circuit. On one of his journeys along the stretch from Effiduase to Atebubu, he had a strong urge to pray. The Rev. Osei Assibey was led by the spirit of God to go up the Abeisua mountain, but as tradition demands, he could not go up the mountain without the foreknowledge of the custodians of the land. Rev. Osei Assibey followed the necessary protocols and was given permission to explore the place, but he was assigned two hunters to accompany him for safety. Interestingly, when they began climbing, Rev. Osei Assibey told the hunters to let him lead the way to where God will show him. On the journey to the top, he sat to rest a couple of times thinking those were the places he was supposed to pray but the spirit of God told him to keep moving until he reached the peak of the mountain. His final destination is what is currently referred to as the main camp on the mountain, noted as Camp 3 (the Methodist Camp). Rev. Osei Assibey prayed as soon as he arrived and planted a cross at the place. According to accounts, before the planting of the cross, Rev. Osei Assibey was covered by a thick cloud such that the hunters including the Rev himself could not see the next thing beside them which was interpreted as the presence of God.

On the other hand, Philip Okyere (2018) renders an account culled from oral history which indicates that the Abeisua mountain was discovered by a Methodist minister, Rev. Abraham Osei-Assibey in 1965 who was posted from the Sunyani Circuit to the Asante Effiduase Circuit of the Methodist Church Ghana as the Superintendent Minister in 1963 (Okyere 2018). The Rev. Abraham Osei Assibey was returning from a pastoral trip to the Afram Plains when the car he was travelling with suddenly stopped at Abeisua junction, a vicinity of Atwea. It is said that when the car was put into reverse gear, it moved backward, but when it was in the forward gear, the car would not move. Instantly, it dawned on the late Rev. Assibey to go to *Krɔbo boɔ* (the original name of the Abeisua Prayer site), one of the four mountains in front of him. Notwithstanding, the Very Rev. Isaac Yao Boamah, who was the driver of the late Rev. Osei Assibey, in an interview, recounts his side of

1. The Very Rev. Samuel Adu- Boateng was a former Director of the Evangelism Mission and Renewal Directorate of the Methodist Church Ghana, who initiated the Connexional Prayer Retreat at the Abeisua mountain.

the story. He recounted that when they reached the Atwea community which was on their way to Mampong, the Rev. Abraham Osei Assibey was believed to have been moved by an unusual urge to tell him to stop because he felt drawn to the top of the *Krɔbo boɔ*. According to Rev. Yaw Boamah, Rev. Osei Assibey inquired from the leaders of the town whether people could go there. The response was that it was possible because some European tourists had visited the place before. These accounts show little differences in some details, although they all acknowledge the discovery by Rev. Osei Assibey and the circumstances around it.

The study adopted a field observation of the Abeisua Mountain over approximately three weeks. The site was observed a week before the Connexional Week programme to assess its baseline environmental conditions and regular activities. During the programme, the site was closely monitored to evaluate the impact of patrons' activities on the environment, particularly regarding waste generation and management. Following the event, an additional eight days were spent on-site to observe the caretaker's and his staff's efforts in addressing the garbage produced by patrons and restoring the site to its original state. Interactions with the caretaker of the Methodist Camp indicated that although they did not know the exact size of the mountain, he recalled that a few years ago, some Europeans visited and measured the hill indicating it was over 700 feet high suggesting that the mountain is huge and imposing.² During the study period, in participant observation of the activities that go on there, it was possible to count over 1432 steps where the staircase begins from the base to the top of the mountain within 56 min, with five rest stations. In all, there are 10 camps equivalent to the various monasteries because they were each managed by different entities. However, two are not functional; therefore, eight of the 10 camps received patrons day in and day out. The overseer at Camp 3 could not give exact numbers of the average patrons to the place. However, at Camp 3, people were always present, especially on Tuesday evenings through Wednesday mornings, and Fridays through weekends when prayer sessions were held. Attendance could reach at least 100 patrons. During special programmes, attendance could exceed 500 patrons. He further admitted that pilgrims' stay ranged from one day to three to six months or even one or more years. He cited an example of someone who had stayed there for nine years. A good number of those who stayed longer, usually stayed for about 40 days as was the example of Jesus on the mountains.

