

Church Issues in Togo: A SWOT¹ Analysis of the Church Growth Context in Togo - According to Selected Pastors

Mark J Harris, Mission Consulting Group

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I. INTRODUCTION

General Introduction

Determining what factors and conditions are required for fruitful, church based ministry is an important subject for any missiological research. Strategies must be built upon a clear understanding of the context, and some of the factors of each context can be learned by interviewing local Christian workers. The purpose of this research project is to inform Westerners (and perhaps some Togolese as well) regarding “SWOT” (i.e. strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of Togolese churches, as understood by a selected group of Togolese pastors from various denominations.

The results of this study could contribute to helping Christian workers in Togo to utilize strategies that take into account the Togolese context, with the effect that there will be more solid, fruitful church planting and church development work.

Background

From two prior ministry trips to Africa (Nigeria and Tanzania), I had begun to formulate questions in my mind regarding church planting factors specific to African contexts. I had considered doing more research when I was contacted by a young Togolese pastor in 2008. From that initial e-mail began a plan to visit Togo if I could find an existing Western missionary with whom to collaborate. Mike Squires of Wycliffe became the collaborator, and invited a group of pastors from several denominations to meet with me in Anie during the week of September 21-

¹ “SWOT” is the abbreviation for “Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats”

25, 2009. One objective of our meetings was to ask them to do a SWOT analysis whose results are the substance of this paper.

II. RESEARCH APPROACH

As noted above, the purpose of this research was to discover the perspectives of a representative group of Togolese pastors, asking them what they considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of Togolese churches, and the opportunities and threats facing the churches in Togo today. I gathered this information through group interviews, allowing the pastors to hear each other's responses to my basic questions and build on or counter each other's perspectives. The SWOT analysis was pursued in the order T,O,W,S as seen in the results.

Research Boundaries

I confined my study to pastors who were hand-picked by Mike Squires from various denominations in the central part of Togo.

Limitations of Findings

The results of this qualitative study may not be able to be generalized beyond the particular boundaries mentioned above. Pastors from the capital city, and in denominational leadership positions, could have a different set of answers. The research may be subject to other interpretations than those I offer, but I sought to let the pastors speak for themselves as much as possible, minimizing my own personal interpretations beyond that which is self-evident. There could be several other specific responses to each question that I did not discover in my interviews, but the chances are low that these would be common, given the small size of Togo and the variety of denominations represented. I believe the findings should be taken at face value, being the perspective of a fairly representative group of pastors.

Other Introductory Notes

1. This is a qualitative research study, and not quantitative. That is, I was not looking for statistics to prove the proportions of pastors who had this or that view. The value of the research is in displaying something of the variety of responses anyone might encounter in communicating with pastors in Togo. A worker will benefit from being prepared to respond to each of the perspectives found in this paper.

2. The sessions were conducted in English through a French-speaking interpreter. I have summarized the responses based on the English translation. Due to the generally concrete nature of the answers, difficulties in translation should not be a factor.

III. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Threats and Difficulties Facing Togolese Churches

I started by asking the pastors to describe what they considered to be the most important external threats and difficulties that face the churches as they seek to serve Christ in Togo. There is some overlap in these categories, which are listed below without intention of ranking them in any order of importance or agreement among the pastors.

1. Unresponsiveness of Men

One of the first impressions upon observing Togolese churches is the imbalance of women and children as compared to men. The difficulty of reaching men may have many reasons (some of which are mentioned in later sections below), but the result is a lack of solid cores of strong families in churches. One observation is that men (and especially older men) are much more traditional than the women, and consider it important to hold to the old ways. They refuse to jettison these traditions in order to follow Christ.

2. Competition for Souls

In Togo virtually everyone is religious in some way – either Christian, Animist, or Muslim. Therefore the dominant “religious” work involves the attempt to alter a person’s loyalties. The result has become an ongoing competition that has commonly become attached to meeting earthly needs and worldly desires. A starting Togolese assumption would be that the true God (or the most powerful “god”) would be the one that can “solve my problems.” Because the overarching problems are material, the pastors said that “money talks in Africa.”

