

## Partnership visit to the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon 12<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### Aims

- To meet with PCC leaders to discuss partnership issues including new grant administration
- To visit PCC programmes
- To understand the nature of the ongoing crisis in South West and North West Cameroon

I traveled overnight on Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa and I was glad to arrive at Douala International airport in the afternoon the following day. After a short wait at the airport, I was pleased to be greeted and collected by Jessica –PCC Development Manager before traveling by road to Buea. It was good to revisit Buea.

### Meeting with PCC Moderator

I was delighted to meet Rev Samuel Forba –the Moderator of PCC with his Financial Secretary and Synod Clerk. We last met in 2015 ago at our MCB Conference at Westminster Central Hall, London. I presented him with few MCB prayer books, explaining how British Methodists regularly pray for our partners and I reassured them of prayer support during their difficult times. He shared how the existing crisis in the region had slowed down the economy precipitating social unrest. Over the last 12 months, there had been many protests and strikes by civilians; especially when church leaders from the Anglophone region were singled out and summoned to court at Yaounde (the capital) in 2018. Shortly afterwards, members of the Council of Protestant Churches of Cameroon visited Buea (PCC HQ) had jointly sent a letter of solidarity to the President to address the grievances listed by regional elders through dialogue. Regrettably, almost two years have passed and the President of Cameroon is yet to publicly acknowledge the ongoing crisis that has existed in Anglophone Cameroon.

Moderator of PCC – Rev. Samuel Forba



### Socio-political challenges in South West and North West regions of Cameroon

Listening to the comments from colleagues living in Buea, the capital of south west region of Cameroon; there were several incidents that sparked the crisis. In 2016, the Cameroonian government started sending French speaking magistrates to preside in English speaking courts in Anglophone regions namely south west and north west regions. This was compounded by the fact that there was no English speaking magistrates at the state level and no plans to recruit. The challenges faced by the lawyers were twofold as the Francophone and Anglophone courts ran different

judicial systems. The majority of the offenders and their lawyers struggled to communicate in court as French became the prime language spoken by judges . As a result, the English speaking lawyers went on strike for three months but were ignored by the government whose headquarters were in French speaking regions.

Nine months later, i.e. in 2017, the uprising started. The Trade Union then instructed the teachers to stop classes until outstanding salaries were paid in support



Clouds over the mountain reflects the political mood of the region

of their learned colleagues. Meanwhile, the government tried to harmonise the school education systems in both Anglophone and Francophone regions. Schools in the English speaking regions complied by adjusting the school curricula and the number of years to be spent in primary, junior and senior schooling. However the French speaking schools are yet to budge knowing they cover eight regions. As a result English speaking Cameroonians asked for decentralisation of government and suggested that the government should adopt federalism, the government is yet to respond. Civil societies, professional bodies and activities are frustrated by the lack of dialogue. Consequently,

there is an erosion in community cohesion plus increasing number of vigilante groups ordering 'ghost days', road blocks and curfews, in rural Anglophone regions.

By 18 March 2018, the underlying tensions were mounting with more villages being deserted, farmers hiding in the bush, as well as rural churches and village schools remaining closed. During the week, some frustrated youths captured a government minister for ransom and elsewhere a retired PCC pastor was killed when travelling in a public vehicle by road. The disillusioned folks are slowly taking over, causing fear in the region. However, many Francophone Cameroonians are oblivious to the increasing tensions as the government influences the media sector. Thank God, Buea remained calm throughout my visit. Others were hosting relatives and friends from affected the rural areas. Rev Forba as the Moderator repeatedly updated church members to keep calm and offer support and assistance to those affected. He would continue to share updates with internal and external partners to encourage the government to engage in dialogue with the people.



One of the Presbyterian Primary Schools at Limbe

because they were considered to be private schools. As a result, the government ignored the teachers and these schools remained closed for protracted periods but only in the English speaking areas. As the English speaking schools were not government schools the teachers were severly affected, they would only receive government subsidies which have been significantly reduced. Churches have needed to pay teachers as employers. The Presbyterian Church of Cameroon was worst hit with ninety five percent of its schools based within the Anglophone region; many in the rural areas being forced to close. Consequently the closure of schools for the second year running, has led to a drastic drop in income. It has been particularly difficult with PCC schools who are expected to pay taxes and social security, plus staff salaries, yet the government had not paid its subsidies! The closure of both primary and secondary schools especially in rural dwelling has resulted in delinquent activities, arsonists setting school infrastructures and few villages on fire.

