

Report on MECI / SCWA Forum on Witchcraft Accusations Against Children

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For many reading this, it may be hard to comprehend the hold that belief in witchcraft and witches has on people in many regions of Africa and beyond, or its devastating impact. Families and communities are torn apart by fear and suspicion. Individuals and whole societies are unable to flourish because of it. And in many areas, (as is the case in Togo), it is children that suffer the most. That's why this Round Table Action Forum (RTAF) and its success was so important.

The Background

The RTAF was a collaborative initiative between Mission Enfance pour Christ International (MECI) in Togo and Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA), based in the UK. MECI has been actively working among marginalised children in Togo for seven years, led by Gad and Liz Numadi. It currently works with children living with disability, those in prison and those affected by poverty. It also has a country-wide work training churches in child protection as well as equipping children's ministry workers in churches with the training they need to be effective.

Established in 2012, SCWA is a coalition of agencies based in the UK that is responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or the threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft. It works by influencing churches to engage with harmful beliefs and practices and empowers leaders to guide their church congregations and communities through a process of learning, which helps people to explore and apprehend the roots and consequences of witchcraft accusations. SCWA links with other agencies to develop practical training tools and resources; to equip church leaders with an essential grounding in theology, the law, and child development, and to share methods and approaches which will bring about change.

How the Forum came about

SCWA member BCT has had a warm relationship with MECI for several years, sharing experience and learning related to child protection. More recently, SCWA member Urban Saints has been working with MECI to train church-based children's workers to more dynamically and effectively work with children.

While training churches around Togo, MECI came to realise that witchcraft accusations and associated persecution against children and adults are prevalent not only in the general population but also in churches, where there is a preoccupation with the demonic and a deep fear of witchcraft and evil spirits. In September 2015, Susie Howe, SCWA Chair, visited MECI as part of a broader trip to Togo and shared SCWA's vision for empowering churches to address witchcraft accusations against children. The seed was sown for the RTAF. In March 2016, MECI and SCWA began to plan and organise the Forum for the end of the year.

Beliefs related to witchcraft accusations in Togo

Beliefs and practices related to witchcraft accusations in Togo are complex and all-pervading. There are around 41 tribes in Togo, each with their nuanced worldviews and traditional practices. Christian, Voodoo and animistic beliefs may be syncretised. Togo is a beautiful, verdant nation with some of the loveliest beaches in Western

Africa to the South. But the fear of witches and witchcraft is all-pervading in Togolese society and casts a dark shadow over people's lives.

In Togo, a witch is believed to have supernatural power to cause harm and misfortune; to kill and destroy. Witches are believed to fly around the world; meet at night with other witches, drink blood and eat human flesh. Any negative situation such as sterility or failure of crops, sickness or death may be attributed to witchcraft. Interestingly, so may social advancement, promotion in employment and the sudden acquisition of wealth. How has this person become rich or advanced in their work if it were not as a result of witchcraft?

The word for 'witch' in southern Togo is *Adzeto* and in northern Togo *Sorcier Suogdan*. Elderly people, (particularly women,) and children are most likely to be accused of witchcraft. When a person is accused, the whole community may shun that person – ostracising and stigmatising them. The accused person is often violently beaten and driven from the community.

Anyone who dreams at night of eating, drinking, flying, swimming or having sex is incontestably believed to be a witch. Some church pastors frequently warn those in their congregations of such dreams and will practice deliverance rites that involve severe beating, forced fasting and lashings.

'The child is no longer considered (after an accusation of witchcraft). He is ashamed. He finds himself in solitude.'

Focus Group response, Centrale region.

Focus Group Research

In August and September 2016, MECI with the help of trained volunteers from churches carried out 20 focus group sessions in all five regions of Togo with around 200 participants altogether. The purpose of these focus groups was to learn more about the roots, realities and responses of churches and communities to witchcraft accusations against children. So profound is the fear of witchcraft that several villages refused to allow those conducting the research into their villages. In some cases, people just walked out of the focus groups as they were too afraid to continue. An informal analysis of the feedback from the groups revealed many deeply entrenched, harmful beliefs and practices that are fracturing families and communities and making the lives of some children a living hell. The research is now to be formally analysed.

