

# Pentecostal Eco-Mission Maturing

## Tensions Between Economic Benefits and Promotion of Environmental Stewardship in the Illegal Mining Sector in Ghana<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Ecological mission is gradually becoming an integral part of the mainstream mission of Pentecostal churches in Ghana. One area that has caught the attention of Pentecostal eco-missionaries in Ghana is the illegal artisanal mining sector, known in the local parlance as *galamsey*. Illegal artisanal mining activities have led to the destruction of hectares of forests, rendered arable lands unproductive, and pushed many farmers out of employment. While government agencies and civil organisations try to fight it, the church also seeks appropriate biblical responses and missional strategies. This article presents findings from empirical research conducted among leaders and members of Pentecostal churches as well as individuals engaged in illegal mining activities in Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipality in Ghana. The article highlights the complex relationship between the church and illegal artisanal mining activities. It posits that the church faces a dilemma in its ecological mission due to the benefits it receives from the illegal artisanal mining sector. The situation raises important questions about the church's role in promoting environmental stewardship and ethical practices in these communities.

**Keywords:** eco-missionaries; ecological mission; environmental stewardship; illegal artisanal mining; tensions

## 1. Introduction

In light of the current ecological crisis, Pentecostal scholars have begun investigating the relationship between theology and ecology. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2018:38) earlier argues that “as holistic and comprehensive as the Pentecostal template of mission is, there are some aspects – widely embraced in ecumenical mission nowadays – that are

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either missing or marginalised at the grassroots level of typical Pentecostal mission work and consciousness. They have to do with structural sin and care for the environment.” Though Pentecostals’ understanding of the imminent return of Christ has been a source of motivation for them in carrying out the Great Commission, it also created these blind spots in their missions. However, in the last few years, some emerging scholars within the Pentecostal-Charismatic circles have analysed the compatibility between mission and ecology. These scholars maintain that there is a need to integrate eco-mission into the mainstream mission of the church (Swoboda, 2021; Awudi, 2023:78). For Davis (2021:12), the empowerment of the Spirit is not only for church and piety or the winning of souls, but also empowerment for the ecological mission.

While ecological mission has caught the eyes of many environmental ethicists and missionaries in Ghana, the dilemma of the church not only includes fighting political powers and traditional authorities, but also how it can promote environmental stewardship while it keeps receiving financial benefits from the illegal mining sector. Therefore, this article investigates some critical issues, including possible conflicts of interest in the church’s ecological mission among illegal artisanal miners in Ghana. The article argues that although there is a growing realisation of the relationship between ecology and mission and the integration of eco-missiology in the theology of the church, the benefits the church receives through the activities of illegal miners make it challenging to promote environmental stewardship in the sector.

The article employed the qualitative sampling method and data collection processes. This involved the use of purposive and convenience sampling methods to sample 10 illegal mining sites in the Tarkwa-Nsuaem enclave and 15 illegal artisanal miners, respectively. Purposive sampling was used to sample five clergymen and five lay church leaders. A survey was carried out to investigate the religious affiliations of the miners, while an interview guide was used to collect data from the 15 illegal miners and the 10 church leaders. The interviews were conducted in Twi (a Ghanaian language dialect) and transcribed into English. The data were coded, and pseudonyms were given to the interviewees, namely CL for church leaders, IM for the illegal miners, and Clergy for the pastors. The data were analysed using a thematic approach, which helped identify recurring themes in the responses of the interviewees.

## **2. Artisanal illegal mining sector as eco-mission field**

Until recently, the Ghanaian Pentecostal mission has been one-dimensional, focusing on saving souls. However, as mentioned earlier, the Ghanaian fraternity has a growing realisation that saving ‘soils’ is as important as saving souls. Thus, they are beginning to adopt the five marks of a holistic mission, which, according to Carthy Ross (2008:xiv), includes “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” For instance, as part of its vision to transform nations (Visions, 2023, 2028),

the Church of Pentecost (CoP), the largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana (Wiafe, 2023:120), has since 2018 launched the environmental campaign, which includes its annual clean-up, and tree-planting exercises (Anim & Awudi, 2022). The other major classical Pentecostal churches have also contributed their quota to the Green Ghana project since its inception in 2021, with the Apostolic Church-Ghana alone planting 90,000 seedlings on 7 June 2024 to mark the 2024 Green Ghana Day (TAC 224).