Given how difficult it is to climb and stay up the mountain, it is anticipated that when patrons climb up such mountains, they will give full attention to their object of worship and give considerable attention to the environment, to cultivate it and make it better; however, this is not the case in the modern example as exemplified at the Abeisua mountain.

²The caretaker is Evang. Richard Afriyie. He manages the Camp and organises programmes there for the patrons. He constantly reports to the church on development at the camp.

Environmental concerns at Abeisua mountains

There were various issues at the prayer site that related to the environment given the reception of the patrons to the site. In an interaction with the caretaker of the Methodist Camp and some of the patrons, the observation of some practices and several issues came to light. There is a welcome signage of about 4 x 8 feet which outlines a few rules and regulations for visiting patrons. Although present, the signpost is faded, torn and partially obscured by leaves. Interestingly, a portion of the post admonishes patrons to not litter or urinate around the camp. Use the dustbins provided and keep the environment NEAT, CLEAN AND TIDY (emphasis, not mine). The citation indicated that patrons are not often conscious of the concept of cleanliness, particularly in a sacred environment like this, and hence, there is a need to emphasise this as a major concern. Then under the rules and by-laws, besides, the first two rules of the four rules under the by-laws read:

- It is illegal to cut down any tree in the forest reserve or elsewhere. The forest reserve is the property of the Government of Ghana and a restricted area: use it wisely.
- Do not set fire in the forest or spend the night there. Always return to the camp by 17:00. This is because it is dangerous to attempt to stay in the bush.

It was important to question the motivation behind these regulations at the camp entrance, which were as it was suggestive of the likely occurrence of practices against the environment. On the principle of scratching where it itches most, it shows that managers of the camp have issues with people's attitudes towards the environment. The caretaker of the camp confirmed that patrons themselves installed the billboard and replaced it with new ones when the existing signs faded. This gesture shows that not all is lost and some of the patrons are concerned about the environment. They appreciate the Christian concept of environmental stewardship and hence will put resources into erecting a signage to encourage their compatriots to keep the environment clean.

Beyond this signage at the entrance of the camp, there is a lively market where all kinds of items ranging from toiletries, bedding, breakfast supplies and hot meals such as various types of rice dishes, banku, kenkey and fufu are sold. Most of these items are plastic and non-biodegradable items. Sometimes, the location of the market even makes entry to the camp difficult. The market also generates significant amounts of waste. It is even more alarming that a damaged pit latrine barricaded with aluminium roofing sheets located 20–30 steps from the market gives off an awful smell leaving patrons to cover their mouths and noses to keep them from inhaling the smell. The caretaker of the camp explained that the latrine was not properly constructed and broke down after a few years without any potential solutions to address it.

About 15 steps to the left of the main camp entrance, lies a garbage site. However, there were visible remains of plastic waste including water sachets and black carrier bags buried in the sand.

On toilet facilities at the camp, the caretaker noted that they had 15 washrooms for females and 10 for males in addition to some washrooms fixed in the recently constructed housing units. These may not be enough given the numbers of patrons that visit daily, especially during special programmes. Regardless of these provisions, he bemoaned the fact that some patrons still preferred urinating right beside the washroom or in other places they deemed fit, thereby giving justification to the welcome note at the entrance.

Again, dustbins had been provided at vantage points to curb littering of the site; however, patrons refused to dump garbage in the bin and rather threw it on the ground. Some users felt that people had been employed to sweep and clean up the environment; hence, littering by patrons served as job security for the cleaners whose job was to clean.

Notwithstanding, the caretaker had managed to get reservoirs to store water making life up the mountain a bit easier as compared to previous years. However, water closet facilities could not be built up there because it would cause water shortage because the water available was from a temporal source. Attempts had been made to drill a borehole down the hill and pump the water up into the reservoirs but to no avail. The picture painted, especially from the Methodist camp, which even seemed a lot better compared to some of the other camps, is not pleasant. The challenges they had at the camp were largely two-fold: attitudinal and infrastructural.

