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Presentation theme

Methodism in Dahomey : Between mission- obstacles and vitality

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Introduction

The presence of Christians in society is like salt that purifies and gives flavor. It is also like the light that illuminates in the darkness so that the life of individuals as well as that of nations be changed. The Church as the body of Christ, the ecclesial body, is a social body where the suffering of some must arouse the emotion and responsibility of others and therefore of all. Yet the Church is not exempt from reluctance, even resistance, prejudice and hardness. In this work, we propose to read the life of the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin (EPMB) by analyzing this course of Benin Methodism in a structuring dynamic between mission , obstacles and hope.

I. The Methodist Mission in Dahomey

The establishment of Christianity in Benin was not easy. The first missionaries who came to evangelize people deeply rooted in their beliefs Religious have not had the easy task. Traditionally, only the practices of ancestor worship were tolerated. European missionaries had to work hard to occupy the land. According to history, Methodism was born in Benin (former Dahomey) in 1843 through the British missionary from Badagry **Thomas Birch Freeman** . Under the direction of the Wesleyan Missionary Committee (London) , Freeman asked King Ghézo a missionary antenna in Dahomey.

If 1850 is the year of the opening of the first chapel, it started working in 1856. Ouidah was the only antenna to cover all the Dahomey until 1889. From 1890 to 1900, several European and indigenous missionaries contributed to the establishment and propagation of the Gospel at the national level. The work of the Wesleyan Methodists spread from place to place along the Dahomean coast. It has developed with appreciable success in the middle of the population . The mission of Cotonou was founded in 1890 and that of Porto-Novo in 1900. Gradually, the Methodism will spread all other the nation into three Mission¹:

- Southern Mission that covered Ouidah, Cotonou and Porto-Novo
- The Mission of the Center covering Abomey, Dassa - Zoumé and Savalou
- The Northern Mission on which Savè , Parakou, Djougou and Atacora depended .

Today , many of the local communities are created and are enjoying the fruits of the excellent work of the ancient missionaries and the remarkable involvement of indigenous workers. The means of such an extension has been the preaching of the Gospel to all men and the socio-economic testimonies.

¹ P. WOOD LAINE, *The FREEMAN Missionary and the beginnings of the Protestant Mission in Dahomey-Togo* , document Library of the House of Missions, DEFAP (Paris), 2002

- **Mission and works**

As the Gospel is addressed to Man and to entire Man, missionary action was thus organized around teaching works (creation of schools), works of assistance to the poor, the sick in hospitals and in garrisons. This opened indeed, the door of the heart of the people to the missionaries. They achieved spectacular successes, where the fetishers consulted before were powerless.

As part of the works , Polyclinic "The Good Samaritan is an indicator of positive testimony of Methodism in Benin." The vision of the church in creating this polyclinic is to provide the population a health framework where some and others could be treated cheaply and find work for unemployed graduates .

II. Some obstacles related to the Methodist Mission in Benin

1. The Methodist Mission in the colonial period

Around 1893, in the wake of colonization, Dahomey became a French colony. The Methodist mission which was of English source will thus know a moment of stagnation. In fact, the French administration accused the English authorities of the Methodist mission in Dahomey of subversive activities in the colony. The mission had a difficult time in proclaiming the Gospel. In this way, to facilitate relations and allow the Methodist mission to continue the work begun, in this case, evangelization in Dahomey, an agreement was signed with the Society of Evangelical Missions of Paris (SMEP). Following this agreement, French Protestant pastors were sent to Dahomey in 1946 to replace the English.

Already considered as a District of the Mother Church of Great Britain, the Methodist Mission of Dahomey becomes a Dual Status Mission with two Metropolises : Paris politically and London spiritually.

2. The Schisms .

The EPMB had experienced several schisms :

The 1st in 1901- BODAWA Church

causes : Problem of understanding the Yoruba language for Goun. The cult was reorganized into 2 cults : 1 Goun in the morning, the second in the evening for the Yoruba.

They are not happy and retire to form Bodawa . Attempts have been made in vein. The schism occurs April 4, 1901 and the church bears the name today of 1st African Mission of Benin BODAWA (EMAB).

