

# MISSIONS IN WEST AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

George Gumah

## INTRODUCTION:

- Mission fuels the growth and expansion of the church globally. This has shown that God is still working (John 5:17) and He is recruiting more laborers into His vineyard in ways that are beyond imagination (Matthew 9:35-38). Globally, there are a total of 17,094 people groups with about 7,165 considered as unreached. This indicates that there is 41.9 percent of unreached globally (Joshua Project, 2020). The unreached largely belong to major religious blocks such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ethnic religions/tribal expressed in multiple ways depending on the context they are practiced.
- The West African sub-region is right in the middle of the world and it is strategically positioned for the evangelization of the world. The sub-region has the footprints of slavery and colonialism, which has influenced many facets of life both positively and negatively. Concurrently, the gospel was brought by missionaries who sacrificed their lives to propagate the good news, which has led to the establishment of the church in West Africa. Most West African countries were exposed to missionary activities in the 1800s and notable among them were the Catholic missionary activities in Senegal and the Protestant missionaries in Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, there were disagreements, unhealthy competitions, and conflicts among the many denominations that were present in the sub-region (Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2017). Christian doctrines were much enforced and converts were expected to strictly adhere to biblical teachings. The incorporation of education, social interventions, community development, and bible translation enhanced the activities of the missionaries and gave them access to areas that were hitherto resistant to the gospel. Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2017; 252) explains that “the expansion of the missionary movement into Africa was part of the growing conception of Christian responsibility for the regeneration of African peoples”.
- Many years after the inception of missionary work in West Africa, the church has grown to global recognition. The question that lingers is “what is the state of mission activities in West Africa”? What is the extent of the work done or yet to be done? We are in a globalized and dynamic world and it will be prudent to ascertain the state of Mission in West Africa and to understand the opportunities and challenges that may foster or derail the efforts workers serving in this sub-region are putting in to share the gospel. Exploring mission in West Africa will help churches and mission agencies to have an idea of the extent of the work and understand the political, socio-economic, and religious terrain that will (1) enhance the personnel development and deployment as well 2) strategic ministry and partnership and 3) resource mobilization. This article, therefore, highlights some key characteristics of West Africa, outlines some opportunities and challenges from both secular and church/mission perspectives, and proposes some ways forward for mission to thrive in West Africa.

## MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS:

Fifteen West African countries are highlighted in this article to help understand the state of the gospel in the sub-region. The countries are *Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo*. The landscape of West Africa is covered with two major national languages. There are five Anglophone countries (Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria) and ten Francophone countries. This is directly linked with the Colonial rulers who left their language footprints on the Soil of West Africa.

## Population dynamics

- The population of West Africa is over 396 million with Nigeria having about 52% of the total pop-

ulation representing more than half of the population of the sub-continent. This makes Nigeria a very important country in the advancement of mission if Christians can be mobilized and sent to join the existing workforce. The population of West Africa keeps increasing annually at a fast rate and this rapid growth has ramifications for evangelism and mission activities. We hope that this growth will bring progress and advancement of mission within and out of the sub-region (Figure 2).

- Reports from Worldometer (2020), the population of West Africa is about 5% of the total world population and ranks as number 2 in the whole of Africa with about 48% of the population in urban centers.
- According to Figure 1, Nigeria has the highest number of unreached population with about 64 million people representing 31% of the country’s

total population, followed by Niger (23 million) and Mali (18 million) sequentially. In terms of the total population and unreached population ratio, Mali and Niger top the chart because of the high Islamic presence in these countries. Countries like Guinea and Senegal also have a significantly low ratio. Cape Verde has the lowest unreached population with no known unreached population.

### Religious Dynamics

Religion is central to the life of the people in West Africa and understanding the composition of the main religious bodies that are predominant in the sub-region is essential in driving mission activities. Figure 3, gives a pictorial view of the three major religious blocks in West Africa and Figure 4 shows the ratio of Christianity and evangelicals in each coun-