The most significant challenge at the Abeisua prayer site was the lack of environmental stewardship. They did not seem to appreciate the harm they caused to the environment by their poor maintenance practices that were expected of a Christian concerning environmental stewardship (Hermit 2015). The second challenge at this sacred site was the level of infrastructural development which did not meet the growing numbers of the patrons of the sites. The absence of these two elements leads to dire environmental consequences that affect not just the patrons but the entire ecosystem, and may lead to an ecological crisis in the future if not managed properly.

Comparison between the monasteries and the sacred sites today

In view of changing times, between the Early Church and the modern Church, a lot has changed about prayers and other practices at sacred prayer sites. While the permanence of early monastic communities differs from the temporal nature of pilgrimage sites like Abeisua, this study draws parallels

based on their roles as loci of spiritual retreat and their impacts on environmental stewardship. Despite their differences, these contexts offer valuable insights into the evolution of Christian ecological ethics. Whereas in the case of the early Christians, going to the mountains was a lifetime commitment and a resignation of material things to seek the face of God alone, the situation is different today. Many go up the mountains to show that they are spiritual and therefore stay there for a period and return to brag about having been to the Atwea mountain.

In most cases from the participant observation, the motivation for visiting the site, based on interaction with some of the patrons, was prompted by existential needs which are very material, unlike the case of the early monks and nuns who sought to build on their spiritual needs. Patrons at prayer sites today climb up to seek the favour of God for jobs, travels and marriages. Three out of five patrons at these prayer sites go to the mountains and are motivated by either one of the three, all of them, or some of the three issues. The early ascetics, on the other hand, looked to develop a deeper relationship with God by fighting sin and demons, while patrons at prayer sites today are more interested in bread-and-butter issues.

The differences in motivation have impacts on their reception of the environment. The early Christians were motivated by a desire to draw closer to God, while Christians today visit to show off and gain some material things. Although early Christian monks and nuns prioritised spiritual practices that fostered harmony with their environment, evidence from sacred sites like the Abeisua Mountain suggests that some modern Christians, focused on material concerns, leading to some environmental degradation through practices such as littering. As a result of the changing motivations in the different epochs, the impact of activities and perspectives on the environment are diverse. The early Christians were very conscious about their environment and made meaningful contributions in serving great purposes, but today the activities of some patrons at the Abeisua mountain leave much to be desired. It is almost as if they go there for parties rather than for spiritual activities.

Heaps of waste are generated at these sacred prayer sites, and there are no proper waste management practices. The vendors at the markets generate tonnes of solid and liquid waste, which are not well managed. In addition, the siting of the toilet facility is a great challenge. Because Abeisua is located on top of a mountain, drilling water-closet toilets is difficult and pit latrines are preferable. Because these pit latrines are very difficult to dig, they are often not very deep.

The early Christian monastic groups added value to their environment to the extent that today many of them have become parks and even centres for medicinal benefits. Meanwhile, prayer sites today at Abeisua for instance are faced with environmental degradation challenges. In some parts, refuse is disposed of profusely with no separation or

waste management practices in place. The few waste bins in the area are insufficient and too small to accommodate the waste generated by patrons. There are also a few activities of lumbering at the sites to give room for infrastructural development. Given the number of visitors and the need to provide safe accommodation and other facilities, there are buildings all around the camps with powered generators that disturb the serenity of the mountain and drive wildlife away from their natural habitat. In some cases, some harsh chemicals that are harmful to the vegetation are used to ward off insects and other animals.

Joseph-Maria Mallarach, Josep Corco and Thymio Papayannis argued that despite the resurgence of interest in monasticism and the value of communal spiritual life in nature, it is important to acknowledge the fact that during the 19–20th century, some monastic communities adopted policies regarding the use of fossil fuels and non-renewable materials and chemicals in agriculture and animal husbandry that were not fully compatible with the spiritual principles of the natural and environmental conservation (Mallarach et al. 2014:373).

