

My Mission to Benin

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Rev. Laurent Ladouce in a matching and blessing preparation workshop

My mission to the Republic of Benin lasted fifteen days, April 14–28, 2014. I was invited there like an older brother as an adviser; however our church community is much bigger in Benin than in France. Benin has around 1,400 members. They invited me essentially to teach their young people and members in charge of their Sunday worship services. Benin is a small West African country, six hours by plane from Paris, with a population of about 10 million; her capital is Porto-Novo and the seat of government is Cotonou.

The country has a good reputation because in the 2013 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) it ranked thirteenth among fifty-two Africa nations; among the members of the Economic Union of West African States (ECOWAS), Benin ranked first. This country was spared post-colonial problems -- starvation, civil wars and natural disasters. Benin is poor but I didn't see flagrant misery. Notably, it's a country that takes care of many refugees and does it well. Nowadays, Benin is also used as a model in this region for its attitude toward its past -- more on that later.

Benin lacks gigantic cities. Cotonou has six hundred thousand inhabitants and its suburb, Abomey-Calavi, equals that population. Benin is located between Nigeria and Togo. There is a conurbation of sorts from those three nations' major coastal cities. They are going to build the Trans-West African Coast Highway.

The region is now undergoing economic transformation. Nevertheless, Benin's coast is still wild. When we went to Ouida the wind was blowing strongly. In Benin, nature rules, not human beings. Many traditional activities remain, especially in net fishing and agriculture.

The Beninese Church

The country was tempted by Marxism in the past, but did not fall into dictatorship. In 1972, Mathieu Kérékou deposed the chairman of the Presidential Council of the nation, which was then known as Dahomey.

In 1975, the year that our missionaries arrived, President Kérékou (1972–91 and 1996–2006) declared himself a Marxist–Leninist, declared Marxist–Leninism as the nation's model and changed the nation's name to Benin. (Public protest caused Benin to abandon Marxist–Leninism in 1989.) Mr. Kanatani, the father of a second-generation member in France, was one of the 1975 missionaries to Benin. The earlier members had to work under the Kérékou regime for years; nevertheless, the number of members didn't stop increasing.

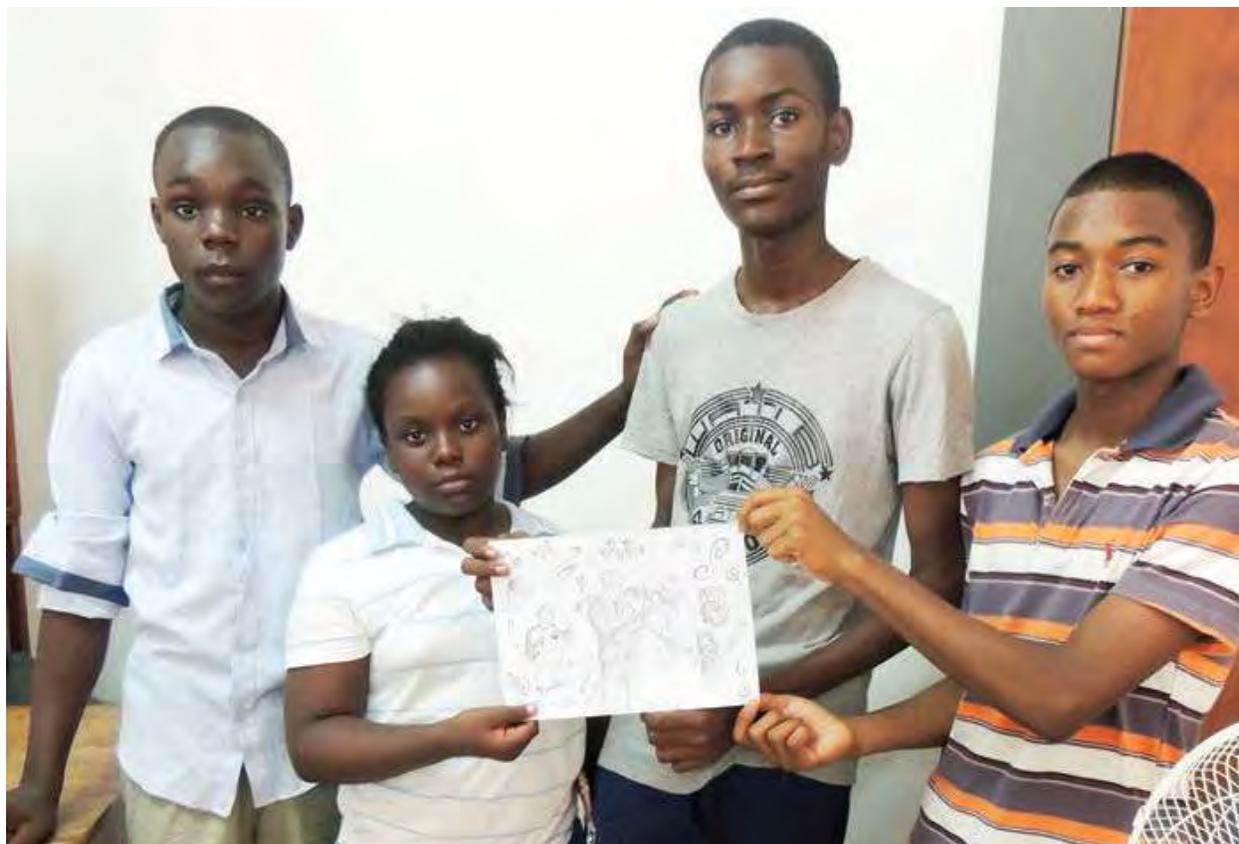
Today, Benin has the third-most members in Africa, after the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cote d'Ivoire. As a portion of the population, it's the nation in Africa that we have most deeply penetrated. I believe that is because Beninese members are very well organized and they attentively follow instructions. The members in general are uncomplicated, simple people. I was continually surprised to see the diplomas they had earned. They are so modest. One woman was a biological engineer; most of the members have advanced degrees.