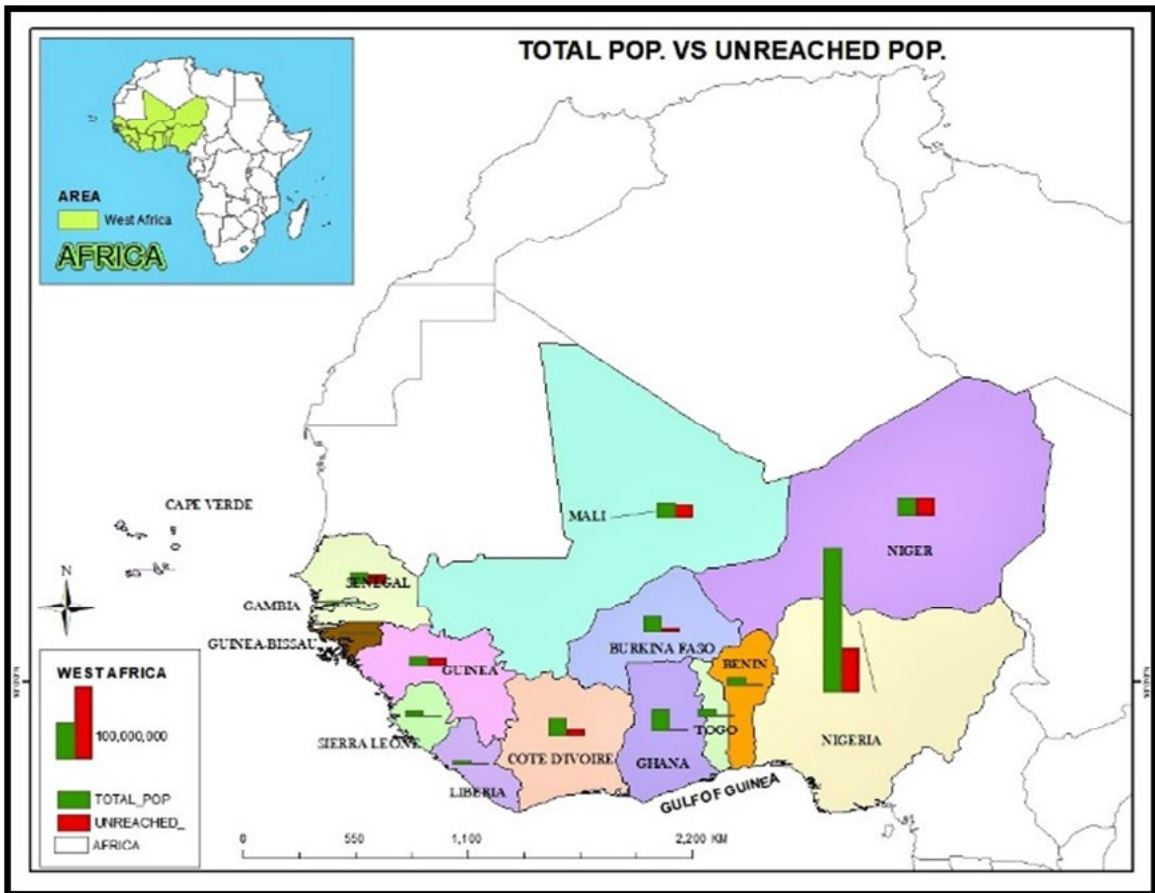


Figure 1: Comparing Total pop. of countries with Unreached pop.  
Data Source: Joshua Project, 2020