3. Need for Resources

This difficulty is largely magnified by the previous one. If people’s thinking is dominated by their lack of resources, and they are willing to offer loyalty to those who meet those needs, then the churches are immediately going to feel a bit helpless in the face of overwhelming needs. Helplessness is compounded by frustration when rich Muslim nations begin to pour resources into Togo (digging wells, building mosques, etc.). It is understandable that pastors would expect the West to pour in resources in order to counter the activity of Muslims that threatens the status of the Christian faith in Togo. Holistic ministry is needed in Togo, much of which requires resources the pastors feel that the churches do not have.

4. Building Preoccupation

According to the pastors, this is a problem not with their own attitudes, but with that of the populace. That is, there is an assumption that only a ministry that can afford a nice building is worthy of respect. If there is nothing “concrete” to view, people will tend to mock the work as lacking in substance. The typical Togolese shelter, made up of tree branches and palm fronds, is considered a pitiable structure for a church. Combined with the problems of competition for souls and lack of resources, this leads many pastors to seek funds from wealthy Westerners who would be “giving testimony to the faith of the Togolese” by building solid church structures.

5. Village Access

This problem has two aspects. The first is that many villages needing churches are in areas not easily accessible to workers. To get to the villages requires either a great deal of time, or else funds to hire motorcycle taxis. The second aspect of the problem is that access to villages is controlled by village chiefs. Not much (if anything) can happen in a village apart from the permission of the chief, many of whom are closed to the gospel.

6. Animism

The problem of struggling against animism is dealing with true spiritual battles, and thus gaining credibility, without accepting the worldview assumptions of the animists. Animists tend to believe that there is a supreme God, but that in order to get to this “big God” one needs to pacify the “small gods” along the way. They want to see with their eyes that Christians do indeed have this direct relationship with the supreme deity that they claim to have. Concrete manifestations of spiritual power, with results in the physical realm, are thus more important to them than theological explanations.

The shamans get their livelihood from the spiritual fears of the people in their sphere, and will directly oppose any attempt to pull them to another world view. If the people abandon the shaman, and then anything goes wrong in their life, they are told that “this happened because you left animism.” Many anecdotes of doom falling on “apostates” put fear into the hearts of the people. They really feel that their physical life is at stake in making any move toward Christ. The challenge for Christians is not simply to take away the “old ways,” but to *replace* them. Without shamans, and without funds for medicines, converts are faced with great temptations to return to those old ways. Those who already see themselves as “well off” will wonder what the benefit is of transferring loyalty to the God of the Christians. The question is always “what has God done for you?” A related challenge is to help shamans that respond to Christ and have lost their livelihood as a result.

7. Islam

As in any interaction with Islam in any country, much of the struggle is with competing truth claims. The usual Islamic arguments are in evidence (Jesus is not the Son of God, Mohammed is the true messenger of God, Jesus did not actually die on the cross, etc.) The normal attitude would be, “Islam has the truth – why should I move away from it?”. However, the Islam of Togo tends to be folk Islam (Koranic teaching mixed with animism). So, an alternative folk Muslim argument would be that Jesus did indeed die on the cross, but this proved he did not have the power to stop his own death, thus ending any call for a Christian faith. As noted above, Muslims are seen as opponents in the financial realm, providing material benefits to gain converts (and removing those physical supports from those who come to Christ). Honor killings are not unheard of for family members leaving Islam. As opposed to animists, Muslims are aggressive opponents, actively involved in proselytism, and there are great social divides between Muslims and Christians that make evangelism very difficult.

8. Growing Sophistication

The pastors note that Togo has been in a transition period in which people (especially animists) are not so easily responsive to the gospel as before. Open air meetings with the showing of the Jesus film, for example, are no longer impressive to people in the villages. Earlier it was considered easy to convince animists, but now, with the growing competition for souls, the audience is more “fussy,” more questioning of messages brought to them. This is calling for more sophistication in communication, which in turn calls for more training. Also, as Togo develops economically, new sets of needs attract the hearts of the people (such as the question of providing education for their children). Growing complexities of life lead to a loss of earlier simplicity of reasoning in responding to God.