### Visit to Tellco – Preswood Furniture Centre, Ombe

The centre offers vocational training to non-academic students and during my visit, there were twenty seven personnel employed at the centre. It offers carpentry skills to apprentices from both the church and community. A few promising graduates who are interested in ministry receive church scholarships for ministerial training. It was thrilling to the high quality of handcrfted wooden products (from start to finish) though a local initiative. The finish looked very professional and I believe these products could compete favourably if well marketed. Perharps more important has been the abiity to engage and upskill youths in the community, thereby training future entrepreneurs that would create more jobs and helping them to become responsible citizens. Sadly, the General Manager commented that the political instability has reduced customer orders, causing him to seek customers from further afield to offset some of the accumulating debt. The enterprise is bearily breaking even, but for the grace of God.



Furniture displays for sale at Tellco Furniture Centre, Ombe

### Visit to PCC Printing Centre at Limbe

This centre was based at the southern coast of Cameroon though it serves the whole country. It was developed to be an income generating unit for PCC, specialising in printing Church stationeries and resources in addition to taking customer orders. It was fascinating to see the various stages involved using 'dated printing machines' - from taking orders to product design and delivery (which was still quite labour intensive). The advantage of using this system is that it relies upon the flexible recruitment of community members to deliver contracts and sometime from the government too. Consequently, many of the workers are temporary. However, it boosts PCC's reputation as an employer in a country where jobs were scarce (and the people out of work receive no maintenance payments).

The Printing centre has a very low turn over rate at the. Recently, the centre has developed an apprenticeship scheme to pass on skills and knowledge to the next generation. The marketing manager informed me that he started as an apprentice twenty five years ago. He is knowledgeable about each stage of the process including the functions for maintaining the machines. This forum also serves as an effective way of spreading God's love through work and deed to community members. Interestingly, most of these processes have now been computerised in modern day printing machines in the West. However the centre manages to provide a livelihood and support other PCC mission priorities.

### Prescraft Centre Bamenda visit

We left Buea by road at 06.00 hours for Bamenda, taking the long route to avoid hot spots along the way arriving 7 ½ hours later (at 13.30). Jessy and I then visited the Fairtrade craft shop located in the city centre. It serves over 1000 local household producers in the locality plus surrounding villages. Although the crafts were made to very high standard they have witnessed a sharp decline in local sales due to the ongoing crisis. However, all is not lost and sales can still be generated through visiting tourists as well as overseas customers who frequent the market. Perhaps links with Tradecraft and Fairtrade ventures abroad may help to increase sales and continue to support their livelihood, alleviate poverty, reduce rural urban migration, and preserve local artistry. With God all things are possible.

PCC livelihood support scheme for its community members



Another untapped opportunity has been 'online marketing' to help generate sufficient income for artists and offset overheads at the shop. I witnessed just outside of this centre individual vendors with a similar business operating (with no overheads) but selling poor quality goods at cheaper prices and in turn competing with Prescraft. To combat this, they would welcome having a person at the centre for a few months with special skills: IT and/or marketing skills to help identify popular products for the global market and to help connect with potential buyers: such as museums, art galleries etc. There are plenty of opportunities to teach youths (or interested people) the traditional craft making and art at Bamenda. This could help resource the Cameroon museum, promote tourism and prevent the extinction of these handmade crafts.

### Pottery Centre Bamesing Visit

This rural development programme started in 1984 as a way to engage with the local community and encourage them to design and produce pottery using locally sourced materials. Although the preparation process is thorough, it was quite tedious. The process was as follows: clay is dug from four meters deep to harvest mature dark clay. This is then brought to the centre in wheel barrows. The clay is then soaked, sieved and left to thicken for pliability over several days. The clumps are weighed, wrapped into transparent polythene bags and stored for future use in a cool basement with little sunshine. When orders are taken, the pliant clay is moulded and fired at various stages in different ovens at various temperatures. Surprisingly, it takes about four years to train staff to make high quality products sold locally and globally. The centre maintains a forestry nearby for its wood supply and to replace 'felled trees' and to control erosion. There were temporary workers on site during my visit to deliver customer orders.