As the Ghanaian Pentecostal ecological mission gains momentum, it is increasingly focusing on the illegal artisanal mining sector as a key area of concern because it has become one of the major contributors to ecological depredation in the country. Indigenous Ghanaians have practised artisanal mining since the 18th century, but it has evolved over the years. The indigenous people 'gathered and sold' gold dust to the colonial merchants, which gave the trade its local name, 'gather and sell' now corrupted as *galamsey*. Unlike the licensed firms regulated and supervised by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Minerals Commission of Ghana (MCG), the illegal mining firms operate without oversight, using unapproved chemicals in their gold extraction processes. With the introduction of sophisticated equipment, the activities of illegal artisanal miners in the country have led to significant deforestation and pollution of rivers and aquifers. Sediments deposited into the soils and water bodies during the extraction of the minerals contain toxins such as mercury, arsenic, and lead, posing threats to aquatic and terrestrial lives. A report released by the CSIR-Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (2017:3) links these toxins to skin disorders, cancers, and other health problems in individuals who live close to the mining sites. Recent data from the Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital reveals a correlation between illegal mining activities and babies born with deformities in Ghana (Domfeh, 2023). The data shows that the majority of babies being born with deformities in recent times were from illegal artisanal mining areas. Aside from the effect on flora and fauna, the illegal mining communities have become safe havens for armed robbers, commercial sex workers, and drug addicts (Domfeh, 2023). Thus, the activities of illegal miners not only threaten human survival, but also the entire ecosystem and the achievement of some key indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Several organisations in the country have taken steps to fight the menace, but not much has been achieved. The situation persists and continues to surge not because of weak state institutions, but because it serves the interests of a wide range of actors, primarily politicians, law enforcers, chiefs, and opinion leaders. The government of Ghana tried to regulate it with the introduction of the Small Scale Mining Law, the PNDC LI 218, in 1989. This empowered the MCG as the only authorised body to purchase gold in the country, making it easy to apprehend the illegal miners. Several other interventions were later introduced, including Operation Flush Out in 2006, Operation Vanguard in 2017, and Operation Galamstop in 2019 (Yeboah, 2022).

One major setback of the interventions is the involvement of some of the members of the various committees and taskforces, government officials, and traditional leaders in the illegal mining activities. Some security personnel from government task forces were found providing paid security services to illegal mining sites owned by government officials, chiefs, and other influential persons in the communities. In 2022, some news outlets in Ghana reported that some confiscated mining equipment went missing (Nartey, 2022)—they were either stolen or illegally sold to other companies. These setbacks made the various interventions to curb or regularise illegal artisanal mining unsuccessful.

The church, realising the devastating effects of the trade on fauna and flora, the threats it poses to the survival of both current and future generations, and the vices associated with the illegal mining activities, not only tries to use the pulpit to influence the pew to desist from the menace, but sees it as a mission field. In other words, the church not only targets the souls of the miners, but also the redemption of the earth and its inhabitants. This has been the cry of emerging Pentecostal ecological missionaries like Amos Yong, Aaron Jason Swoboda, and Shane Clifton, who have all drawn attention to the connection between Pentecostal Pneumatology and earth-transforming mission (Swoboda, 2011; Clifton, 2016). They argue that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), is not only about ‘winning souls and preparing them for heaven, but also the transformation of societies and the salvation of the ailing earth. They believe Christ’s ministry to the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised, and those on the periphery (Lk. 4:18, 19) serves as a basis for ecological missiology. They contend that the oppressed in modern societies include flora and fauna, with which the modern church must groan (McFague, 2000; Awudi, 2023).