2nd Schism (1930) Eledja

causes : Polygamy and mismanagement of a sum of 12000f by Superintendent David LOKO, concerning the stairs of the gate of Whèzounmè . Lay people sent a letter to Pastor Bishop about it. The pastor reacted in turn and denounced the polygamy of these lay people. " *Because of the money, you announced our polygamous condition that you know and you yourself have always hidden* ". On October 5, 1930, a group will become a church, through the intervention of Paul HAZOUME and the lawyer Mr. BOURJAC, who intervened by seeing the colonial authorities.

3rd Schism (1197-2016)

In 1997, the Rev. Moses SAGBOHAN wanted to unilaterally change the Articles of Incorporation in 1992, claiming to stay for life at the head of the Church. The case was brought to court. All the verdicts of the court rendered, have always denied the pastor Moise SAGBOHAN, but the application of these court decisions regarding the recovery of certain temples he held encountered practical difficulties on the field. This resulted in : the existence of two ecclesial communities that fostered hatred and hostilities against each other. Here and there we could notice fights, persecutions, animosities, break-ups of families, social fractures. All these have left a bitter history of our heritage, not to say an anti-evangelical testimony. Several observers were quick to assert the failure of Methodism in Benin and the absence of the Holy Spirit within His Church. From then on, mediations were tried with the aim of recovering the unity of the Church. But unfortunately ! None has succeeded. There is no doubt that the Methodist Protestant Church of Benin, like the Corinthian Church, is crossing the desert . This crisis caused enough damages. it sowed doubt and panic in the hearts. It uprooted the faith of some church members ; other brothers and sisters have deserted the Church. Some were dead, others are disabled. Most of the Beninese Methodists have become suspicious. Discouraged and weakened by the crisis, some fell into the dilemma and skepticism. The fear of God has disappeared from the hearts of the members. All layers of the Church are affected. Divided families, broken friendships, separated households and divorces are observed here and there.

III. The process of reconciliation and rebirth

A society divided against itself is a society doomed to fail. God did not want to leave Methodism in the counter-testimony, a process of reconciliation was launched. On Sunday 03rd of July 2016 a cult of reconciliation and reunification of the Methodist members of Benin was celebrated. This cult was made possible after several meetings and consultations initiated by the President of the Republic with the various offices of the Synod Council (EPMB) and Conference Board (EPMBC).

The main architect of this reconciliation is God Himself through Patrice TALON, President of the Republic. At the end of this service, a document entitled Proclamation and Convention Of reconciliation and reunification of the EPMB has been signed and a body called : Transitional Management Body (OTG) is set up. It consisted of fifteen (15) members :

- Seven (7) members of the General Synod Council Office (EPMB) ;
- Seven (7) members of the Conference Board Office (EPMBC) ;
- One (1) representative of the President of the Republic, member of Protestant Methodist of Benin.

Thus the OTG organized the management of the Church over a period of one year (from 03 July 2016 to 02 July 2017). At the end of this period, an extraordinary synod took place from 26th June to July 2nd, 2017 on the theme "**Holy Spirit, Come, Reconcile your Church**". This synod proceeded to the election of a President, a Vice President and a General secretary. They have all taken official office on the basis of the constitutive texts and statutes of 1992.

- **A hope of vitality of the reconciled Church**

According to recent statistics, the EPMB now includes :

- 641 local churches and 92 national prayer centers ;
- 68 diaconal works, including works of education (Primary and Protestant secondary schools), (Pr. West Africa University, common to member churches with the Faculty of Theology and its management institutes) A School of Theology Methodist Georges GBYONGBE of Dowa). Health works : (The Polyclinic Good Samaritan in Porto-Novo and other Health Centers) ; (A Micro Finance Facility in Cotonou) ; (Reception Center in Porto-Novo) ; (Nutrition Education Center in Dangbo) ; (Agricultural farm in Savè) . A radio broadcasting ... Etc

These works and statistics prove the dynamics of the Church today, despite her moments of fragility. The question is : how to put all these heritages together coherently so as to recover the lost years of prevarication?

It is true, it can safely be said today that the reunification of the Church seems to be effective, but it must be known that the reconciliation and reunification of the hearts of the Methodist brothers and sisters is not yet evident. We will have to work on this so as not to lose this hope of vitality. For that, we must meet certain challenges.

IV- Current Challenges of the Church

1- Identity and Ecclesiological Challenges

The reconciliation of the Church, so that it is not a reconciliation of facade, must be lived daily among the church members. We must strengthen the capacity of the clergy and the faithful not only in Bible knowledge, but also in the knowledge of our history. Our ecclesiology is very unclear in people's minds and pastors and lay people.