Between September and November, MECI and SCWA planned the RTAF programme, raised the funds for the Forum and mobilised supporters to pray for it daily throughout November. Everything was in place. We were ready to go!

The Forum

Nothing like the RTAF has ever been done in Togo before. As Emmanuel, MECI's Administrator said afterwards, 'In a way, we took a risk getting a large group of church

leaders together from different denominations to focus on a subject that is so scary and that many of them would normally never talk about.' But in the event, the Forum far surpassed our expectations in the way that it transformed the thinking and understanding of those that took part in it.

The venue for the Forum was the Centre Christ Rédempteur in Lomé. 59 Church leaders took part – many of them heads of denominations. We were so fortunate to have with us Dr Andy Anguandia Alo from DR Congo, Dr Sam Kunhiyop from Nigeria and Dr Opoku Onyinah from Ghana – three highly experienced theologians with extensive knowledge and understanding of the cultures in which witchcraft

accusations flourish. They skilfully provided teaching that helped to unlock understanding and illuminate thinking.

Exorcism, physical maltreatment, moral and psychological, chased away from home, abandonment, taken to the charlatan – the child becomes the slave of the charlatan.'

A reality for the child accused of witchcraft –

Focus Group response, Kara region.

Dr Andy began by taking the participants on a journey through the Bible, skilfully summarising and condensing the 'Big Story' from Genesis to Revelation, in order to set the theme of the Forum in the Biblical context. Susie then spoke on the purpose of the Church as revealed in the Bible, emphasising that we as Christ's followers are to live according to his values, ways and Kingdom culture, rather than being swayed and influenced by harmful cultural norms and worldviews that contradict what he taught and the example that he gave.

Dr Andy also taught about God's heart for children and the Biblical imperative to protect, nurture and care for children and to help them to reach their potential.

After each talk, participants went into groups to discuss, 'How should we be thinking and acting differently in light of what we have just heard?' Again and again, we heard people saying, 'This teaching has opened my eyes. I have never heard these things before – I must change the way I think.' The feedback from the groups showed that the opportunity to discuss and think about this issue in a supportive environment does indeed open up the possibility for new ways of thinking that we pray will result in new ways of acting. One group in particular summed up the overall response when they said, 'From now on, we must no longer marginalise those accused of witchcraft. We must consider them in the same way as others. We must no longer fear them, but take steps to lead them to be accepted in their communities, families, schools and churches.'

Most participants held a worldview that witches and witchcraft exists. During the teaching, emphasis was placed on the fact that, whatever our view, the Bible makes it

clear that we are to imitate Christ, who never accused anyone of witchcraft, but rather acted with love, mercy and compassion. The Bible makes it clear that we are to defend those who are marginalised in society, those who are outcaste and those who are vulnerable, (such as orphans and widows) – the very people who are most likely to be accused of witchcraft.

Dr Opoku is one of the leading experts on addressing witchcraft accusations and spiritual powers from a theological perspective and is a highly respected leader of one of the largest Pentecostal church streams in this part of Africa. He taught on spiritual powers – a pivotal topic in the context of this Forum. His exposé was a good balance of the theological and the practical, and he repeatedly emphasised the need for caution when labelling anyone as being ‘possessed’ by a demon or practicing witchcraft. Instead, he highlighted that in the majority of cases, the person who appears to be troubled in spirit or in mind actually needs counselling, support and at times expert medical intervention from a psychologist or psychiatrist – not deliverance.



‘Some children try to commit suicide or it can be the charlatan or family poisons them.’

Focus Group response, Kara region.

Interviews with people should be confidential, supportive and caring. Never should a pastor accuse someone of being a witch and there is no place for mass ‘healing and deliverance’ services. ‘It is God who heals and restores – not a pastor. He may give us individual opportunities to bring healing to a person, but it is never through our own efforts but rather by God’s power and grace,’ he said. Prayer camps are popular in Togo and Ghana, in which children and adults thought to be witches or demonised are brought for deliverance. They may be chained up, beaten and whipped, and forced to fast for days. Dr Opoku categorically denounced these camps.