Similarly, the Pentecostal missiologist, Amos Yong (2005), lists “Cosmic salvation: Redemption of all creation and interconnectedness of human beings and the environment,” among his seven interrelated tiers of a holistic Pentecostal-Charismatic mission. Due to this realisation, some Pentecostal churches in Ghana have included clean-up campaigns on their annual calendar of activities, while others are involved in tree-planting exercises and the reclamation of degraded lands, as mentioned earlier. However, the church is caught in a difficult position, balancing the financial gains of the trade against its missional duty to protect the environment and promote ecological sustainability.

### **3. Tensions between economic benefits and promotion of ecological stewardship**

Aside from efforts by individual Pentecostal churches to restore the ecological balance, the leadership of the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC), on 14 October 2022, visited some illegal mining sites in the Eastern Region to obtain

firsthand information about the devastating effect of illegal mining activities in the area. The group leader, Paul Frimpong-Manso, revealed that the GPCC will now take its mission to the illegal artisanal mining sector,

We are leading the fight; the fight is in four phases. First, accepting our challenges and weaknesses, pledging that we won't be part of it, telling the people that it is wrong [to engage in *galamsey*]. The church is also telling the people in authority that they should do the right thing. Finally, [we are] coming out to protest in our numbers to tell the world that *galamsey* is destroying our river bodies (MyJoyOnline.com, 2022).

Frimpong-Manso bemoaned the destructive nature of *galamsey* in the areas they visited and posited that "it is sinful to engage in *galamsey*" (MyJoyOnline.com, 2022). For him, the church can no longer sit on the fence and allow the destruction of the ecosystem to continue. Despite the progress made by the Pentecostal churches in Ghana, this article highlights critical issues that require urgent attention for the church to fulfil its mission and effectively impact the illegal mining sector.

There is a perceived conflict of interest on the part of the church as it keeps receiving financial benefits from the illegal mining business. As mentioned earlier, the direct and indirect benefits the church receives from the illegal artisanal mining sector make it difficult for them to promote ethical environmental behaviours in the mining communities. Recently, the church has been accused as one of the major beneficiaries of proceeds from illegal artisanal mining businesses in the country. Essuman, for instance, bemoaned in 2023 that "There is enough proof that the church, especially those in the heart of the *galamsey* business, depended on the wealth of the operators to survive. It is the church members who engage in the business who are able to contribute meaningfully to support church projects" (Obatampa Radio, 2023). He believes many churches in such enclaves would fold up if the Ghanaian government wins the fight against illegal artisanal mining. The fears of three of the pastors interviewed collaborate with this assertion as one of them stated, "For me, I will never use my platform to speak against *galamsey* to destroy or collapse my church. The main message of the church is salvation, baptising and teaching unbelievers" (Clergy 5). The reservation of these clergymen is genuine, as the data shows that 12 of the 15 illegal miners interviewed belong to the Christian faith. The data reveals that a majority of the church's financial strength comes from persons involved in illegal mining in the area. While Clergy 1 mentioned that 120 of the 250 members in his church are involved in illegal mining, the three other clergymen were of the view that their churches' financial muscle is from the illegal mining business, so they could not speak against it. One of the illegal miners corroborated this when he stated,

When you go to these rural communities around Tarkwa, it is *galamsey* that keeps the church so no pastor can preach against *galamsey*. A lot of the church buildings are raised with *galamsey* money. The cocoa farmers only come in to help during cocoa season but a chunk of the church's financial support are from us the *galamsey* people (IM2).