The assistant national leader, Mr. Jérémie Egueh, invited me to Benin and I worked closely with the president of Benin's Blessed Family Department. I also saw Kevin Winter in Benin. He was one of the

1975 missionaries to Africa. His original country was Chad. Since October, four Japanese missionaries have been working there.

They have centers scattered throughout the country, though the urban population of the country is concentrated on the coast. Their headquarters is located in Godomey on the outskirts of Cotonou. It's a very popular quarter but quite poor.

The building covers three thousand square meters. Construction isn't completed but everything works well. It has a big courtyard. When they conduct workshops, dozens of people live there, under rudimentary but still decent conditions. They have a big hall that holds three hundred people.



High school students with their artistic depiction of "How to succeed in life"

Mission Work in Benin

My schedule was quite full for the first and second weeks. I first conducted a four-day Succeed in Life workshop for people eleven to twenty-one years old. I was impressed by the general level of those young people and their knowledge of Divine Principle. I believe that if members of our second generation competed against them, the Beninese would win. They know Divine Principle much better than we do. I was impressed even when I was with the youngest, the seven- to ten-year-olds. When I spoke about Universal Prime Force, I asked, what is a force? Immediately, one stood up and said that it was energy and another without hesitation said that it was power.

They don't learn by heart but I felt they are very spirited. I worked with the youngest ones for two days. I don't have experience teaching people so young. I was challenged. At first I told them that I did not think I could carry out the program, but they told me it was very important to them. So I did it and it was very interesting.

A hundred members came to the first workshop for the older ones and ninety to the second. They were so well disciplined. After an hour and a half if I told them, "Let's take a break," they wouldn't understand.

They are not used to having breaks as we are in France. They are more focused. Another point that surprised me is that the young boys have the dignity of grown men. Also, if I were to give them a microphone and ask them to answer a question, they do not just give the answer, they shout it out; they proclaim it, like young prophets.

Hope for International Matching

I had a matching preparation workshop with the older ones. They are at an age when they increasingly think about the matching, but they don't have the same facilities we do to connect to the internet. The language barrier is very strong too.

These are some points with which we can help them. Our experience in that field is precious for them, because they want international marriages, if possible. It's a big challenge when you live in Benin.

Teaching Teachers

I was asked to teach their Sunday school teachers for three days. I had never done that before, so I told them that I didn't see why I should do that. "It's very important," I was told, "You need to prepare yourself and train them."

It turned out to be a very useful experience. They are as deeply concerned as we are to develop a systematic approach to teaching those in our second generation from nursery school until the end of high school. They have many documents on Sunday school education that are in English and come from Korea that they take very seriously. Few of them understand English, however. When I looked through the documents, I realized that we should also be interested in them. I learned many things there.