He noted the mistranslations in the Bible that have been perceived to justify witchcraft accusations and associated persecution and the fact that in the New Testament, witchcraft is only mentioned once. ‘Nowhere is a person accused of witchcraft and there is no Biblical reference to Christ accusing anyone. Whenever there is mention of him releasing a person from demonic oppression or possession, it is always in a way that is supportive, compassionate and that reintegrates that person back into society rather than making them an outcaste.’

Dr Opoku’s talk stimulated passionate group discussions and we expected to have to handle some vehement opposition or viewpoints. We were therefore amazed to learn through the feedback that the participants appeared to have really taken to heart the key messages and manifestly wanted to change their way of thinking:

-  ‘We should no longer confuse mental illness with demonic possession.’
-  ‘We need to demystify witchcraft, remove fear and stop believing what people are saying about others.’

- 🗣️ 'We used to demonise everything! But now we want to work in collaboration with doctors and professionals.'
- 🗣️ 'We must take time to analyse every case and discern the root of the problem. We must avoid making assumptions.'
- 🗣️ 'We must change our mentality and prioritise counselling.'
- 🗣️ 'We must teach our churches and leaders to stop accusing people.'

Dr Andy Alo is a gifted and clear speaker. He taught on human and individual responsibility in the face of a culture that seeks to scapegoat others when bad things happen — often as a result of personal failings and poor choices. 'We prefer others to take the blame for the consequences of our bad choices or actions and we blame the most vulnerable', he said. Citing many examples, he showed that scapegoating through accusing a child or adult of witchcraft has become a 'norm' in many African cultures.

Again, the feedback on the following group discussions demonstrated that the participants had internalised the message: 'Let's stop thinking that every problem has a spiritual root. Analyse the situation. Let's encourage the church to cultivate a culture of responsibility rather than scapegoating others. We must be role models for the world.'

By the last day of the forum, it felt as though we had been on a long but stimulating journey of discovery together. Dr Sam Kunyihop started the day by talking about the socio-economic roots of witchcraft accusations. 'So many African nations are in social turmoil and children are consequently suffering. Their pain is compounded, because instead of blaming poor governance and ethnic conflicts, children are being used as scapegoats and accused of being witches. Just as Pharaoh's daughter heard the cries of Moses and rescued him, so the church must hear the cries of children accused of witchcraft in our communities. Children should not be made to suffer for our social, economic and political turmoil,' concluded Dr Sam. 'I call that we repent and turn away from abusing and mistreating children.'

The response of the participants was encouraging:

- 🗣️ 'We must be available to children accused of witchcraft and protect them.'
- 🗣️ 'We need mature adult Christians in our churches to foster vulnerable children.'
- 🗣️ 'In the case of witchcraft accusations against children, we must analyse the socio-economic context in which the child is living so that we can find the real root of the problem.'
- 🗣️ 'We've been passive in speaking out about witchcraft accusations. We must train leaders and encourage them to attend forums like this in order to equip them.'
- 🗣️ 'We must be actors for social justice.'
- 🗣️ 'We need to stop the culture of blame and ban these accusations.'

Sharing the DRC Experience




In 2014, SCWA ran an RTAF in Kinshasa, DRC along with local partners. During the Togo RTAF, I shared what has happened as a result of the DRC Forum, in order to encourage and inspire these church leaders in Togo. In Kinshasa, pastors are training other pastors; parenting groups have been developed; vulnerable families are being supported with counselling; radio in market places is being used as a means of communicating messages of child protection to local communities; pastors are teaching about child protection and children's rights from the pulpit; some pastors and families are fostering street children and those accused of witchcraft. I shared that, with some help from those in DRC, SCWA has written and is preparing to pilot a seven module training tool for church leaders that focuses on child protection and witchcraft accusations against children. FEBA Radio has started working with SCWA to produce audio Bible studies that will integrate the testimonies of pastors who are helping children accused of witchcraft, as well as the voices of the children themselves. These tools will eventually be freely available in Togo. This news was warmly received. Throughout the forum, church leaders begged us for more teaching and to replicate the Forum in other parts of Togo.

“We must open our hearts and doors.”

