

**APPRAISING THE DIOCESE ON THE NIGER MISSION TO TOGO IN THE
LIGHT OF CROSS-CULTURAL EVANGELISM: A HISTORICAL
EXAMINATION**

Chinedu Emmanuel Nnatuanya

Department of Religion & Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ce.nnatuanya@unizik.edu.ng

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to point out the importance of missions across nations, tribes, and languages. This is because the message of the gospel is global and as a result, Christians of nations, irrespective of colour and denomination, must strive to ensure that this message of transformation is extended to all, notwithstanding their region, locality and colour. It is in response to this that this work investigates the evangelization activity of the Diocese on the Niger in Togo, their impacts and activities. The framework of qualitative research was adopted while findings indicate that much work has been done in the areas of human and societal development; notwithstanding, the problem of funding, language barrier, and manpower become a threat to missionary work.

Keywords: cross-cultural evangelism, diocese on the Niger, Anglican Communion, Togo, Historical Examination.

Introduction

The gospel mandate by Jesus Christ to go and make disciples of all nations, with the charge of baptizing them in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit [1] is not local, but global in scope and dimension. It is an instruction and a command to carry out the evangelization process to people of all races and colors. This is because God gave us the gospel to reach the reached and the unreached without discrimination but with love and wisdom [2]. In other words, the purpose of the gospel message is a total transformation of humanity and society. This transformational process is designed by God to impact people of all races irrespective of their personality, locality, and language. In essence, the gospel message is for all humanity.

Such was the motivational force that influenced the missionary activities of the early church as can be seen in Apostle Paul who said that he was unto the Jews a Jew, that he might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that he might gain them that are under the law; while to them that are without law, as without law, so that he might gain them that are without law. He concludes that to the weak, he became as weak, that he might gain the weak: for Apostle Paul, he is all things to all men that he might, by all means, save some. And this he does for the gospel's sake, that he might be a partaker with all who are saved by grace [3]. Paul can be described as a cross-cultural apostle.

In other words, one can argue that religiously motivated missions are part of a long historical tradition in various world religions. On this note, missions are usually regarded as undertakings to propagate, spread and communicate religious beliefs, values and convictions across social, ethnic and cultural boundaries. The agents are called missionaries who attempt to convert and proselytize those who are yet to believe or those with other cultural backgrounds and religious traditions. In this transformative process, experiences of cross-cultural difference, alienation and otherness undoubtedly play a crucial role [4].

From the early church till the great mission awakening of the 19th century that triggers the evangelization of West Africa, the driving force has always been a passion for impact among peoples of various colours and tribes. No wonder many missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and other missionary bodies died in West Africa, of which, the Niger Mission is a great beneficiary. In line with that, the Diocese of the Niger which is the offshoot of the missionary activities of the CMS Niger Mission in 2010 embarked on cross-cultural mission activity in Togo in fulfilment of the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ. This mission has opened up opportunities for the transformation of life and society in Togo despite the numerous challenges facing it. In this light, this work investigates the gains, impacts and challenges confronting this cross-cultural mission embarked on by the Diocese of the Niger with a view of proffering solutions for better ways forward.

Conceptual framework

It is important to understand the keywords that form the bone of this work in light of the research.

a. Cross-Cultural Evangelism

This is the act of taking the gospel of Christ from one tribe, language, ethnicity, culture, community, or nation across a border of another. Cross-cultural missions involve a deliberate and conscious effort to break barriers placed by traditions of men, culture, language, norms, ethnicity, remoteness, and exposure. It entails a sacrificial approach of

forgetting your personality to win others for Christ over some time. This is quite tasking, humiliating, risky and enduring. In reality, it is only the called that can endure the scourge of fierce culture, unfriendliness, poverty, harsh climatic differences and tense isolation from social amenities, just for the sake of the gospel [5]. It also means living among different tribes in a locality to share Jesus Christ.

b Diocese on the Niger (Anglican Communion)

Owen Nwokolo states that the history of the Diocese on the Niger stems from the missionary endeavours of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from the 27th day of July 1857, led by Samuel Ajayi Crowther. As the mission grew, it became necessary to consecrate Crowther a Bishop to lead the Mission. The ministry of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther has been a topic for discussion nationally and internationally [6]. The Episcopacy of the Diocese on the Niger remains the oldest in Nigeria; meaning also that Diocese on the Niger is the oldest Diocese in Nigeria. Presently, the Rt. Rev. Dr Owen Nwokolo is the Bishop of the Niger who inherited the vision of cross-cultural evangelism to Togo from his predecessor Rt. Rev. Ken Okeke became the one to execute the mission activity with great passion and zeal.

c. Few things to note about Togo

The nation of Togo is in West Africa and has a boundary with Ghana to the west, Benin to the east and Burkina Faso to the north. The country extends south to the Gulf of Guinea covering 57,000 square kilometres (22,008 square miles) with its capital at Lome. The population is about 8 million people. It is a Francophone-speaking country.