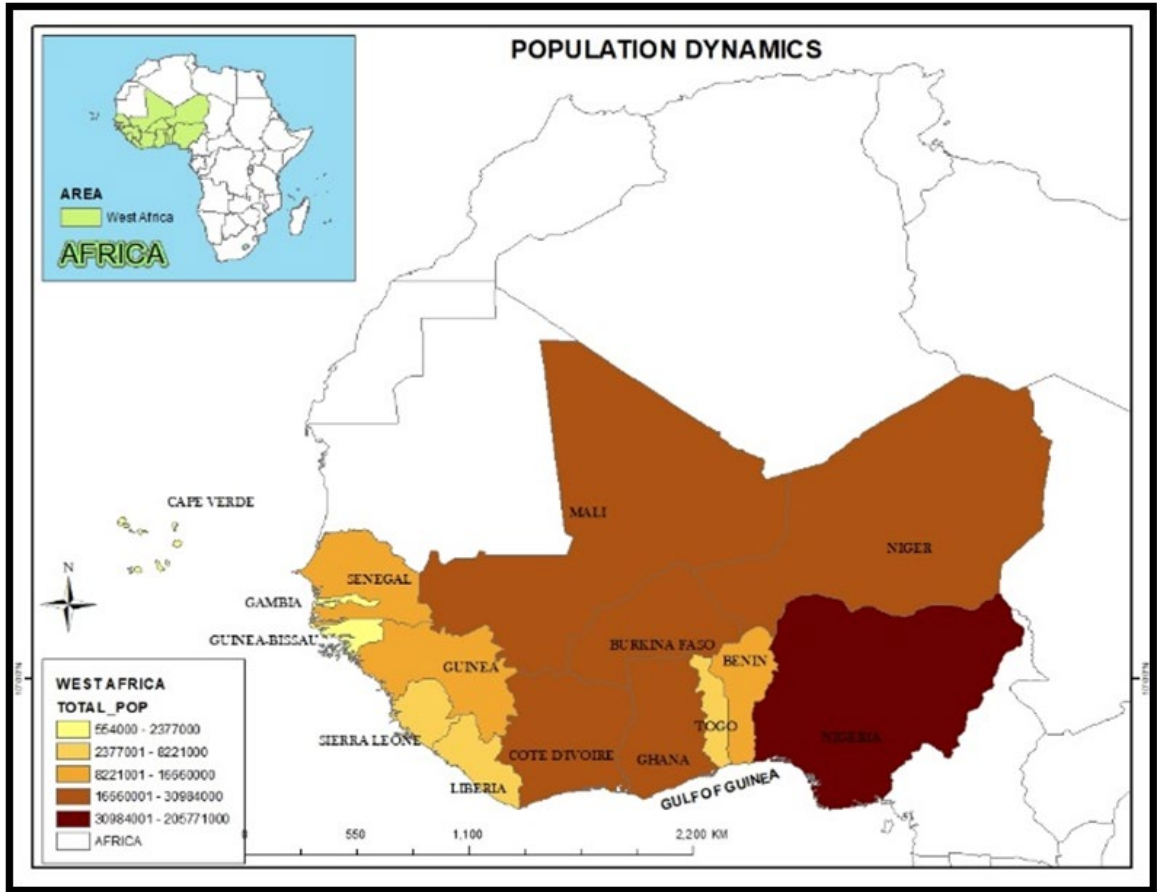


Figure 2: Population ranges for countries in West Africa

try.

- Generally, Islam is dominant in nine countries; Niger (93.4%), Senegal (90.2%), Gambia (89%), Guinea (88.2%), Mali (87.4%), Sierra Leone (60.9%), Guinea-Bissau (51.6%), and Burkina Faso (54.8%) and Cote D'Ivoire (45.2%). They have a total population of about 91 million. Even though Islam is the highest religion in each country mentioned, Nigeria has the highest pop-

ulation of Muslims, with little over 82 million adherents. Nigeria, like most coastal countries in West Africa, has Islam adherents mostly in the middle to northern parts of the country. This has a chorological history as Islam came at the early ages through the north.

- Fortunately, most of the Islam dominated countries in West Africa are still open to the gospel but there are still some high-risk areas and closed

