

A Mission Grows in Senegal

by **Andrew J. Schleicher**

Nashville, Tennessee, June 5, 2009--In Senegal, a land where 95 percent of the population is Muslim, The United Methodist Church has been welcomed and is growing through good relations with neighbors and partnerships across borders.

The United Methodist Church was already known in the region through the work of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). "In the mid-'90s, we received an invitation from a Muslim man who was a key leader in Senegal," said the Rev. Patrick L. Friday, a staff member of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. "He had worked with our relief efforts."

This man invited the board to establish United Methodist churches in the country. "This is an invitation that we cherish," Friday admits. "Our work is very ecumenical."

The United Methodist Church has developed prison ministries, a women's ministry, and agricultural and micro-credit programs. "Any aspect of what we do in Senegal is comprehensive," Friday continues. "It has taken time to develop. The United Methodist Church has been creative."

Senegal Mission

Senegal was recognized as a "mission" by the General Board of Global Ministries in 2007. The United Methodist Church there now has 17 congregations and 950 members. It has also grown from owning only one structure in 1998 to holding at least five buildings today.

Two years ago the first group of eight pastors was ordained. That group included Joseph Bleck, who now serves as mission superintendent. It also included Dibor Fatou Ndour, the first woman to be ordained in any church in Senegal.

"We are building up a ministry that is led by local people," Friday says. He adds that the goal is to move Senegal toward becoming

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Karen Ujereh has served as a missionary in Senegal for 10 years; she sees membership and financial strengthening as priorities.

Image by: Patrick Friday

Source: GBGM Administration



The Reverends Paul Messer, Etienne Dionne, and Joseph Bleck have been pivotal in growing Senegal's missions and congregations.

Image by: Patrick Friday

Source: GBGM Administration

its own annual (regional) conference, but it has a way to go yet.

"I think that the leadership in the Senegal mission is a very good leadership, but it is young," said Karen Ujereh, a missionary in Senegal for 10 years. "They have a lot on their plate.... The leadership is strong, but they should also move slowly."

Mission leaders would like to develop more congregations. Global Ministries has committed to starting 400 congregations around the world in the next few years. Senegal is part of that commitment.

Ujereh would like to see the existing churches strengthened. She says the mission needs to reinforce its membership as well as their sense of ownership. However, it also needs to be strengthened financially, and right now this comes from outside the country.

Currently, support for the mission comes primarily through Global Ministries and Côte d'Ivoire Annual Conference. Bishop Benjamin Boni of Côte d'Ivoire oversees the mission as its episcopal leader. The Côte d'Ivoire Board of Ordained Ministry supports the process toward ordination. It also facilitates pastor training with the assistance of Global Ministries and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

The Rev. Paul Messer, a Global Ministries missionary from the North Alabama Conference, is the interim country director in Senegal, taking over some of the responsibility of Karen Ujereh on her retirement from service there.

Relations with Muslims

While relations between the Muslim majority and the United Methodist minority are generally good, tensions do occur and, so far, have been handled with positive results. For example, Patrick Friday tells about a creative resolution to a situation involving the Thiadiaye Circuit in eastern Senegal:

The United Methodist Church bought a parcel of land a few years ago to build a sanctuary, but the local Muslim leaders were not prepared for this new situation.... The local Muslims built a mosque that towers over the church property, apparently to assert its dominant position in the people's eyes. In the fall of 2008, the Rev. Etienne Dione, pastor of the Thiadiaye Circuit, offered the leader of the mosque a portion of the United Methodist land on which to grow vegetables for his family. Deeply touched by this offer, the Muslim began to soften his stance toward the church, and the situation improved dramatically. The two religious leaders are growing crops together and some of the sale of some of the produce will go toward building a new church.

Focus on Poverty

One of the new areas of focus for The United Methodist Church as a denomination is the alleviation of poverty. In Senegal this is being done in a variety of ways, including micro-enterprise and agricultural loans.

Missionary Ujereh describes how the Senegal Mission works with women's associations to train them to start or enhance their small businesses: "For the first 12 weeks they work together and loan among themselves with their own money." Afterwards they deposit that money and receive three times the amount for a further round of lending. Eventually they will get their money back. "The women are doing their own businesses,"

Ujereh says. It is not a cooperative.

One woman, Fatou, has an open-air restaurant where she provides breakfast for persons working in the market. However, her cups were broken and lacked handles, discouraging business. Through the micro-credit program she was able to invest in a new set of dishes. Fatou's business has tripled.

Agricultural loans are also provided to individuals, helping them improve access to water. In four years of working with Alphonse in growing onions, he was able to move from his mud thatch house to a new cinderblock home on a bigger piece of land closer to water.

Three young onion growers in Pecc Maxa were also able to double their crop. They then bought a horse and cart, which they were able to use as a taxi to transport people in and out of the village.

Health and nutrition are also part of the work of the Senegal Mission, which has been engaged in AIDS and malaria prevention since the start in the 1990s.

Partnerships

Partnerships with churches outside of Africa are just beginning. In April 2009 a Senegal Mission Initiative Consultation was held in Wisconsin. The Rev. Tony Fuller, Global Ministries' consultant for this initiative, was instrumental in organizing the event. The consultation included inspirational worship, general sessions and workshops for learning, and time for bonding and fellowship among participants.

"We had Senegal recipes that the local people made, rice with stew cooked with vegetables and beef," said Fuller in a telephone interview. "I wish there had been more attendees, because there were great resources and not enough people to share it with."

There are currently partnerships involving 12 US congregations in the Senegal Mission. The \$20,000 contributed thus far is one-third of the goal. "The vision is to find enough partners to fund the mission to be successful and to do the projects they want to do without any worry over money," said Fuller.

Partnerships provide funds for a pastor's salary and rent and space for worship. Even with these partnerships, another \$60,000 is needed for the Mission. Fuller would like to see more support for the mission's wellness program, which includes nutrition centers.

Fuller is organizing trips to Senegal in 2010 and 2011 for those interested in partnerships. He says the importance of these yearly trips is "to show support for the Senegalese people and to inspire the US people who go there."

Fuller first went to Senegal himself in January 2007. At the time he was the Wisconsin Conference mission secretary. On that trip with others from Wisconsin, he saw the historical remnants of the Atlantic slave trade as well as African wildlife. The important part of the trip was meeting people during worship, teaching, and taking part in a medical mission. Fuller took on the role of consultant for Senegal in early 2008. He sends out a monthly e-mail and hopes to develop a website to promote the mission and partnerships with it. For more information about the Senegal Mission or church partnerships, please contact the Rev. Tony Fuller at

tonyfullersenegal@gmail.com.

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Schleicher is a writer, editor, and provisional deacon living in Nashville, Tennessee, who focused on African studies at Kalamazoo College in Michigan.

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