The rate of the destruction of the various ecosystems at these prayer sites shows a neglect of the Christian theology of stewardship by many patrons at the prayer sites. The idea of stewardship of the environment is not well-appropriated by Christians today (Hermit 2015). They are mostly interested in their personal needs without paying attention to the impact of their actions on their environment. The influence of mass commercial culture on Christian religious institutions, including monastic communities, varies in different contexts. Some monastic communities resist the pressures of life and maintain their traditional practices of land care, as illustrated by Mallarach et al. (2014:9). Their resistance shows their resilience towards environmental stewardship. Instead of a direct comparison, this study highlights how the values of self-restraint and voluntary simplicity as examples from premodern monasticism can be adapted to contemporary pilgrimage prayer sites. The dissimilarity between permanent monastic settlements and temporary pilgrimage gatherings exhibits diverse approaches to sacred space and environmental care. However, their shared religious impetuses and ecological connections make the comparison relevant for assessing the continuum of Christian environmental stewardship towards environmental sustainability for succeeding generations. Tinyiko Maluleke (2019) suggests that African theologies must include environmental concerns because mismanagement of the environment affects human existence. He posits that holistic theology reflects social and environmental injustices, therefore faith communities must actively participate in ecological stewardship as worship and justice.

Towards sound eco-system at prayer sites today

In light of these discussions, the biblical responsibility in Genesis 2:15 that God put man in the Garden of Eden to take care of it as well as Romans 8:19–22 that the whole of creation

awaits in eager expectation for the children of God, the church must go back to the days of the ascetic movements where attention was given to the environment. This is imperative because the need to connect with God cannot be done in a vacuum without the environment, and indeed, humans cannot survive without the environment. Ecotheology, according to Ernst M. Conradie (2011), implies Christian preservation of the environment as given by God. He further calls for a theological reflection that is constructive towards a sustainable future, by adopting practices that promote environmental stewardship. Adopting monastic values of self-restraint and simplicity enhances environmental stewardship for contemporary pilgrimage sites. These principles encourage sustainable practices and a deeper respect for natural resources, aligning with modern ecological goals.

In the first place, efforts must be put into educating Christians in particular and the general public on the need to keep the environment clean, especially on waste management (Golo 2020). It is acknowledged that the problem of environmental degradation in general is about how to manage the waste produced by humans. Because the whole problem is attitudinal, it must be solved through education and admonishments. Management of the environment must be taught in schools and churches; ministers of the gospel must focus on Christian stewardship of the environment (Golo 2020). This is the key to dealing with the problem because it is possible to find patrons dropping garbage close to dustbins. During participant observation, a patron was encouraged to dispose off their waste in a nearby bin. The patron responded that refraining from doing so justified the employment of those paid to keep the site clean. The patron's logic was that if everyone used the bins, those workers would have no job. This was a sad incident and many confirmed that they also had such experiences, including the overseer of the Methodist camp.

The truism is that waste will be generated in human environments regardless; it is, therefore, necessary to prioritise the management of the waste for a better ecosystem (Hermit 2015). Preachers of the gospel must therefore build on ecotheology for a sustained environmental impact. It is trite knowledge that most of the patrons of these prayer sites are from churches and there is a need for them to appreciate their divine mandate in handling the waste that is generated. Ministers of the gospel should bear the responsibility of reaching the targeted audience, that is the patrons with the message of environmental stewardship. The church has a daunting role to play in educating its members on how to manage and properly dispose of waste because it is our responsibility to live in harmony with the earth.

The education of the patrons up the mountain is also very important; managers of the various camps must be actively involved in shaping the attitudes of the people who come to these prayer sites. The patrons who come to these camps should be tutored on waste management techniques and the nurturing of attitudes that will build a better ecosystem

at these prayer sites. Regular announcements must be made during programmes about the need to keep the sites clean. Furthermore, posters and billboards should be used to educate patrons on keeping the place tidy as well as where to keep the refuse they generate. At the Methodist Camp, there is a billboard that seems to capture some rules and regulations of the camp at the entrance, but it is not very visible and the caretaker at the camp noted that it is usually replaced by some of the patrons when it is faded. There can also be pictorial posters on waste management at the site, to educate patrons who may not be able to read or have some disabilities.