2- Spiritually

On a spiritual level, the Church must strengthen the faith of the members through a process of collective healing based on forgiveness. It must focus on theological animation, evangelization, Christian education . Methodism seemed to lose its mark during this period of crisis : strong syncretism, orientation towards the esoteric sects, misguided exorcism in the groups of prayers of deliverance, multiplication of the warrior prayers instead of the prayers of repentance. The number of prayer groups has increased everywhere in the regions and districts today, but they are not strictly supervised. Methodist classes are no longer practiced as fraternal and spiritual cells of communion. The concern to be transformed by God through perfection and sanctification must be a collective spiritual project.

3- At the social level

Benin is a multicultural society with many cultures and languages. It's the same in the Church. It is urgent to meet the challenges of regionalism. Indeed, during the crisis, ethnic groups were raised against each other, families against families, friends against friends, brothers of the same Methodist class against each other. The social fabric is deteriorating in

favor of small regionalist groups whose consequence will be the birth of partisan spirits within the Church.

4- Financial and material level

After more than 174 years of existence, the EPMB still struggles to take charge. Its revenue sources for mobilizing financial resources have not always varied over time, although it must be acknowledged that efforts are made from one region to another. They come only from the same traditional and historical recipes that are : offerings and thanksgiving known as **Pedido** in Goun or **idupe** in Yoruba. From the conversations we had with the members, there was often talk of faith and material life relations. Indeed, many felt that lack of faith sometimes fuels poverty. The church must first build the faith of people before they engage. Many Christians no longer give themselves actively to works, because they have not experienced the depth of the grace and love of God in their lives. This lack of personal relationship with the Lord is synonymous with a lack of spiritual power that is explained by a low commitment of the member in his parish.

Some temples are almost empty on Sundays, while others are sometimes crowded with people. We sing and dance with great fervor, but despite this enthusiasm, the church suffers from its material impoverishment.

As we are talking, several regions accumulate wage arrears to workers. The problem of management thus remains an obstacle to the material and financial life of the Church and is a factor of discouragement of the members, who see the funds of the church squandered by people. The crisis gave birth to bad management in some places. To these difficulties, we must add the state of decay or lack of maintenance in which are some temples, presbyteries and heritage of the church.

5- Training Challenge

In any business, training is a major concern ; it is a very important lever for development in the field of executive skills and consequently the development of any organization.

From the beginning, the EPMB understood very early the challenge of training pastoral personnel in relation to its mission of evangelization. As a general rule, any candidate for the Holy Ministry is required to undergo theological and pastoral training for 3 or 4 years before becoming Pastor. Today, the formation of pastors becomes an urgent necessity ; but she is complex : First, organizations are no longer able to offer scholarships to churches, as grant conditions are still complicated. Second, the church itself no longer has the material capacity to deal with the costs of training of young people in theology . She is disengaging from year to year. Thus, tuition fees are left more and more to the charge of candidates and their families.

With the stakes of the Mission and the challenges of the hour, the training of workers is more than ever indispensable . Better, the fight for the life of our communities requires the training of its managers and leaders. The Church must improve the abilities of her men through training. It's about acquiring a better skill for a better service, because goodwill alone is not enough.

Speaking of the training of pastors, in the hour of reconciliation, EPMB must also regulate the issue of redefining the specific training to the former school of theology of DOWA, an institution that forms as well as the international institution of UPAO students in theology.

Conclusion

The division of the Church is an obstacle for the world to believe that Jesus Christ is the Father's messenger and that we are loved by God as he loved Jesus Christ. The division of Methodist Christians is a testament to the faith of the world in Christ and the love of God for humanity. In this case, we need to weld ourselves to Christ through the Word of God, prayer, and fasting. Indeed, the mandate that falls to the Church is that of the announcement of the Word of God in its purity. God wants the existence of a place where his Word is constantly pronounced, communicated, propagated. This Word is the standard of faith, guidance, and practice. Admittedly, several challenges await Methodists in Benin, because not everything is perfect yet.

But, whatever the obstacles and weaknesses that can be noticed in the history and mission of the EPMB, we must rejoice in one thing : the fire of evangelization lit since the 18th century by John Wesley is not extinct and we must safeguard this heritage.

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