Apart from the support the respective churches receive from the illegal miners, all the five clergymen interviewed revealed that they received personal support ranging from money, buildings, cars, and monthly stipends from their church members who are illegal artisanal miners. IM2, who owns an illegal mining site, revealed that about 20 pastors of his church have been on his payroll from 2010 to 2016. He stated, "Depending on the relationship I have with the pastors, I give them monthly allowance of GH¢ 1,500 to GH¢ 3,000." This situation presents difficulties for these pastors in using their pulpits to address the issues associated with the business. Clergy 5 asserted that some churches in the Tarkwa-Nsuaem enclave own illegal mining sites.

It is also interesting to note that some of the illegal artisanal miners are leaders in some of the churches. IM7 argued that his contributions and support to the church influenced leadership to appoint him as a lay leader in his church. Similarly, IM4 explained that he was relieved of his position in the church as a Fundraising Committee Chairman when his *galamsey* business dwindled. Apart from regular church attendees who contribute to everyday fundraising in the church, special invitations are sent to some *galamseyers* during fundraising activities in the church. IM9 stated, "I provide various supports to my church, including donations during fundraising. I also purchased instruments for my church and donated money and building materials to support church projects." Similarly, IM5 asserted, "Anytime my church is having a fundraising, they invite me to be the chairman for the occasion." He added that whenever he absented himself from church to visit his mining site, "My presiding elder calls me to send my offering from the *galamsey* site." Other respondents also attested to the fact that their pastors and church leaders asked them to send their tithes from the *galamsey* sites.

Thus, all interviewees mentioned that they supported their churches in various ways, including supporting church projects, purchasing instruments, and donating building materials. Some of the illegal miners stated that they singlehandedly constructed church buildings for their churches. This factor is one reason the church finds it difficult to use the pulpit to preach about the effect of illegal artisanal mining and how to curb it. In some instances, some church leaders pray for God's protection for their church members who are illegal miners. Thus, despite the impact on the ecosystem, the church's effort to influence the illegal mining sector has not yielded the desired impact.

Ernst Conradie attributes this to three major factors: ideology, idolatry, and heresy (Conradie, n.d.:121). He argues that one ideology that might have influenced some Christians into mining gold illegally, regardless of the impact on the ecosystem, is the culture of consumerism. He states, “One may say that the lure of gold, flaunting wealth, epitomises consumerist dreams and aspirations even though this remains out of the reach of many but royalty and the elite.” In several communities where illegal mining is prevalent, young men and women live affluent lifestyles – drive flashy vehicles and live in mansions. Similarly, David Ackah (2019:22) also maintains that one major motivation for illegal miners is the desire to get rich overnight. He writes, “It is always the ambition of most young men and women to get rich quickly in order to obtain whatever is fashionable. Such people would want to dress gorgeously, own mansions, ride the latest cars, have access to modern sets of furniture, and become millionaires at a point.” Thus, these young guys are ready to risk their lives and the future of the next generations to mine gold.

On the issue of idolatry, Conradie believes that the exploiters of the land rather put their trust in their wealth instead of having faith in God, who is able to provide for them through alternative livelihoods. On heresy, he posits that some individuals distort the gospel for their personal gains, which results in the exclusion of others. He believes such heresies may be prevalent among churches that preach the ‘prosperity gospel.’ Pentecostal scholars like Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo and Emmanuel Anim separately argue that the doctrines of Pentecostals, in general, do not motivate them to care for the other-than-human creation due to the anthropocentric hermeneutical principles embedded in them (Golo, 2014; Anim, 2019). Anim’s position in relation to the Pentecostal’s prosperity gospel is that the prosperity gospel “. . . without responsible ‘stewardship’ brings unintended, destructive consequences on the ecosystem” (Anim, 2019:113). Anim faults Pentecostals on the anthropocentric explanation of the ‘dominion’ mandate in Genesis 1:27-28 as he posits that,

My thesis is that many African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians have bought into the dominion theology or the prosperity Gospel, which presents the most anthropocentric approach to religion and faith and thereby changed their attitudes to what was considered ‘sacred’ (Anim, 2019:108).