Further to these, the desire to develop a sound ecosystem at the prayer site cannot fully see the light of day, if there is no strong collaboration between the managers and stakeholders of these sites. In Ghana, lands are vested in the hands of chiefs and indeed these prayer sites are partly controlled by them. Again, given the capacity of the area, they are included in the mandate of the Forestry Commission which is a Government Agency. It is therefore essential that all parties collaborate to establish protocols, structures and facilities that seek to keep the site ecologically safe in all respects.

There is a need for several measures to be put in place to curb this indiscriminate littering and destruction of the environment. These include the provision of properly labelled dustbins to encourage recycling, intensification of security checks, installation of more billboards and informational posters, and implementation of sensitisation activities for patrons. The number of dustbins must be increased, and bigger dustbins must be put in place. Also, the number of toilet facilities must be augmented to cater to the growing demands of the patrons who visit daily. The provision of infrastructure cannot be borne by individual camp management. To completely address the situation, a uniform structure across all camps should be encouraged. Concerted and collaborative efforts by all stakeholders involved including the camp managers, chiefs and government will help keep the prayer sites clean and eco-friendly for the present generation and posterity as exemplified by the early church. There is no doubt that once these are put in place, cleanliness at the sacred sites will be improved giving room for the prayers to reach God. Premodern monastic communities demonstrated a conscious care for their surroundings, which led to sustainable interactions and, in some cases, exploitation through domestication. A holistic approach to spirituality demonstrates the interconnectedness of mind, body, spirit and the environment, seeing each other as essential to deepening faith and well-being. Rather than focusing solely on personal rituals or abstract beliefs, this approach encourages spiritual growth through inner contemplation and active engagement with the world. For instance, practices such as meditation, prayer and physical well-being are noted as complementary to the stewardship of the natural world, enhancing harmony between self and surroundings. This perspective aligns with Christian environmental stewardship, where the care of God's creation is both a spiritual act and a means of engaging in compassion

and gratitude. By this, spirituality becomes a lived experience, integrating sacred connection with both creation and community, growing faith that is contemplative, active and fully engaged with the world.

Conclusion

The early Christian monastic communities had a unique relationship with the environment as characterised by sustainable practices. This relationship differs significantly from what contemporary Christians, particularly in the context of resisting the pressures of mass commercial culture are engaged in.

Although the church today is interested in spending time to pray at such sacred places because they believe they get results on what they need, on visits to sacred sites, it is clear that there is no attention being paid to the environment as their activities lead to environmental degradation.

In light of these issues, there are concerns about maintaining the environment well which should not just be an option but a matter of urgency. This indeed is crucial because the sustenance of the environment is the sustenance of humankind, as is exemplified by the saying 'when the last tree dies, the last man dies' which implies that taking care of the environment is taking care of humankind. The principles of self-restraint and voluntary simplicity from premodern early Christian monasticism offer significant insights into contemporary environmental stewardship. In embracing a holistic approach to spirituality, one moves towards a faith that harmonises mind, body and environment, in fostering inner peace and a compassionate relationship with society. This harmony aligns with the Christian call to environmental stewardship, appreciating environmental stewardship as an expression of responsibility to God and humankind.

As most of the problem of environmental degradation is attitudinal, education must be intensified. Preachers must stress eco-friendly theology which identifies with responsible management of the earth. Furthermore, collaboration between managers and stakeholders is essential for the sustenance of the mother earth. Essentially, two important areas merit future exploration. Firstly, to assess the potential risk of excessive environmental purism, where spiritual practice may become overly focused on environmental ideals at the expense of broader spiritual values. Secondly, the challenge of keeping the balance of cleansing and renewal with other core spiritual values, such as compassion, community and humility. Addressing these complexities will foster the understanding and application of a balanced, integrated spirituality. Future research should therefore explore practical applications of these values to further strengthen ecological practices at prayer sites as a missionary agenda.

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The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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