

Hyatt, James M. (1869– ?)

DEWITT S. WILLIAMS

DeWitt S. Williams, Ed.D. (Indiana University) lives in Maryland after 46 years of denominational service. He pastored in Oklahoma, served as a missionary in the Congo (Departmental and Field President), and Burundi/Rwanda (President, Central African Union). He served 12 years in the General Conference as Associate Director in both the Communications and Health and Temperance Departments. His last service was Director of NAD Health Ministries (1990-2010). He authored nine books and numerous articles.

Dr. James M. Hyatt was the first Adventist missionary to work in Sierra Leone and the church's first black missionary to enter both the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and Nigeria.

He was born in 1869 in Kentucky to Milton and Maggie Hyatt. Hyatt married Marian E. Williams (b. 1867) on December 21, 1892 in Battle Creek, Michigan. James Hyatt was a dentist and earlier records indicate he was a tinner. Marian was a seamstress and dress maker. It does not appear that they had any children.¹

The Foreign Mission Board voted on December 16, 1902 to send Hyatt and Dudley U. Hale to the Gold Coast, West Africa.² The Hyatts, located in Minneapolis, Minnesota when the call came, left early in 1903 for New York, where they spend some time at the Bible Training School headed by Stephen N. and Hetty Haskell. From there they sailed to Liverpool, England, where they connected with the Hales before the final leg of their journey to West Africa.³

Gold Coast, West Africa

James Hyatt wrote more than a dozen letters from Africa that were published in the *Review* and *Signs of the Times*. In one of the earliest letters he described sighting the coast of Africa for the first time. After going ashore for a brief stop at Freetown, Sierra Leone, Hyatt observed "that all the natives are not illiterate, as has been said, but some are well educated. All government offices are filled by natives, except that of the governor-general."⁴ The journey continued another four days before their arrival on March 10, 1903 in the Gold Coast, a British colony that became part of the independent nation of Ghana in 1957.

Later that year Hyatt reported that the work in Cape Coast Castle, site of the Adventist mission station, was "moving along quite well" and that they were being "greatly blessed," though he felt overwhelmed as the only teacher in the school the missionaries were operating. At the most recent of their Sunday street meetings, the "congregation blocked the street off entirely." The meetings held in a hall on Tuesday and Thursday evenings were also well-attended. He also did dental work when time permitted and was "able to help many" in this way.⁵ Soon after his arrival in Africa, the 1903 General Conference voted ministerial credentials for Hyatt, renewed in 1905.⁶

Hyatt was pleasantly surprised by the availability of some things he did not expect to find in Africa. He needed, for example, a portable organ for the public meetings and discovered to his delight that his neighbor had one. Apparently Hyatt was a good musician. He discovered that the people of the Gold Coast really enjoyed music and that it helped get them to the street meetings.⁷

Hyatt and Hale were reviving a work that began 1888 when the captain of a ship anchored in the harbor of Apam agreed to distribute literature from the International Tract Society in the Gold Coast. A roll of tracts fell into the hands of F. I. U. Dolphijn, a native Ghanaian who read the literature and began to observe the Sabbath. Missionaries, including Elder Hale, arrived in 1894 and 1895 but they encountered the climate that caused the Gold Coast to be called the “white man’s grave.” All of the missionaries had to leave after a short while because of malaria and black water fever. When they left, Dolphijn and a neighbor who had converted through his witness, G. P. Grant, took charge of the work. Hale returned briefly in 1897, but after illness again caused his departure there were no Adventist missionaries in the Gold Coast until 1903.⁸

Less than a year after arriving for the third time, Hale suffered his third attack of black water fever and was not expected to live. He finally rallied but after the doctor warned that to remain would be nothing less than suicide, Hale and family reluctantly left the field.⁹ The Hyatts, now the only missionaries in the Gold Coast, remained healthy and continued to oversee the work.

In subsequent letters Dr. Hyatt told how the nationals loved anything American and were anxious to read the literature that he distributed free, or on occasions, sold to the people. Many people had become convinced of the Sabbath but few were taking a stand for it.¹⁰ Nonetheless, some who were drawn to Adventism through Hyatt’s work helped to establish the Adventist church in Ghana. Among the most prominent was Christian A. Ackah who organized churches at Kikam and Axim in 1909.¹¹

Sierra Leone and Nigeria

In 1905, the Hyatts moved to Freetown where they became the first Adventists to conduct mission work in Sierra Leone. “I am holding a very interesting Bible reading on Thursday evening, at one of the houses, and prayer-meeting on Wednesday evening at my home,” Hyatt reported, adding that some local ministers were among those whose interest had been aroused.¹² Also, the cooler weather was a needed break from the Gold Coast climate. They were soon joined by Elder and Mrs. D. C. Babcock and the work in Sierra Leone began to blossom. Together they opened a day school.

In April 1906 the Hyatts went to Lagos, Nigeria – again pioneers as the first black Adventists missionaries in that land. Hyatt had initially hoped that Nigeria would be his field of labor for an extended period of time, but instead returned to the United States in 1907. Marian Hyatt seems to have remained in Monrovia, Liberia.¹³

The 1906 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* was the last in which Dr. Hyatt was listed. During the summer of 1912, he canvassed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. When he spoke at a young people's convention on July 27 at the First African (later Ebenezer) church, pastored by his friend Thomas H. Branch, Hyatt was identified as a missionary to West Africa.¹⁴ Thereafter Hyatt's name disappears from denominational sources. Nor has anything that would shed light on what became of him has been located in accessible public records.

Contribution

Dr. Hyatt's contribution, however, was not forgotten. Decades later, as Adventism in West Africa grew exponentially, historical accounts acknowledged that the "Adventist work in Sierra Leone was started by J. M. Hyatt, a black American,"¹⁵ and that he was "the first Black American SDA missionary to Ghana."¹⁶

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NOTES

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2. Foreign Mission Board Minutes, December 16, 1902, 84, General Conference Archives, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/FMBM/FMBM19010424.pdf>.
3. "Brother D. U. Hale and his family . . .," *ARH*, February 3, 1903, 16; J. M. Hyatt, "West Coast, Africa," *ARH*, June 2, 1903, 17.
4. Hyatt, "West Coast, Africa."
5. J. M. Hyatt, "West Africa," *ARH*, August 11, 1903, 19.
6. "General Conference Proceedings," *ARH*, May 5, 1903, 15; "The General Conference, Thirty-Sixth Session May 11-30," *ARH*, June 8, 1905, 21.
7. Hyatt, "West Africa."
8. "G.C. President's Tour Marks Centennial in Ghana," *ARH*, November 24, 1988, 28-29; C.B. Mensah, "History of the Adventist Mission in Ghana," *West African Advent Messenger*, November 1959, 3.
9. Mensah, "History of the Adventist Mission in Ghana."
10. "Writing from the Gold Coast, West Africa . . .," *Signs of the Times*, January 20, 1904, 13.
11. "G.C. President's Tour," 29.
12. J. M. Hyatt, "West Africa," *ARH*, August 31, 1905, 13.
13. Williams, *Precious Memories*, Vol. 2, 43.
14. "Dr. J. M. Hyatt . . .," *Columbia Union Visitor*, July 24, 1912, 8; Mrs. H. P. Branch, "Philadelphia, Pa.," *Gospel Herald*, September 1912, 72.
15. Lindsay Thomas, "Lay People Receive Instruction in Soul Winning," *ARH*, December 22, 1983, 17. See also R. R. Frame, "The Church Today in West Africa," *ARH*, January 18, 1968, 16.
16. "G.C. President's Tour," 29.

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