

The Togo-Bénin Province (TOG) Report

Introduction

The TOG province is made up of two small French-speaking countries in West Africa. Large majority of the population of both Togo and Benin live in the countryside, on subsistence agriculture. Our cities are relatively smaller, not really crowded. The two-wheel-taxi service known as “zemidjan” (*bring me home fast*) is very likely a unique invention of its kind, thanks to the Beninese ingenuity, which is equally a means of self-employment in Togo as well. Both these countries are considered to be among the poorest countries of Africa in economic terms, as there aren't many natural resources available or exploited, although rich in other areas of life. Cotton is the major export quality cash crop in both countries.

Togo has a wonderful SVD history. After China and Argentina, Togo was the third mission field which our saintly Founder personally accepted and whose development he accompanied and supported since 1892. In addition to the large, beautiful buildings that were put up, a hymn-cum-prayer book, other liturgical booklets and catechisms, and a news bulletin which eventually became the national Catholic newspaper, all in the local languages (*all of them still very popular and in modern editions*) give the people cause to remember with appreciation the hard work of our pioneering German confreres in Togo, the first Catholic missionaries in the country. In January 1918, in the aftermath of World War I, the last SVD missionaries were expelled from Togo, as it became then a French colony.

Our missionaries came back to Togo in 1974, taking up a parish in Bassar in the north. We moved out to Benin in January 1987. Togo and Benin are former districts of the Ghana Province. The Togo/Benin Region has been in existence since March 1993. Togo-Bénin became the youngest province in the AFRAM zone since June 1st, 2008. Our life here is organised under four district communities: Lomé, Bassar Kanté and Bénin.

Internationality, our contribution to the primary evangelisation of the local population, as well as the efforts to bring to light the prophetic dialogue vision of mission, especially in the face of growing Islam and a very dynamic African traditional religion could be considered to be the three major axes of our missionary charism as it is lived out here.

Personnel

There are 56 confreres of 15 nationalities who are presently members of the TOG province (of whom 50 are in perpetual vows – this includes the current Nuncio here – and 6 in temporary vows, doing their OTP/pastoral year. There are, however, only 50 confreres living within the province, 6 of them being elsewhere: 3 doing higher studies, 1 with the JRS in Burundi, 1 on exlaustration in Belgium and 1 deacon in MEX. There are just 4 Brothers, 1 of whom is doing OTP here. Of the total 56, only 8 confreres are above the age of 50, 1 of them is semi-retired. Our confreres exercise ministry in 13 parishes [*9 parishes in Togo (in 5 dioceses) and 4 in Benin (in 2 dioceses)*], and in 4 SVD communities. Those in SVD houses are mostly engaged in specialised ministries: teaching, formation, media and in diocesan and provincial administration. Two Togolese confreres are pursuing higher studies in Lomé.

A few more numbers: there are 60 confreres now of Togolese/Beninese origin, of whom 35 are in final vows. Of these 2 are brothers, 31 priests, 2 deacons as well as 18 major seminarians and 7 novices. These 60 confreres work or study in 20 countries around the world, besides being in Togo and Benin. Presently, there are 15 postulants doing their three-year philosophy programme in Lomé. We thank God for a good number of aspirants in both

Benin and Togo who are accompanied by our team of vocation promoters. Speaking of preparing the new missionaries for French-speaking countries of the zone, it is good to know that this year we complete 10 years of the French-language Institute here in Lomé, fruit of a decision taken at the zonal assembly held in Botswana.

Follow-up on the Provincial Chapter

The first-ever provincial chapter of TOG was held in January 2009. One of the first resolutions of the chapter was to agree upon our vision-mission statement, which could be summarized as: *Burning with zeal for the Word and guided by the Spirit, so that God's reign may come about amongst all people.* This vision has been sustained by a plan of action expressed in the recommendations of the chapter itself. Since June 2009, our Society is a recognised religious association by the Togolese government. The process is going on to obtain the same status in Benin as well.

Our missionary life and work as prophetic dialogue

The five sub-themes of the 2006 general chapter were studied these recent years, as part of the district level on-going formation of our confreres, to imbibe ourselves in the prophetic dialogue and characteristic dimensions of our mission. Our lay associate members (*les Amis de la SVD* and *la Voie du Coeur*) join us in our mission by their spiritual and material support. Our confreres run for the Society/for the local church institutions like CEBILO (Centre Biblique de Lomé - www.cebilo.org), Institut Saint Paul de Lomé - www.isplome.org, Economat de Kara, Ediverbum, CEDICOM (Centre diocésain de Lomé - www.cedicom.org). The provincial coordinator for communication takes care of the website and a blog for the province: (<http://svdtogben.free.fr> and www.svdtogben.over-blog.com). Being the AFRAM zonal communication coordinator at the same time, he administers the website www.svdafram.org for the zone as well. In collaboration with the SSps, some of our confreres work in the JPIC area, especially in the care of non-school going (girl) children, poor, abandoned and marginalised, besides the care of some VIH/AIDS persons. Conflict situations have their share as well in our international SVD community living - dialogue and peace conversations often help in resolving most of such incidents.

The **year of the priest** in our communities has received a welcome place: many of our confreres were able to give/participate in recollections/retreats/workshops on the theme at the diocesan level; in our four districts, the theme was studied in a morning-session by all our confreres; in practically all our parishes, people recite on Sundays the prayer for priests; our parish/SVD bulletins/newsletters carry regularly short articles/other useful material to keep the spirit of the year going; confreres are supplied with on-going formation material for reading, besides orienting them to pertinent Internet websites.

On the **Brother vocation in our Society**, we were able to do the following so far: the Cebu declaration was translated into French and every confrere was given a copy; Bro Théodore Kakanou who participated in the said assembly shared his experience and reflections on the theme with all the confreres, making use of the district meetings as a viable platform; the vocation promotion team of the province held a brain-storming session and exhorted later all the confreres to seek ways to promote Brother vocation to the SVD at the local level; at the recently concluded provincial assembly the theme was further discussed and confreres returned to their communities aware of the need to make the brother-identity more visible in our parishes. (*It is a fact that we've only 2 brothers of Togolese origin - and not a single candidate!*).

In the **financial self-sufficiency area** our initiatives are still at the initial level : an attempt to lead a simple life-style ; efforts to maintain local farms, poultry etc ; gifts and remunerations received for offering retreats, conferences, media services etc. Again, we are still at the initial investment level in regard to our properties/farms at Apésito, Bassar, Sonahoulou, Parakou and Sirarou. We have been thinking seriously of placing our bank reserves rather in plots of land in the vicinity of Lomé. The mission secretary with the local coordinators are putting into place a network of local benefactors, besides the two lay associations connected with the SVD in Lomé making their frugal contributions occasionally.

Plans for the near future

Another SVD House within the greater Lomé area for a project we want to call *Arnolduskopè*, which, if and when we will have the permission from the Generalate, would enable us to create our own (*and not diocesan owned ones that we run presently*) Biblical Spirituality and Media/Communication Centres. Should we still opt for a **full-year programme for our aspirants** remains an open question. Opening a **novitiate house for the province** has been one of the provincial chapter recommendations. **A new parish in Sokodé**, a city with a large Muslim population in the central region of Togo, especially to make a significant SVD contribution in regard to religious dialogue, is also a chapter recommendation since last year. May the light of the Word and the Spirit of grace illumine and guide our ways.

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Provincial

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