The distortion of the gospel of prosperity—to make wealth at all costs, regardless of the impact on the ecosystem—leads many people into doing illegal businesses, including illegal artisanal mining, to create wealth (Awudi, 2023:85-86). Thus, the prosperity gospel has become one major motivation factor for some Christians to indulge in illegal activities. While this article agrees with Conradie on the impact of

ideology, idolatry, and heresy, it also discovered inequality as a major contributor to illegal mining activities in the research area.

#### **4. Addressing inequalities in the mining sector**

The Tarkwa-Nsuaem community has a high level of unemployment among its indigenous population, while a significant number of workers in legal mining companies are either non-locals or expatriates rather than local residents. The youth in the area believe they are entitled to work in the legal mining sector and that these opportunities belong to them rather than the non-locals. However, they have resolved to mine illegally because they have been denied employment. IM5, for instance, expressed his frustration, "I was born and raised up in this community. The land on which these companies are mining belongs to us. I have written several applications to these companies, but they turned me down." The 14 other interviewees all expressed similar sentiments. They argued that their lands had been sold by the chiefs to either the government or to the highest bidders who have also employed foreign nationals or nonnatives of Tarkwa-Nsuaem, but the indigenous people are unemployed. IM9, who served as a liaison between illegal miners in the area and government officials, argued that "Bonsa mining site was sold to a sister of one president, and now it has been sold to the son-in-law of a certain vice president." He added that the significant inequality in the system drives the youth in communities to engage in illegal gold mining. One area where the church can collaborate with the government in its eco-mission efforts is by addressing inequalities in the legal mining industries.

This article proposes that the church in Ghana needs to lead the way and liaise between the government, communities, and mining firms in order to give the youth in such communities the skills they need to work in the sector. The church can collaborate with the legal mining firms to institute scholarship schemes for the natives of these communities to enable them to acquire employable skills in the mining sector. This would address the inequality gaps and discourage illegal miners from engaging in the illegal mining business. Governments must provide ready markets for those who quit the *galamsey* mining and join the alternative livelihoods. Another way to reduce the inequality gaps in the mining communities is to provide alternative livelihoods for illegal artisanal mining. To do this, the church must engage traditional authorities in the municipality. The church can collaborate with other organisations and, with support from the central government, provide alternative livelihoods to those willing to quit the *galamsey* business. In addition, the church needs to formulate strong biblical theology on creation care and biodiversity conservation, as discussed in the next section.



## 5. Building a strong biblical foundation for eco-mission

As highlighted in the introduction, some Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana have expressed worry about the ecocides that result from the activities of illegal artisanal miners. Though the churches have made some efforts to promote ecological stewardship, their sustainability is at stake without a strong biblical foundation for eco-mission. This article posits that pursuing the ecological mission without a biblical framework is unpardonable. It also contends that the lack of a strong biblical foundation for ecological mission within the Pentecostal-Charismatic fraternity will likely hinder the progress of their eco-care and eco-mission agenda.

Awudi (2019:80) argues that “Inadequate understanding of how Scripture speaks to eco-care and eco-mission is likely to result in the acquisition of worldviews that do not motivate creation care and mission.” In other words, the lack of a biblical ecological framework makes it difficult for most people in the Pentecostal-Charismatic fraternity to appreciate eco-care and eco-mission as integral aspects of the mainstream mission. This was evident in the responses of both church leaders and the clergymen interviewed. Three out of the five church leaders and two of the clergymen interviewed were of the view that it is not the church’s mandate to promote ethical environmental stewardship in the enclave. For example, Clergy 3 explained his unwillingness to use his pulpit to speak against the illegal mining business,

[Fighting] *galamsey* is not the church’s mandate. Our public leaders have involved themselves in the trade so I don’t see the need to preach against it. We have our mandate to win souls. If the church is cutting logs to roof our buildings, the government sends people to arrest us. If they have power to arrest us, then they should have power to stop *galamsey* (Clergy 3).