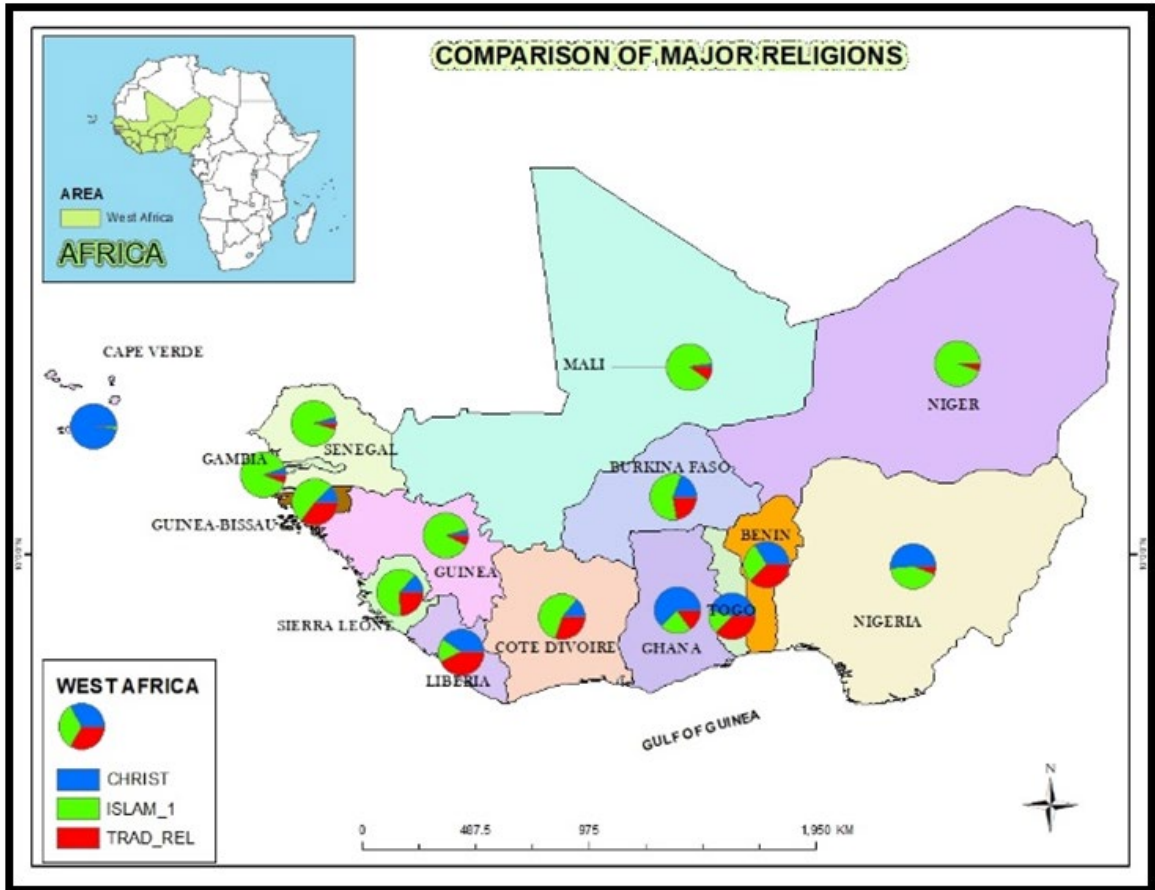


Figure 3: Major Religions in West Africa  
Data Source: Joshua Project, 2020

- Four countries, namely, Cape Verde, Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria have Christianity as the largest religion. The total evangelical population in West Africa is over 55 million (40%) out of the total Christian population of about 135 million. Most of the mission drive in West Africa is expected to come from the evangelical population which is less than 50% of the total Christian population. In Figure 4, Cote D'Ivoire has the largest percentage of evangelicals in comparison to the Christian population, followed by Nigeria and Burkina Faso.
- Although the majority of Africans are now Muslim or Christian, traditional religions have endured in many countries and still dominant in two countries – Benin and Liberia. In Benin,

Voodoo is the national religion and it is well-rooted in the country and other parts of West Africa especially in Togo.

- The non-representation of the minority religions such as Hindu, Buddhism, Bahai does not deny their increasing influence in West Africa. Other pseudo-Christian groups such as the Jehovah's Witness and the Lather Day Saints are gaining significant grounds with church structures all over the country. They have multiple services where the local dialects are well utilized and integrated into their activities through music, arts, and teachings. They also care a lot for the poor, marginalized, and disabled, giving them the leverage in their expansion agenda.