Culturally speaking, Togo at present is made up of various groups, among them the Ewe from the east, and the Mina from the west. Historically, Togo was formerly under German colony at the 1884 Berlin Conference; however, after the first World War, it was divided between the British and the French (English and French speaking). It is important to note that British (English-speaking) Togoland joined Ghana at independence while the French colony (French speaking) became Togo in 1962. Togo as a country was the first African independent nation to experience a military coup, and from 1967 to 2005, the country was militarily ruled by President Eyadéma, who imposed an authoritarian regime, oppressing the democratic opposition and violating human rights.

At his death, his son took over in elections marred by killings and torture, and democratization continued to be blocked by those in power through 2005. The economy of Togo depends on subsistence agriculture and the export of coffee, cocoa and cotton, and on the production of phosphate.

Speaking about the cultural and religious life of Togo, the Rt. Rev. Owen Nwokolo explains: Togo is one of the most populous countries in West Africa. In terms of religion,

animism is very popular. Togo remains one of the last strongholds of voodoo worship in West Africa. There is however a steady growth of Islam (9% in 1900 to 30% in 1985) which is the religion of nine Togolese tribes. Though the first Church (Methodist) came to Togo in 1843, the land remained largely unreached until the 90s. With the coming of democracy, many evangelical churches sprung up. Nevertheless, as many as 15 tribes can still be said to be unreached with the gospel. There are many villages without churches. Nominalism is still a plague. Their social life is like most African nations, with a francophone touch and culture. The marriage tie in most places is weak; there are many single mothers and children born out of wedlock. There are two universities, Lome and Kara. Lots of students aspire for education but are sieved out because of lesser vacancies in campuses. Poverty seems to rule the land [7].

The above was the fuel that ignited the cross-cultural mission of the Diocese on the Niger to Togo which is the subject of this research.

Missionary activities of the Anglican Church in Togo

The fact remains that scripture, theology, the Church and even a Christian would not exist without a mission. This is because mission and church are synonymous. Therefore, a theology without a mission is not a Biblical theology, a Church without a mission is no longer truly the Church, and a Christian without a mission is no true disciple. One can conclude that the Christian mission is not an optional extra for the fanatical few or the specially anointed; it is a fundamental definitive of all who we are in Christ [8].

It was in light of the above that Rt. Rev. Ken Sandy Edozie Okeke, the then Bishop on the Niger, was inspired to send Rev. Oliver Ofoegbu (now Venerable) as a missionary to Togo in 2010 to carry out feasibility studies on the possibility of embarking on a mission outpost. In 2011, the Rt Rev. Owen Nwokolo, Bishop of the Niger facilitated Rev. Oliver to move to Togo to begin missionary activities which led to the planting of St. Paul's Church, Togo. To ensure the progress of the said vision, the Rt. Rev. Owen Nwokolo Bishop on the Niger set up a Foreign Mission board which has Ven E. O. Ukpeke as the Chairman and Rev. R. N. Ezenwaka as the Secretary. The Foreign Mission Board identifies the issue of funding as a challenge; however, the board put measures in place to ensure that the new mission was sustained. One of the measures is the adoption of mega-churches in the Diocese to sponsor the mission in the mean time [9].

The major reason for the mission is to invade Togo and beyond with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ while the goal of the Diocese is to occupy all the towns and villages with saturated church planting. To actualize the mission, a Church was started in Kara – Northern Togo. By May 2013, in his report to the Primate of the Church of Nigeria, Rev.

Nicholas Okoh, the Bishop of the Niger stated thus: “in all, we have penetrated 16 fields: Dapaong, Niamtougou, Sotouboua, Assahoun, Sokode, Blitta, Pagala, Adeleme, Totse, Kpalime, Kara, Kante, Sinkasse, Mango, Atakpeme and Natchamba-Bassar regions. These are scattered through the length and breadth of Togo [10].