He explained that the mandate of the church in the locality does not include the promotion of environmental stewardship. His view is that since the agencies mandated to lead the fight against illegal mining have rather become accomplices, members of his church must also be allowed to enjoy part of the proceeds. For him, the church has no business preaching against *galamsey*. This understanding not only points to his unwillingness to address the issues of ecocides, but also a lack of understanding of how scripture speaks to eco-care and eco-mission. All five clergymen and the five lay leaders interviewed revealed that they had never preached against illegal artisanal mining in their churches. They explained that though they were well aware that some of their members are engaged in illegal mining and its impact on the ecosystem, they could not preach against it. Understanding these church leaders and pastors shows that some Christian leaders are yet to appreciate that the Great Commission includes eco-mission. This challenge is mainly due to the anthropocentric Christology that Pentecostals preach.

Traditionally, Pentecostals have preached a Christology known as the 'Full Gospel' – Christ the Saviour, Healer, Sanctifier, Baptizer of the Holy Spirit, and the Soon-Coming King (Land, 2010:7). However, not only does this Christology lack ecological ethos, but also the various elements are anthropocentrically expounded. To Clifton, in the light of increasing global ecological crises, failure to include ecological ethos in Pentecostal theology shows that Pentecostals do not preach a "Full Gospel" as they claim. Put differently, the exclusion of ecological framework in the 'Full Gospel' renders it a 'Half-Gospel' (Awudi, 2023).

There is a need for a reimagining of the 'Full Gospel' to respond to the ecological crisis. To reframe the 'Full Gospel' and make it eco-friendly, Clifton suggests that Pentecostals are responsible for developing a Pneumatological Theology of Creation (Clifton, 2009:122). Thus, the interpretation of the creation story begins with the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters (Gen. 1:2). For him, the Spirit's empowering role should not be limited to tongues speaking, evangelism, and healing alone, but be extended to vivification, redemption, and healing of the ailing universe.

To make the 'Full Gospel' ecological, Awudi (2023) proposes the introduction of a sixth component, Christ the Creator, which has enough scriptural support, as explained in the previous paragraphs. Thus, instead of the Full Gospel being pentagonal, this article proposes a Hexagonal Gospel as the new paradigm for the 'Full Gospel' as Jesus the Creator, Saviour, Healer, Baptizer of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, and the Soon-Coming King. However, since the baptism and indwelling of the Holy Spirit leads to the sanctification of the believer (Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:13), the Sanctifier element can be collapsed into Christ the Baptizer of the Holy Spirit for the alternative paradigm to become Jesus the Creator, Saviour, Healer, Baptizer of the Holy Spirit, and the Soon-Coming King. Lastly, the trajectories identified in the explanations of the selected doctrines also apply to the new components of the 'Full Gospel.' It is, therefore, incumbent on the church to intentionally develop manuals to educate its members. The Great Commission involves the turning of cultures, systems, and worldviews, and the transformation of all that make a group of people (Walls, 2017:28).

These discoveries place a burden on the ecumenical body to develop study guides to assist church leaders in understanding the biblical position on creation care. In other words, the church in Ghana needs to develop guides that teach the biblical mandate of every believer.

## 6. Conclusion

Considering the devastation illegal artisanal mining is causing and its contributions to the depletion of forest cover, the church in Ghana cannot help but fight it with all urgency through the promotion of eco-friendly practices in mining areas. This is

because the future and the survival of the human species are tied to the flourishing of other creations. This article argues that the ecological mission must become an integral aspect of the Pentecostal-Charismatic mission. While eco-mission includes the winning of the souls of those engaged in destroying the ecosystem, it also needs to focus on saving the land's inhabitants. The paper discussed the dilemma of the church in Ghana and how the benefits they receive from the illegal trade make it difficult to effectively do mission within the illegal mining sector. It also proposed that the church in Ghana address the issues of conflict of interest and find strong biblical foundations that would serve as the impetus for creation care in the Pentecostal circles.

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