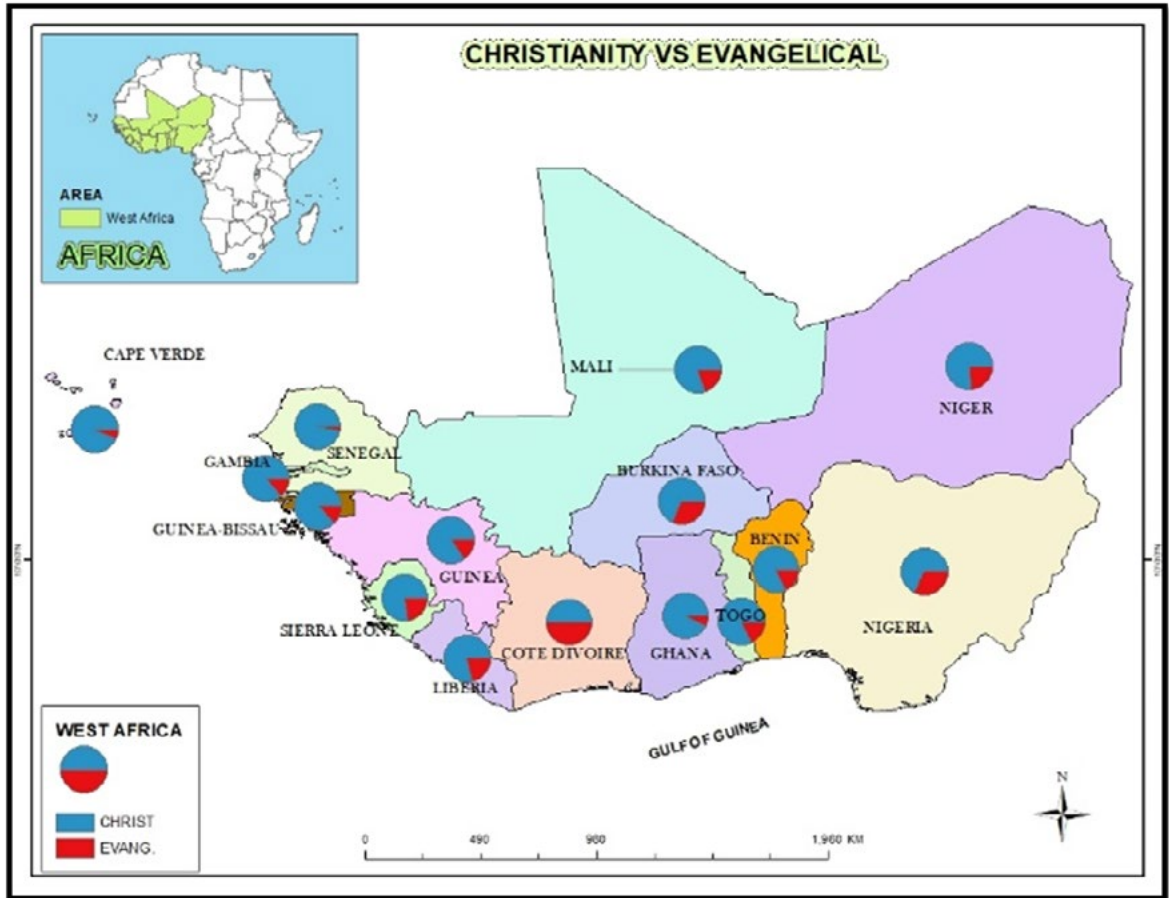


Figure 4: Understanding the state of Evangelicals

### People Groups Dynamics

West Africa has 1,317 People groups (PGs) with Nigeria having the largest with about 544 people groups representing 41% (Refer to Figure 6). Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Niger, and Mali have more than half of all the PGs as unreached. Niger alone has 28 UPGs out of the total 36 PGs in the country.

- Most of these people groups can be found across borders. Every country has at least one language that is spoken in other West African countries. Hausa, Fulani, Kotokoli, Mossi, Ewe, Dyula, are some common groups that cut across countries. The total number of Unreached People Groups (UPGs) in West Africa is currently 379 representing 29% of all people groups.
- This may seem that so many people groups have been reached with the gospel but the problem now is that many Unreached are in territories that are hostile to the gospel and some have a huge population. For instance, in Nigeria alone, the total number of Fulani is close to 20 million, the Kanuri (Yerwa and Manga together) are about 8 million people. In Niger, the Tuareg and Fulani have over 2 million each, and the Hausas are more than 11 million people.
- 118 of the UPGs are Frontiers people groups. According to Joshua Project (2020), “Frontier People Groups (FPGs) are Unreached People Groups with 0.1% or fewer Christians of any kind and no evidence of a self-sustaining gospel movement”.