Among other things, I taught the fifty Sunday school teachers the education theory that I had taught in France before. Benin is well known in Africa for its extreme interest in education.

There are many hyper-intelligent people in the country, who graduate from high school very early and study in big schools usually in France or in the United States. They are talented in studying.

Campus Witnessing

We organized *parole donnée* witnessing program, with the theme, "global education," at the Abomey-Calavi National University, which has a good reputation. Located near Lake Nokoué, the university, which was founded in 1970 and has sixty thousand students, is considered one of Africa's best. CARP, which is officially recognized, has been active on campus for twenty years. I finished my stay by giving the Sunday worship service in the education center, where they recently had a seven-day workshop for forty students. Believe me, when they hold workshops, it's intense.

Historical Sites

I had the opportunity to visit three of Benin's most famous sites. All three were impressive. I visited the royal palaces of Abomey-Calavi, which are unique in Africa. Cities like Timbuctoo in Mali and Agadez in Niger have interesting ruins, but only in Benin can you find African royal palaces of this type. This UNESCO World Heritage Site comprises around forty palaces. It goes beyond being a curiosity and gives a sense of the greatness of Benin's past civilization. French colonial officials banished the last monarch, King Béhanzin (1844–1906) to Fort de France on the French island of Martinique in 1894. Later, the king requested to be transferred to Blida, Algeria, where he eventually died.

The Beninese people have a complex relationship with their kings, because these kings were indeed great and well organized but were also involved in the slave trade. It is generally understood that they shipped 2 million slaves from Dahomey; so the relationship with their kings is complex.

Beninese people are bright; they have an unusual philosophy toward slavery, one in which they think one should repent first before accusing others. In February 1999, when Mattieu Kérékou was president of Benin for the second time, he visited the Church of the Great Commission in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States. In front of the mainly African– American congregation, the president got down on his knees and apologized for the key role that Africans played in the slave trade and for his nation's participation. Following that, Benin hosted an "International Conference on Slavery and Reconciliation," at which the then president of Ghana, Jerry John Rawlings, apologized for his nation's historical involvement in the slave trade. Because they appreciate this language and the heart behind it, African-Americans have invested in Benin as a nation that has a sound philosophy regarding this painful historical reality.

A Bit of Europe in Africa

Another curiosity full of charm is Ganvie, on Lake Nokoué. The lake water is brackish. Seawater enters the lake making it undrinkable, leading to many health issues. Nevertheless, it's an experience to see, just a few kilometers from the capital, such an astonishing place. It looked as if we were in Southeast Asia; the houses are built on stilts above the lake surface. People travel by skiff, which they propel using poles in the shallow water. It's full of charm. Ganvie is a fishing village of thirty thousand inhabitants that is known as Africa's Venice.

Reclamation, Liberation

Finally, on the day before going back to France I went to Ouidah, which is famous as a prolific slave-trading port. It's also the world headquarters of voodoo. Those two dark aspects come together in Ouidah.

I visited a voodoo temple. I was photographed holding a python with another around my neck; voodoo adherents believe pythons are the ancestors of the local people.

I was moved by being in those places; I could sense what people forced to go to the New World went through. I could "put myself in their shoes." I saw the precise place where their bodies were branded with a red-hot iron, as if they were cattle. In order that their screams not disturb the slave traders in their fine, nearby houses, the slaves were forced to bite down on a stick, which was held in place with a rope. Not only were they reduced to a position lower than human beings but the idea was that they must forget everything about their homeland before leaving.

Everything that was done to dull their brains made them almost crazy before they boarded the ship that would take them away. I visited a mass grave for those that died in the process even before the traders were able to get them onboard a ship. In 1992, UNESCO created a Gate of No Return. It's an archway you pass through in the area leading up to the Atlantic shore. Passing through the Gate of No Return is meant to help you empathize with the men, women and children who were forced to board ships bound for Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States never to return to their homes, families or villages.

In Ouidah, I felt that something in Benin is like an initiation course that teaches about the development of human beings, because finally it's a message of hope that is given there. They don't rejoice in suffering. Ouidah is a city that is flourishing now, in part because of African– American investment. When I think about the fact that Benin is governed well and is beginning to prosper, I am prone to think that it has something to do with its attitude toward history.

Dae Mo Nim is coming there soon. The fact that spiritual liberation will take place in Benin gives us all hope that those that suffered on earth and suffered in the spiritual world because of their deeds on earth have some means of becoming truly free.