

Mission Inter Senegal: a case study of church mobilisation in a Christian minority context

Summary

Mission Inter Senegal (MIS) have been working from their base in Thiès, Senegal for 9 years. They have been working to establish churches whilst concurrently incorporating a process of church and community mobilisation that not only communicates about the Christian faith in rural areas, but also encourages localised development. The context in which they work is quite antagonistic to Christianity – both the strong Islamic context and the strong local cultural traditions hold quite a negative view of Christianity. As a result of the work of MIS, the proportion of Christians in these settings is increasing, and is far above the national average in many of the villages where they work.

Background

MIS was born out of PRONAED, the development body of the Fraternite Evangelique au Senegal in 1997. Since 1986, teams headed up by MIS have gone from Dakar into the interior of the country to communicate about the Christian faith. Many of the teams that went noted that there were several aspects in common:

- that there was a strong suspicion of Christians and the Christian faith (particularly in rural areas);
- that the few Christians that were there were persecuted; and
- that there was a high physical/socio-economic need.

Up to 1995, there were only 50 known Christians among the approximately three million Wolof tribes-people.

Christianity was not appreciated nor fully understood, particularly in the rural areas. It was associated with colonialism, and with repression. The Wolof tribe, in particular, had negative views about the Christian faith, being traditionally fairly Islamic in their beliefs. MIS sought to overcome these negative attitudes, focussing on a triangular region that covered both the Wolof and the Serer tribes.

Response

MIS's strategy is centred on establishing sustainable Christian communities, with other responses being incorporated as time evolves. As there are few churches in the focus areas, one of the key elements that they considered was to focus on ensuring that there was a church in the village that would be able to develop the spiritual life of believers, help with meeting the physical needs of the village through participatory processes of needs identification, and would be able to enable the establishment of further Christian communities in the surrounding area.

MIS choose to work in villages where there is already a Christian in the village who is active and keen to take things forward. These individuals go through a stringent recruitment process. They are given an interview, and if considered appropriate, they then shadow an experienced worker for 3 months, during which time they're evaluated. At the end of this, they are then given a more formal interview and if successful, MIS then agree to employ them and they return to begin work in their village.

Their role is initially to encourage the local Christians to develop their relationship with Christ, pray about their village and to involve the other village members in developing their surroundings. They are also encouraged to facilitate the church, where it already exists, in being a more influential member of the community. Historically, the church has taken a back-seat in many decisions or activities, as there is concern that they are not "Christian activities". This is being addressed through training and teaching on how to be a Christian and not lose relationships with other community members. Practically, this implies attendance at traditional events (e.g. naming ceremonies, marriages etc) rather than remaining on the sidelines, and being part of other decision-making events. The main ways that they hope to develop their work is by

- creating links with the villages and people
- positioning themselves to be aware of the needs of others
- encouraging reciprocity from community members
- helping the church to be recognised and accepted as a central player in the community

Church mobilisation in difficult contexts

Once decisions are taken, the MIS worker then communicates with MIS to see what can be done to meet the practical needs of making the project work. Often they will look to dig wells, purchase mills, construct health centres, start literacy classes and generate small businesses. Such activities require funds beyond the means of the villages, and MIS, supported by external agencies, help to cover these funding needs.

All MIS workers receive regular training and development through MIS supported sessions. These tend to be run every two years.

MIS look to work closely with church denominations, so that new Christian communities that are established are linked to, and receive support from, these bodies.

Challenges

The process of envisioning a new MIS worker can take some time. In some cases it has taken quite a few years to be sure that they are fully involved and committed to the vision of the programme. The results are positive though, especially as there is commitment to continual training and development.

Cultural practices and beliefs mean people are quite negative about the Christian faith (particularly among the Wolof). Their response to the outreaches and to the activities has been low. However, through meeting the practical needs of communities, attitudes have softened, and people are more open to talking about issues of faith.

People management was cited as perhaps the biggest challenge. Not only staff but also villagers have different expectations and support is essential to ensure that they are dealt with appropriately.

Impact

MIS has worked in over 15 villages with this approach, and have seen significant attitudinal and physical changes.

The villages of Soma and Babak, for example, have new health centres, mills, wells, and education projects. Some of this had also been supported by the local government. (MIS and the local village ensure that they understand what the local government development plans focus around to seek harmonisation of plans). In one case, the local government, on seeing that there was work being done in one village, developed the road leading to it having seen the positive work being done.

New churches and existing ones have grown in respect within the community, and are more socially involved within the community, even if the numbers of new people identifying with the Christian faith is still quite small.

Conclusion

The work of MIS provides a very positive model of church mobilisation in a very difficult religious context. The approach requires large investments of time and training to develop individuals. The process encourages individual response and growth from new Christians, as well as particular individuals demonstrating their own faith in action.

Author: Mark Butler, Tearfund
Information provided by Mission Inter Senegal