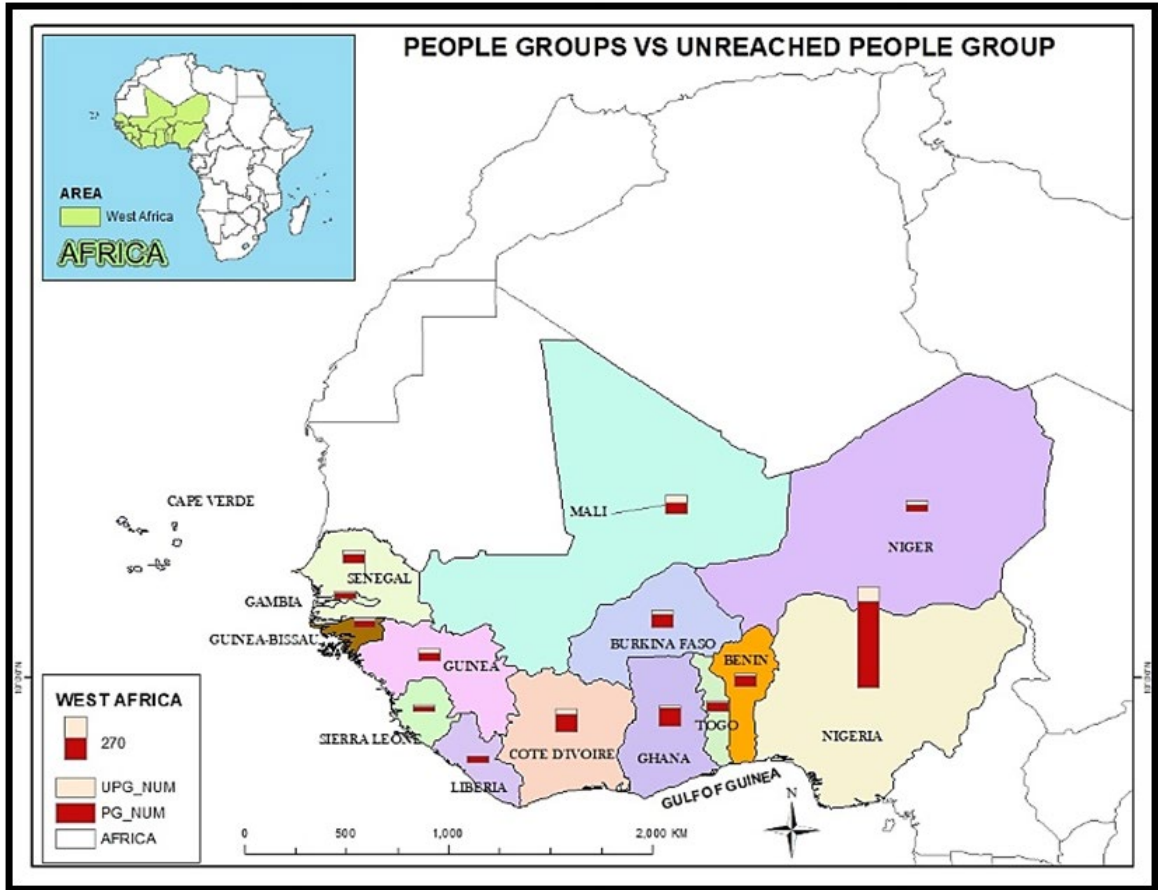


Figure 5: Total Number of UPGs vs Number of PGs  
Data Source: Joshua Project, 2020

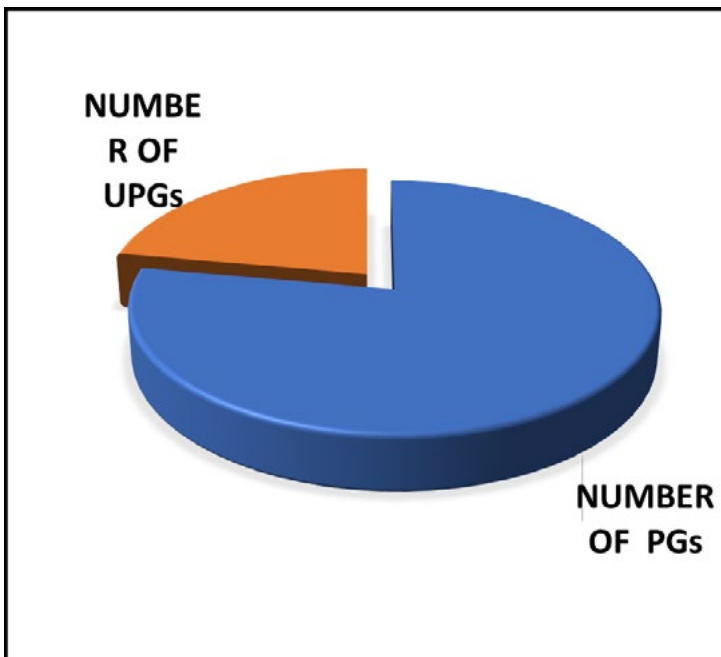




Figure 6: PGs and UPGs for each Country




**CHALLENGES:**

These challenges are not exclusively unique to West Africa but are worth highlighting. They cover both developmental and spiritual challenges that exist today and may impede the smooth progress of mission activities in West Africa.

<p><b>1</b></p>	<p><b>High Illiteracy Rate</b></p> <p>Illiteracy rates in West Africa are among the highest in the world with the situation worse among females. Globally, about 7 countries in West Africa are among the highest. Eight out of the 15 countries have less than 50% of their population as illiterates (Human Rights report, 2009). This situation has implications for missions in terms of access to and sharing the gospel.</p>	
<p><b>2</b></p>	<p><b>Politic Instabilities and Violence</b></p> <p>After independence, there have been several internal disputes, civil conflicts, coup d'états, and demonstrations that have marred the stability of many countries particularly those situated at the Sahel. The least thing in West Africa can trigger violence, especially relating to politics, ethnic clashes, and resource allocations. Pre-election, elections and post-election violence are also common due to rivalry among candidates which incite violence. This phenomenon inhibits the sending of workers and mission activities.</p>	
<p><b>3</b></p>	<p><b>High Poverty and Health Challenges</b></p> <p>Though West Africa is rich in resources, this has not fully translated to the standard of living of the majority of its populace and this is seen in the high low-income class. According to the ADB report (2018), poverty is high, with 43% of the population below the international \$1.90 per day poverty line. This makes people feel they need help rather than giving towards mission activities. Thus, over-reliance on foreign donations, which is gradually dwindling.</p>	
<p><b>4</b></p>	<p><b>Nominalism and Syncretism</b></p> <p>Many people profess to be Christians but their level of commitment and demonstration of Christ-likeness in all areas of life is sometimes questionable. This nominalism makes some Christians compromise on their Christian values. They might not see the need to commit their life, time, and resources to mission activities. Many Christians are still holding on to the religious elements of the African traditional religion.</p>	
<p><b>5</b></p>	<p><b>The Threat of Islam and Terrorism</b></p> <p>Islam has a long history in West Africa and it is the fastest-growing religion in the sub-region. Though in most communities Islam co-exists with Christians and other religions, the extreme activities of Jihadist activities are a great threat to missions especially in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. According to Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2017; 252), the expansion of Christianity from the coast “coincided with the simultaneous southerly expansion of Islam which posed a threat to Christian mission work”.</p>	