Apostle Zabre is a large man with a warm smile. As head of the Church of Pentecost in Togo, he is extremely influential and has become a passionate champion of children through his association with MECI. He gave the final talk and captivated us with an impassioned exhortation for the church to fight against witchcraft accusations. ‘All that is happening today is incompatible with the work of Christ. When we accuse children of witchcraft, we are not serving Christ but the Devil.’ He encouraged all present to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child. ‘Let’s strongly engage to fight this phenomenon’, he concluded. ‘We must open our hearts and doors to the marginalised and ensure children’s liberty, protection, education and their future. The UN Convention says that no child should be discriminated against. But here in Togo, it is ignored. The answer lies in the Church. We must mobilise the church and create a framework for the protection of children.’

Ideas for action

By the end of the Forum, it was clear that the mindsets of the participants had undergone a radical shift and that they are now keen to act on what they have learned. During one of the final sessions, they broke into small groups to discuss what they will now go on to do. Some contributions appeared ambitious, but it was clear that many of these church leaders are going to go beyond words to tangible action:

-  ‘We will form a group that will be responsible for training others.’
-  ‘We are going to give a faithful feedback to our leaders so that they can adopt the vision.’
-  ‘We will train and equip our children’s workers and sensitise our church members.’

- 'Let's create a group of people in each church who will become defenders of children and listen to them when a case of abuse or accusation arises.'
- 'Support local, vulnerable families.'
- 'Organise debates on media.'
- 'Work with children and their parents to help to reconcile them.'
- 'Create a network of church leaders to work on this issue together.'
- 'Have a similar forum this time next year to see what progress has been made.'
- 'Educate the church in the rights of the child.'
- 'Create income generation projects for the support of vulnerable children.'

As we closed the Forum with prayer, I marvelled at the change in these men and women. It's obvious that many still believe in the existence of witchcraft, but are no longer prepared to harm children through accusations and other forms of abuse. Many have revised their perceptions by saying that they now believe that most accusations are unfounded. Others now take the stance that children are not witches. All agree that the church needs to prioritise child protection and to more authentically manifest the love, compassion, mercy and justice of Christ.

Apostle Zabre summed up the general feeling at the end of his talk. "This work is about life and death because the future of these children depends on what we do today." There's been a powerful awakening in these church leaders. It remains to be seen what the practical outcomes will be from this Forum, but I have confidence that this has been a seminal event that has punctured many deceptions and given birth to new vision and ways of seeing things.

Next Steps

The morning after the end of the Forum, the MECI team, Dr Sam, Dr Andy and I are gathered to review the last few days and plan the next steps. We learned that many participants had rung the MECI team to thank them for the Forum. 'You have broken down bridges', said one. 'Before, witchcraft was a scary topic in churches and greatly feared. All that has now been torn down.' 'I feel as though a veil has been removed from my face', admitted another. 'Now I will question things rather than blindly jumping to the conclusion that if anything bad happens it's because of a child witch.'

Many of the pastors asked for a follow up.

The Togo Presse newspaper had included a well-written and balanced feature on the Forum in its broadsheet for the 30th November. The paper has the biggest distribution in Togo and is circulated to all parts of the nation.

The MECI team recognised that they now need to build on what has been started. It is agreed that they will:

1. Ring all the participants to thank them for their participation and to wish them a happy Christmas.
2. Email all church leaders mid-January to send them a summary of what came out of the discussion groups and of their ideas for action. They will enquire about the progress of the church leaders in acting on the commitments they made and will offer them advice and counsel.
3. MECI will invite participants of the Forum to a reunion in 3 months so that they can share progress and plan ongoing action. Use social media to help participants to communicate and share with each other examples of progress, advice, encouragement and stories of success. Create a Facebook page and WhatsApp group for the participants.
4. Ultimately, create a church-based network of church leaders to work together.
5. Encourage church leaders to integrate activities into what they are already doing, rather than seeking to start new projects. They can use the resources that they have been given and the new learning that they have acquired to share their learning with others in their churches and communities through existing initiatives.
6. Share stories of transformation more widely with other church leaders and community members.
7. MECI will keep SCWA informed of progress and can approach SCWA if it needs advice or help.

The Forum was not only a joint initiative between MECI and SCWA, but also our supporters. Without their prayers, giving and encouragement, the Forum would never have happened and we are deeply grateful to them. The investment and hard work has been undeniably worthwhile. As one of the MECI team members remarked, 'I believe that this Forum will change the face of the church in Togo. My faith is that those we have taught will turn Togo upside down.'

Susie Howe

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