

INTERVIEW WITH FATHER DAVID JIMOH JARJU, FORMER EDUCATION SECRETARY FOR THE DIOCESE OF BANJUL, THE GAMBIA



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

May 2021

EXCERPTS:

- “The training of principals is vital in that the role of the leadership is key for the success of school activities. We realized this during the training of our nursery school teachers: the planned activities after training were better implemented in schools where the Head supported the trained teacher.”
- “We initiated the establishment of a Catholic University six years ago and we are moving slowly but surely. I look forward to the day we take in our first students and classes begin. Like Simeon I can say, ‘... at last all powerful Master, you can give leave to your servant: for my eyes have seen...’”

You served as Education Secretary for Catholic schools in The Gambia until recently. Could you tell us what your current work entails?

I am now retired after working as the Catholic Education Secretary from 1997-1999 and 2014-2020. I am now a lecturer at the Social Sciences department of the University of The Gambia.

What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic Education in The Gambia?

The Catholic Education Secretariat seeks to give quality educational services by improving monitoring and evaluation. To this end schools were grouped and Coordinators appointed to visit every school twice a month. During the visits the Coordinators work with the Head Teachers to review teachers’ works; assess the environment; examine the management activities; discipline and religious exercises; curriculum coverage, etc. This has resulted in the improvement of schools’ performance in national and international exams and it has helped attract many students of different faiths (Christianity and Islam) to Catholic schools. The underlying principle is that we inform and form characters in our schools and my role was to coordinate the work of the coordinators by holding monthly meetings and acting on the issues that come out of these meetings.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Father David Jimoh Jarju, former Education Secretary for the Diocese of Banjul in The Gambia, talks about the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools in the country including interesting recent innovations for improving the training of teachers and principals.

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

In which areas could Catholic education in the country be improved and how?

Teacher capacity building – given the near privatization of teacher education in The Gambia, there is a need to support poor students so as to ensure an adequate and sustained supply of qualified teachers for the Catholic Education Secretariat (CES). Since many students support themselves, they are free to choose where to give their services – here the private schools pay more and tend to attract the best teachers. As one way of ensuring that the CES contracts the services of the best teachers, we are partnering with a charitable organization called GambiaRising based in United States. Another partner in this project of teacher training is the Gambia Irish Volunteers in Education (GIVE) based in Ireland. GambiaRising supports teacher training for Basic and Senior Secondary Schools while GIVE supports nursery school teachers.

Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education in The Gambia? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?

The Government of The Gambia, through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) has established School Monitors for all schools in the country. The CES came up with Schools' Coordinators to complement the work of these Monitors. There is a general opinion that our schools are better off and so school monitors of MoBSE were not thorough in their monitoring in some cases. Teacher training projects were initiated because teacher trainees have to pay tuition fees for themselves as opposed to the earlier practice of government supporting all. In the earlier situation, we were sure of getting teachers every year. Now we have to compete with many stakeholders in education. The Diocese of Banjul started the training of nursery school teachers at Farafenni in the early 1980s and the government took over about ten years later. Now we have ongoing training for our trained and qualified nursery school teachers and step down training for those not yet qualified. This training is supported by GIVE and we are going up to Basic Cycle School teachers gradually. In the last two years we included the Heads of schools in our training.

What events, projects or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a regional and global level? What are your ideas?

In terms of activities, the celebration of feasts of patron(ess) of our schools should be accompanied by organizing talks on the values of the patron of the school to help both staff and students know about the patron(ess) of the school. A celebration of mass on the feast day should also be a yearly activity.

In terms of creating a Christian ethos in the school, simple steps such as mounting of Christian symbols like the cross or crucifix could be done, unless this is in places where such practice is contrary to the laws of the state. Erecting of a statue of the patron(ess) of school from a good vantage place is also a possibility.

What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in The Gambia?

The training of principals is of vital importance in that the role of the leadership is key for the success of school activities. We realized this during the training of our nursery school teachers: the planned activities after training were better implemented in schools where the Head supported the trained teacher. Education of the child also has a home dimension: parents need some formation so that they can complement what the student is taught at school. In this way the student gets both home and school training. In many cases in The Gambia parents seem to abdicate their educational responsibilities to the teachers and Priests/Religious Brothers and Sisters.

Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I was trained in Liberia and ordained in the Gambia in 1986; taught in different schools and later did a Master's in Education at Bristol University in the UK. I became Education Secretary thereafter for two years. I took up development work for two years and went back to study at Bristol University for a M.Sc. in Development, Administration and Planning. Upon my return I went to lecture at University of The Gambia from 2005-2012, followed by pastoral work for two years and one year as Principal for St. Peter's Junior and Senior Secondary. From October 2015 to March, 2020, I served as the Education Secretary at the Catholic Education Secretariat in the Diocese of Banjul. Since October 2020, after my retirement, I went back to teach in the Social Sciences Department at the University of The Gambia.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

We initiated the establishment of a Catholic University six years ago and we are moving slowly but surely. I look forward to the day we take in our first students and classes begin in either September 2021 or January, 2022. Like Simeon I can say, "... at last all powerful Master, you can give leave to your servant: for my eyes have seen..."