<h1>6</h1>	<h2>Church Doctrinal Issues and Inadequate Missional Leadership</h2> <p>Issues of prosperity message and the inadequate development of leaders in the West African church continue to stifle missionary work. These doctrinal issues influence the posture of members towards missions and the strategies used in sharing the gospel. Christians become less rooted in the gospel and consequently become unavailable. Few visionary leaders at the top and grass root levels are positioned and equipped to spearhead mission movements in the sub-region.</p>	
<h1>7</h1>	<h2>Traditional Religion Upsurge</h2> <p>Recently, there is a sporadic growth of interest in African traditional religion, occultism, and other spiritual practices. Leaders of these groups are modifying their activities and making them more appealing to the general public. Surprisingly, these are no more hidden realities but are displayed on television, radio, and social media. This poses a challenge to missionary work as leaders of these groups are gaining popularity and drawing many from experiencing the power of Christ.</p>	

**PROSPECTS:**

	<h3>1. CHURCH AND AGENCY GROWTH</h3> <p>The growth of the church in West Africa, especially of evangelicals is a cause for celebration. Though this numerical growth is not the measure of a healthy missional church, it has the potential to nurture mission activities through engaging the growing church. With intentional and strategic mobilization and equipping, West Africa has the potential to send more missionaries to augment the existing working force.</p>
	<h3>2. GROWING YOUTH AND PROFESSIONALS</h3> <p>West Africa has a median age of 18, with Mali (16.3) and Niger (16.6) leading the global chart according to a report by the World Economic Forum. With the huge young population of West Africa deeply exposed to formal education, there is an untapped potential for recruiting these graduates and professionals into mainline mission work. They can serve unreached peoples using their acquired skills, experiences, and professional ethics. Student groups and youth groups across the country are actively engaged in short-term mission activities.</p>
	<h3>3. UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF FEMALE WORKERS</h3> <p>Gone were the days only men were enlisted into mission activities. In the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of females who are responding to the call to send the gospel to the unreached. This has contributed to the total number of missionaries sent out of West Africa.</p>





**4. THE UNREACHED ARE EVERYWHERE**

There is a surge in the number of people migrating from one place to another and the preferred destinations are usually in the cities or urban areas or to areas where there are productive activities such as farming, industrial activities, and other jobs. The cities and towns are now the hubs of economically active people from different parts of the countries in West Africa. It is much easier now to reach out to different unreached groups in the regional capitals especially because their locations are usually marked and they live in clusters.



**5. GROWING DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

West Africa is not left out of the digital growth and social media explosion. According to a report by GSM Associates in 2019, West Africa has about 100 million mobile internet users representing about one-fourth of the total population. There is currently 38% of Africans using mobile phones and this is projected to grow to about 67% by 2025. This statistic shows the steady growth of social media users.



**6. GROWING AWARENESS OF MISSIONS**

There is also a growing number of indigenous mission agencies that are taking bold initiatives in advocacy, mobilization, and sending. The exposure of individuals and churches to God’s mission, our responsibility in His mission, and the need to reach the unreached is widespread like never before. Increasingly, many people are becoming aware of the urgency of mission in the growth of the body of Christ.



**7. MISSION AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**

Mission and theological education are gaining roots in West Africa in both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Some are very young but others are robust and well equipped to prepare many workers and leaders for service in the church and on the mission fields. Interestingly, there is an increase in the intentionality to include mission content in theological schools and expose workers to mission education.

**PROSPECTS:**



**1. Indigenous Mission structure**

There is the need for a robust indigenous mission structure whether it be in the church or mission agencies that is self-sustaining, self-supportive, and self-propagating. These structures should touch all age groups, all classes of people and accommodate new people who come into the church.