Opportunities and Open Doors for the Churches in Togo

Many opportunities are suggested by the threats noted above, but I asked this question independently (without looking at the prior list). What current opportunities do the pastors

believe the churches should take advantage of in Togo today? The main responses centered on the particular openness of various groups within Togolese culture.

1. Women and Youth

In contrast to the men of Togo, the women and young people are displaying a great openness to the gospel. Works of various types that minister to these groups are seeing good fruit. One theme that is seen in this and many of the other comments below is a focus on the next generation.

2. College Students

The young adult student population in particular is in a life transition that has provided many openings for the gospel. Difficulties in finding employment have put them in a frame of mind of life uncertainty, which has in turn made them open to the gospel. Churches have often prayed for them and have sometimes helped them find temporary work in church-based ministries (schools, medical centers, etc.). Churches have also operated business enterprises to help them, such as those in the field of agriculture. Also bearing fruit are campus ministries, such as those providing educational and career counseling, and those creating social centers that provide safe gathering places.

3. Younger Students

Growing concerns for both career and moral education has made for more openings among high-school and younger ages that are not yet necessarily thinking about careers, but who are concerned about early preparation. Ministries that provide school supplies and tutoring have led to many evangelistic opportunities. There are also openings to use “cultural activity” times to provide Bible teaching inside the public schools (though opportunities for this are mixed, and much dependent on the attitudes of the administration). If not during school, the teaching can certainly be done during lunch time or outside of classroom hours.

4. Concerned Family Men

Countering some of the resistance of men to the gospel is the concern that family men have for the well-being of their families. This takes several forms, but seems to focus on the lives of their children (echoing the concerns noted above). For example, they want their children to get good health care and a good education. Loving ministries that help alleviate these concerns can soften father's hearts to the gospel as well (both by their observation of the ministry and in the life changes they see in their children). In addition, ministries that invite men to come with their wives have created openness in the men (as opposed to ministries that target them individually). One key strategy is to make sure men meet with their peers (especially older men meeting with other older men).

5. The Poor and Needy

There are abundant opportunities to minister in practical ways, as people that are helped in the midst of difficult circumstances respond to these manifestations of the love of Christ. Medical ministries often open hearts to the gospel, a common method being to show Christian videos to those waiting for treatment. Also fruitful are making micro-loans that help people begin small businesses to support their families, as well as digging wells for villages that have critical needs for fresh water. As noted earlier, in Togo a major issue for people is seeing manifestations of God helping them solve their problems, and praise for God commonly follows the lines of "look what God has done for me!" In their minds these are the key factors that show the relevancy to them of the Christian faith.

6. Literacy

This could be a subset of a few of the categories above, but is a particular need that crosses age lines. Children in some areas need assistance in literacy, but even more needy are parents who grew up without education and are now handicapped without the ability to read. Churches doing literacy training are finding fruitful ministry in some areas of Togo.

7. AIDS

The growing problems of AIDS in Togo (though not as severe as in many African countries) has provided ministry opportunities in two main ways. First, Togolese churches are promoting and modeling abstinence. People concerned about AIDS are attracted to churches to receive education and observe the example of the believers. Secondly, the churches are able to show love to people already infected with AIDS, since many of these are abandoned by their families and are often dying alone.

8. Orphans

In Togo all the orphanages are started either by churches or NGO's. There are a large number of orphans due to AIDS, illnesses and accidents – many parents dying young in a country with a low life-expectancy. Churches both model the love of Christ and raise up children in the faith.

9. Prisoners

Togolese prisons have deplorable conditions, and prisoners have proven to be much more open than men in the general population. Prison ministries have potential to reach far beyond the prisons themselves if they are successful in discipling men who will become solid testimonies of the transforming power of Christ.