He went further to state that their mission was not only in Togo. According to Bishop Owen, in Togo, 31 native churches have been planted with three zonal coordinators and seven zones. In Burkina Faso, six native churches, in Niger Republic 15 native churches, and in Benin Republic and Cote d’Ivoire – five native churches, respectively. According to him, all these churches have missionaries working with them [11].

By 2010, one of the missionaries, Nwosu Ngozi, reporting about churches in Northern Togo stated thus: God in His glory greatly abounded His grace on the people of Bassar and particularly, those of Nangbani village by planting the Anglican Mission. Among all the missions which came to Nangbani, the Anglican Mission is the only one that still exists. The church of Nangbani had known physical, moral and spiritual difficulties but it has survived them all. Presently, the church has 15 adults (all youths), a few women and 25 children.

As it stands today, the Anglican mission in Togo has grown and is still growing despite its numerous challenges. For the first time in 2021, Bishop Owen confirmed 120 and admitted 56 women into the Women’s guild. And this year 2022, he also confirmed over 100 people and admitted over 50 into Mother’s Union. The climax of this year’s visit was the dedication of St Paul’s church, Akodesewa Lome Togo.

This year’s visit also had the Women’s Ministry of the Diocese led by Dr Mrs. Elsie Nwokolo. The team conducted crusades and visitation in Northern Togo with great testimonies.

Rev. Wilfred the new co-ordinator reports that in 2022 the Diocese bought the following lands: one plot of land at Kara at 5.5 million naira (7,340 US dollars), two plots at Vogan at 6.5 million (8670 US dollars), with 500 thousand naira (670 US dollars) to start work there, another one plot was bought at Kara extension at 650 thousand naira (870 US dollars) and donated 1 million naira (1340 US dollars) to buy more at Kara subzone and many more donations [12].

A Historical Examination

It is important to note that Christianity started in Togo in 1830 upon the establishment of a German Catholic Mission station as a result of the religion’s anti-slavery movement. As a result in 1863, two priests of the African Missions Society (SMA) came from Dahomey (modern Benin) to visit coastal villages. These two priests settled 104 miles inland at

Atakpamé in 1886, but their mission was abandoned within a year after both were twice poisoned. On the other hand, the Methodist Church of Togo goes back to British Methodist missionary work which began in the area in 1843.

However, despite all the efforts of the various missions, the religion of Togo has remained faithful to the country's pagan history. This is the reason why 51% of the country's population has an indigenous belief or ancestor worship called voodoo, while the Christian and Muslim populations consist of 20% and 19%, respectively.

In light of this fact, one may ask, what are possible factors hindering the spread of the gospel and the emancipation of the people from poverty?

Historically speaking, many factors are involved. According to Rev Wilfred, the factors that constitute barriers are culture in nature, social relationships, bad attitude of some earlier missionaries, language and many others.

Cultural factors: Cultural factors entail the people's way of life which involves their belief system, and socio-economic activities. The culture of Togo reflects the influences of 37 tribal ethnic groups and the largest and most influential are the Ewe, Mina, and Kabye. The irony is that despite the influence of early missionaries and the church more than half of the people of Togo follow native animistic practices and beliefs. With these, it becomes very difficult for evangelization to permeate the fabric of the people. This is why the church always blossoms in the Maritime region (South) where many are foreigners but in the other regions where indigenous dwell, the growth of the church is very minimal among them.

Bad attitude of some earlier missionaries: During interaction with some people in Togo, it was observed that some previous missionaries could not live up to expectations. Most of them were interested in economic activities, especially money, and as a result, every church or missionary is classified to be one of them. Such become action now becomes a great barrier. One of the missionaries told a story of how he lost his five-month-old son and daughter and the indigenous people said that he used them for a ritual. With such beliefs, it becomes a challenge to evangelise them. Notwithstanding, with a good attitude most of the indigenous people are beginning to have faith in the missionary work of the church.

Language barrier: Since Togo is made up of different ethnic groups with various languages though French is the official language, communication becomes an obstacle for some missionaries. As I experienced during my visit, in some communities, it is quite difficult to get an interpreter who can understand English and relate well with his people.

This is why educational advancement is very cogent and necessary as part of the missionary endeavour.

Conclusion

It is obvious that this cross-cultural evangelism has revived some homes and churches, boosted the zeal of the ministers therein, and moved Togo missions to a higher level. In the same vein, thousands of lives have been affected socially, spiritually, educationally, and economically. However, more needs to be done, and to achieve that, all hands must join together to liberate those who are in bondage of poverty, sickness and social depravity in this modern time. This is a clarion call.

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