The Centre also has a gift shop and an adjacent guesthouse to serve its visitors and communities. Regrettably the ongoing crisis in Cameroon has seen a drop in the number of visitors, resulting in reduced orders and staff being laid off. PCC again invites individuals and groups interested in learning, designing and making porcelain to attend. This offers a great chance to work in this rural industry as well as revive the dying profession.

### Presbyterian Rural Training Centre, Fonta

After leaving Bamesing at noon, we travelled further by road to Fonta to meet with both the Director and Financial Secretary of the Rural Training Centre. The thirty three students who had enrolled received sponsorship from the Cameroonian government. This was both to gain theoretical knowledge and practical farming skills over a period of two years. At the same time the farm seeks to become self-sustaining by embarking on various income generating farming initiatives to pay staff and manage the farm. The institute was set up by British Methodist Mission Partners in the nineties with the aim of introducing 'improved farming practices' in the region. During my visit, the farm was slowly building its 'cattle stock' as well as offering its services to private owners (to raise funds).

The farm also boasts of its maize farming (to make animal feed), a small nursery unit for orchard seedlings (for future sales) and a plantain plantation. The new Director began in 2017 and he hopes to promote organic farming at the institute. PCC is also keen to invite interested farmers willing to participate and contribute on short or long term basis at the Centre.

The next day, we travelled over eight hours back to Buea and planning to arrive early (before the curfews) at various rural areas along the way. PCC was very grateful for my visit as I was able to listen to affected citizens in various parts of Anglophone Cameroon. There was local report of three deserted villages north of Buea. It was also reported that a military commander was killed earlier in the week (beginning 11<sup>th</sup> March) by frustrated citizens, hence the curfews. I was informed that a government official from Scotland however, he had limited access to the public and national news had been filtered. In my opinion, a dialogue between important Cameroon government representatives and the disgruntled citizens in acknowledgement of the crisis, may ease prevailing tension across the country. Furthermore potentially helping to identify the benefits and opposition to both parties.

PCC Rural Training Centre started by MCB in the 1990s



## Service at a Presbyterian Church, Buea



Rev Numfor Godwin - PCC Web Manager with NMA

The service started at 09.00 hours on Sunday morning at the oldest Presbyterian building in Buea located on the headquarters ground. The chaplain led the service with us singing hymns followed by two Bible readings from Lamentations 3 and Luke 9. He based his preaching on Hebrews 10: 11- 18, sharing the need for priests to offer daily sacrifices repeatedly, for the sins of the people in Bible times. This could be likened to regular washing of piles of dirty clothes. Clothes get dirty irrespective of age, gender or location. They could become dirty by mistake, deliberately, by repeated use or caused by natural body processes e.g. sweat. However Jesus offered himself once and for all as sacrifice for sins and sat at the right hand of God, hereafter, we do not need to offer daily sacrifices for sins. As a substitute to the daily sacrifice by the priests of old, we now appropriate the blood of Jesus instead of blood of bulls, sheep or turtle doves. For when sin has been atoned for, as Jesus did on the cross for us; daily sacrifices of animals are no longer required. It makes me appreciate the significance of Jesus' death. I later brought MCB greetings, reading Psalm 130 to encourage them in time of crisis.

## Meeting with Heads of Departments

Monday morning devotion started at 07.30 hours with a hymn, bible readings and an exhortation. The story was from the book of Number, - how the Israelites disobeyed God and were bitten by poisonous snakes in the wilderness. They had to exhibit faith by looking to the brasen snake image mounted on a stick by Moses. Sometimes to get through life in spiritual wilderness, we need to have faith in God and follow his directives.

With this in mind I later met with departmental heads, to listen to their concerns as well as aspirations. Together we shared possible ways forward in spite of challenging times in Cameroon. Tough times does not mean we should not dream and develop the vision, however timing is of essence to ensure survival. Our God is faithful!



Bunmi with Ms Jessie Eben, PCC Development

*Psalm 146<sup>7</sup>– Who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord gives freedom to prisoners*