10. Village Chiefs

As village access was noted as a big challenge above, it must be noted that those chiefs that open their village to church planting are a tremendous opportunity for the church planters in Togo. Their “blessing,” even though normally they are not personally interested in the gospel, can create situations where entire villages end up in new churches (since they will tend to act as a collective). In cases where the chief himself comes to Christ, the influence is of course magnified.

Weaknesses and Limitations of the Churches in Facing the Threats and Opportunities

How the church meets threats and takes advantages of opportunities depends largely on how it overcomes its weaknesses and takes advantage of its strengths. The pastors first listed what they considered to be the primary weaknesses of Togolese churches.

1. Resources

Given the extent of physical needs in Togo, it is no surprise that churches would feel overwhelmed, unable to meet the needs given the resources at their disposal. They find it difficult to meet the needs of those in poverty, when many of the church members are themselves in the same situation. New church planters are often not supported as well. As noted above, the result is a felt need to seek these resources from outside of Togo.

2. Spiritual Immaturity

Several descriptions of weakness pointed to low levels of spiritual maturity among church members. One manifestation is jealousies that weaken the witness of the church before unbelievers. In general, a lack of spiritual understanding tends to dominate in churches, along with a clinging to worldly ways and sinful habits. This lack of transformation of lives has caused many pastors to become discouraged, and of course greatly limits the potential of churches to minister effectively to the world. It must be added that spiritual immaturity is also a problem among many pastors, who are not truly gifted for their position. Common also is a hireling mentality, manifested in playing favorites among those who give more, ignoring the needs of the poor members who are not so able to give.

3. Inter-Church Competition

One particular manifestation of spiritual immaturity is the tendency for “sheep stealing” between denominations. Rather than focusing on the unreached population, and working in

harmony toward that end, many churches focus on ways to attract members from other churches to transfer to their own congregations.

4. Lack of Training

This weakness certainly contributes to the prior two. Many pastors are greatly lacking in pastoral training, coaching or mentoring. The result is simplistic ministries, in which the same sermons are preached repetitively, and little practical or focused ministry (designed for particular groups such as women, youth, children, etc.). There is also an assumption that the churches and denominations lack the means to give men the training they need, and many potential leaders veer off into other careers. According to the pastors there is much interest among young men to get training, but they either can't afford the training or feel they can't afford to be in ministry. Beyond this, even when training is accessible, there is also a lack of well-trained faculty who would be qualified to provide effective training (either theological, missiological or innovative pastoral).

5. Conflicts of Vision

Many pastors feel that they have the desire to expand their ministries and plant new churches, but that there is a weakness of vision among those in charge. This may be due to a bureaucratic mentality at the highest levels.

6. Absence of Youth Ministries

Given the number of young people open to the gospel, one would think that church youth ministries would be a priority. Unfortunately, the churches are greatly lacking in ministries designed specifically for young people.

7. Lack of Literature

There is not a well-developed literature ministry in Togo, and especially Christian literature in tribal languages (which would be the heart language of almost all the people). Even the

literature that exists is becoming more expensive – and even Bibles are too expensive for most people. There is also a lack of good pastoral materials, with very few pastors having a library of any sort (or being able to afford one even if one were available).

Strengths of the Churches

The final request of the pastors was to list what they considered to be the areas where the churches are the strongest. Most of what they identified related to the realm of the spiritual affections.

1. Love for God

Those who have come to Christ exhibit at the very least an enthusiastic love from the Lord, shown, for example, in their devotion to worship.

2. Spiritual Courage

The believers are not afraid to confront spiritual opposition, which may be most evident in their bold battling with animism.

3. Zeal for Souls

The love and faith of the believers is evidenced in a great desire to reach out to others. The pastors note that they are pushed by their people to go to those who need to hear the gospel, and will involve themselves in sacrificial work in order to build the small chapels that were discussed earlier.

4. Passionate Youth

The young people in the churches are exhibiting a passion to serve the Lord, along with a willingness to be led.