**2. Intentional Discipleship Drive**

Instead of simply seeking a larger membership the church should examine opportunities to build a coordinated effort at the level of both teaching and praxis. The church’s efforts should be aimed at developing mature disciples instead of merely winning more converts.



### 3. Oral learners and their Access to the Gospel

As mission agencies seek to win people in different places, there must be intentionality in developing materials and logistics to allow oral learners to access the Gospel. They should be empowered and encouraged to replicate what they learn. Also, other non-verbal language forms such as sign language should be promoted.



### 4. Local Leadership development

It is the responsibility of both church and mission leaders to identify, develop, empower, and deploy more local leaders to continue the work on the field. There is a need for leadership at both managerial and field levels. As much as the leadership gap should be filled at all levels, the grassroots leadership where the real action is, must not be neglected. No matter the educational level of people, they can be groomed to become effective leaders.



### 5. United Work Force

The task of evangelization cannot be done by one denomination or agency. It needs individual responsibility and collaborative efforts in equipping workers, raising and sharing resources, and thinking strategically together on how to effectively engage people groups and communities. There are few workers and we cannot afford to work in isolation.



### 6. Meeting Felt Needs and Engaging in Community Development

There is the need for a robust indigenous mission structure whether it be in the church or mission agencies that is self-sustaining, self-supportive, and self-propagating. These structures should touch all age groups, all classes of people and accommodate new people who come into the church.



### 7. Raising and Training Christian Professionals as Missionaries

Some of the 'usual' missionary models will not work in hostile environments. There is a need to raise Christian professionals who can work without raising any alarms. Also, this model is sustainable because their profession can be a good source of support for the work.



### 8. Operation Up North

All the countries north of West Africa have Islam as their major religion. Churches and mission agencies must send the gospel to their neighbouring countries in the Sahel and the Mediterranean areas since they are the major hub and source of Islam and Jihadist threats to the sub-region.



### 9. Language Acquisition

One important step to advance mission activities in West Africa is the flexibility to learn the culture and languages of the people groups we are reaching out to. Another important language I want to stress is learning French by Anglophone Christians since most of the countries speak French in the sub-region. Francophone Christians have advanced with learning and speaking English.



### 10. Language translation and Literacy Program

There remain a significant number of languages in West Africa that needs the bible in their local dialect. This will facilitate the sharing of the gospel and equipping local workers to serve their people. Literacy programs will let people learn techniques on how to read the Bible and to replicate what they learn.

## CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the church and mission agencies in West Africa have a great potential to advance the course of mission in the sub-region and beyond. All indication proves that West Africa is ready and have the critical mass to send the gospel to all parts of the sub-region and other parts of the world.

However, there remain more lands to be covered and the task is not without challenges. The political, socio-economic, and spiritual terrain is rough but we have to trust the Lord of the harvest as He promised to be with us. Every country should have the responsibility of tackling prevailing problems and develop strategies and action plans based on the local culture, ethnic, religious, political, and demographic diversity.

Church and mission leaders have to maximize their potential and take advantage of the opportunities available to advance missions. As much as the world is looking up to the vibrant and growing church in West Africa does not mean we should give little attention to our “Jerusalem”. We should intentionally prepare people to reach the unreached at home and abroad.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ADB (2018). West Africa Economic Outlook. Accessed on 10 /11/2020 from [https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/2018AEO/African\\_Economic\\_Outlook\\_2018\\_West-Africa.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/2018AEO/African_Economic_Outlook_2018_West-Africa.pdf)
- GSM Association (2019). Digital ECOWAS: Pathways to investment, innovation, and inclusion. Accessed on 10 /11/2020 from [https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GSMA\\_Digital-ECOWAS\\_WEB\\_LowRes.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GSMA_Digital-ECOWAS_WEB_LowRes.pdf)
- Joshua Project (2020). Accessed on 10 /11/2020 from <https://joshuaproject.net/>
- Joshua Project (2020). Frontier Definition. Accessed on 10 /11/2020 from <https://joshuaproject.net/frontier>
- Human Rights Report (2009). Accessed on 05 /11/2020 from <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2009/04/22/combating-worlds-lowest-literacy-rates> on
- Worldometer Report (2020). Western Africa Population. Accessed on 1/11/2020 from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/western-africa-population/>
- Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2017). Christian Missions in Africa and Their Role in The Transformation of African Societies. *Asian and African Studies*, 16, 2, 249-260.
- World Economic Forum (2020). Accessed on 20 /10/2020 from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/youngest-populations-africa/>
- BBC report. Story of Africa. [https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index\\_section6.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index_section6.shtml)