

Ghana's Christian leaders join GMO debate, with some vouching for the technology's goodness

Christian leaders in Ghana have joined the debate on whether the country should adopt genetically modified (GM) crops, with some vouching for the goodness of the technology. The religious leaders are convinced the technology has God's approval to help humanity deal with challenges of food insufficiency. They are weighing in as scientists in Ghana have [completed field trials](#) that will allow for the commercialization of the country's first GMO crop, Bt cowpea, which can help reduce pest attacks on fields. "It's part of human beings to want to create things and want to find lasting solutions to problems that confront human beings. So, when you look at the technology of GMO itself, I don't think it's bad. Once what we are doing doesn't not end up jeopardizing the health of human beings, then there is nothing wrong with it," Pastor Festus Agyei Sarfo, founder of the Cross Passion Koinonia Church in Accra, told the Alliance for Science in an interview. Gaston Kofi Hunkpe, a catechist with the Catholic Church, agrees. "GMOs can help us deal with agricultural challenges, including the problems with food insufficiency," he said. "So it's a good thing we should adopt and implement and it will go a long way to help us... Countries using it testify that it is a good technology and so it should go across the whole world."

Ghana is a deeply religious country, with more than 70 percent of the population identifying as Christians. Churches have been established across the country and run thousands of schools, hospitals and development organizations, making Christian leaders highly influential figures. They usually lead peace and mediation efforts when conflicts break out in communities and differences arise among political actors. Christian leaders have not shied away from publicly stating their positions on key national issues either as a collective or individually, and government usually listens to them when they speak.

Sarfo dismissed claims that manipulating the genes of living things amounts to scientists playing God, and that the result of such research is thus ungodly. "We all know GMOs involve the movement of DNA. In my opinion, it is not bad. As a religious person, I believe creation is part of God's attributes. And so when we as human beings begin to exercise our creative abilities, it shouldn't be darkened with the notion that some scientists are trying to play God," Sarfo explained. "Once it won't affect the health of human beings, then we are free to explore as far as our intelligence can take us."

Sarfo said Ghanaians should not fear new technologies. "Human beings will still be walking from Ghana to Nigeria if we didn't have the wisdom to fly. Off course, flying comes with its own risks but it has improved our existence as human beings," he said. "So we are looking at, let's say, crop yield. If with GMOs, the yield goes up, and it won't affect the environment, land and human beings who consume it, and we are able to certify truthfully with honesty within our hearts that it's safe, then we have passed the test," Sarfo noted.

Rev. Charles Agyin Asare, presiding Bishop of the Perez Chapel International, which has more than 400 branches, criticized ongoing plans to commercialize GMOs into the country. "Genetically modified food is not what we want. What we want is the natural one that God gave us," he [told his congregation](#) in a 2016 sermon.

But Sarfo said GMOs can play a huge role in Ghana's agricultural sector and should be embraced. "Once what we are doing with the GMO technology can improve our basic lifestyles, can improve yield, can solve unemployment problems, can give us more nutritious seeds, seeds that can resist pest attacks, and our human existence is amplified and strengthened and made more effective, that is God's will for mankind," he explained.

The young church leader has a strong belief in science and the ability of Ghanaian scientists to ensure the country gets the best out of GMOs. "We need to look at it properly and regulate it. And that is what science does. It studies the trend for a long time. It puts information and data together. It arrives at a conclusion based on several tests and evidences put together. And then we conclude and say that this wholistic research on the GMO technology is safe for human consumption. If we are able to open our minds and we can truthfully do that, then we don't have a problem introducing GMOs," Sarfo concluded.

Hunkpe also wants Africa to open up to the technology. "Scientific advancement is a God-given gift that we human beings must explore. And whilst exploring it, we tend to discover things that will help us as humans. So I don't see it as in conflict at all with God," he said.

A few years ago, the leadership of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Bishops Conference Ghana, issued a press statement urging caution over the country's plans to introduce GMOs. The statement, signed by the group's president, Most Rev. Joseph Osei-Bonsu, said: "We believe that Ghana can achieve food sufficiency and even produce surplus food for export using the conventional means of farming."

Hunkpe, however, is not at all convinced Ghana's agricultural sector will thrive without GMOs. "This has come up at our Catholic bishop conference and their stance against the technology is a blow to our fight to improve food sufficiency. But I think with education they will come to accept the fact that GMO is not in conflict with God's plans for the earth... It is rather God who has given us this type of technique to use," he said.

He noted that churches have always backed the idea of using technology, including biotechnology, for the good of mankind. "Catholic as an institution, for instance, has so many hospitals across the world. Is it not the same technology they are employing? Biotechnology is being employed in terms of vaccinations. In fact, they are encouraging people to take vaccinations. They are all aspects of the application of biotech that we have. So why don't we employ the same technology across agricultural lines? It doesn't conflict with the beliefs of God in any way," he said.

"The public should embrace it so that we could all fight poverty. So we can tap into the various advantages that it comes with, like fighting drought. It is God who gave us the idea to do more research into problems for solutions. It is God-given. Advancing such technology won't amount to a sin...." Hunkpe added.

Joseph Opoku Gakpo is a broadcast and online journalist with the Multimedia Group Limited in Ghana. Follow him on Twitter [@josephopoku1990](https://twitter.com/josephopoku1990). Follow the Alliance for Science [@ScienceAlly](https://twitter.com/ScienceAlly).

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