5. Resourcefulness

Given the actual lack of resources, the Togolese churches have learned to be creative with what they have. They are willing to do creative economic activities in order to support the work of the church. The devotion of new church leaders is great despite this lack of means.

6. Contrast with the World

Despite some of the problems noted above, the churches do display more harmony, and are more respectable, than the general public.

III. ADDENDUM: ATTITUDES TOWARD HOUSE-CHURCH PLANTING

I also asked the pastors their attitude toward the possibility of doing house-church planting in Togo. Although they seemed to understand and receive the principles in general, they gave several reasons why they believed this method would meet with limited success in Togo. Whether or not they are correct in all these assumptions, they offer a helpful list to be dealt with by any of us that might try to promote this method through existing church leaders. Here are the primary obstacles they mentioned, some of which are seen above in the SWOT analysis as well:

1. Church Saturation in Togo

The various denominations in Togo are well organized, and have done church planting all over the country (and Togo is a small country to begin with, slightly smaller than West Virginia). A person in every Togolese town of any size already has multiple church options. It is true that there are many unreached in these towns, but it is not because of lack of general opportunity. Most of the areas with no churches are villages, which raises the following issue.

2. Village Chief Control

Because villages are by definition small, and are controlled by a village chief, any work must be done in the open. The chief is the only “man of peace” that is relevant in such a situation, and it would be impractical and unwise to work around him. When the chief gives permission, all things are possible (such as in the village where Yempabou revived the work). Most chiefs are animists, but some of them are open to allowing their village to have a church (as long as they can continue in their animism). It seems rare that there would be more than one church group in any village. There are also some chiefs who vehemently oppose any Christian work in their village, which raises difficult issues for church planting. See below for a common way that churches are being started in villages.

3. Fixation on Buildings

The church has been in Togo long enough that most people already have an idea in their minds of what it is – and this always involves having a building. When people think of church multiplication, they always think of the acquisition of land and the constructing of buildings. A method that relies only on homes and small groups will have to overcome an inherent distrust and lack of respect

IV. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

After reading this paper, many comments could be made by myself and others (especially those experienced in African missions). I will limit myself to just a few observations which take into account not just my experience in Togo but also my general missions experience and training.

Competition Dilemma

Worldly competition for souls in Togo presents a dilemma to Christians. On the one hand, they want to affirm the healing and nurturing power of God (they will often be challenged with the question, “What kind of God would not heal and support His people?). On the other hand, they cannot honestly proclaim that God will supernaturally provide for every desire of sinful men

(a claim which commonly attracts people to churches for improper motives), nor even every honest physical need if God can be glorified by His higher purposes (such as a person exhibiting great joy in Christ in the midst of unsolved physical difficulties). Animism and Islam claim to focus on every area of life, and the temptation is to be drawn into a profane competition to “buy” souls. If people come for medicine and you don’t have it, they may change their loyalty to the local Muslims who may have more resources or Animistic shamans who will use other means to seek healing.

Attitude of Dependency

It will be very difficult to overcome a very old attitude among many Africans that expanded ministry will only be possible with the help of outside funds. Pastors can easily limit themselves from the outset by a tendency to seek and wait for resources that will allow them to build the traditional structures and programs that they assume must be part of any substantial ministry. Many young men follow in this perspective, seeking sponsors overseas via browsing the internet looking for sympathetic people with money. In order to prove their worthiness to receive this funding, then, they are drawn into efforts that give the appearance of growth and enthusiasm while there may be lack of any depth in their ministry. If church members begin to be seen as “props” to attract sponsors, the hearts of young pastors are already damaged.

C. Innovations in Training

Strong and effectively contextualized training is greatly needed, and not just for pastors. There should be no training programs that do not face head-on the very specific problems of Togo, especially if there is a tendency for young men to seek the training for the wrong motives. A serious paradigm shift may be required, in which a shift of thinking is attempted over the course of an entire new generation. Those already in ministry may have become too set in their ways to rethink the way the church should operate, and young men who are flexible in their thinking will not be good candidates for solid, family-based churches. Careful and forward-looking planning is required if substantial development is desired.