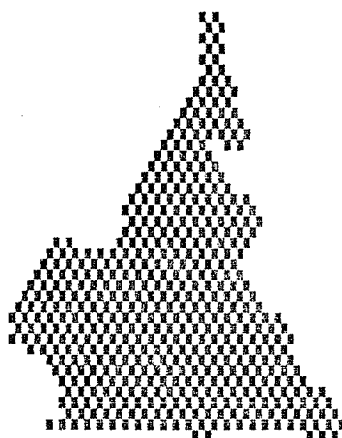


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THE CAMEROON

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A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The Cameroon: A Struggle for Survival

"During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come to Macedonia and help us.'" (Acts 16:9) And so it was that Paul received his direction from the Lord to go and take the gospel to Macedonia. The Lord still issues calls to his church today. These calls come in a variety of ways usually through requests from individuals in places where there is no pure Christian church. The following is the account of one such request brought to us from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of West Cameroon (E.L.C.- W.C.). It is a moving account. It is an account dealing with our synods efforts to aid a young African church body in its struggle for survival. In this thesis we want to concentrate on the history of this struggle for survival as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon moved through various stages of change.

I. Early Beginnings

Before, we indulge ourselves in WELS involvement in the Cameroon perhaps a little background on the ELC-WC dealing with the period prior to our synods

involvement is in order. The beginnings of the ELC-WC centered around a man by the name of Paul T. Chonason. Chonason, a Cameroonian, received his theological training at Concordia Bible College in Ikot Ikpwene, Eastern Nigeria. After also teaching at that school for a time Chonason returned to West Cameroon and began a church there from a nucleus of Lutherans who had come to West Cameroon from Nigeria. The church grew during the Biafra crisis as more and more Lutherans came into West Cameroon. This generated a growing interest among native Cameroonians, many of whom also joined the church.

The Cameroonian church was plagued with financial difficulties, though. The political situation in their country forced them to operate entirely on their own. The government of the Cameroons made it quite clear that they would not agree under any circumstances that any Cameroon work should have headquarters and leadership from Nigeria. Since this most natural avenue for help had been closed the ELC-WC was forced to look elsewhere for help.

That brings us to 1970 and to the point where the ELC-WC appealed to the WELS for help. The appeal came early in February from Pres. Chonason in Kumba, Cameroon. Apparently Chonason had heard of the WELS from the Lutheran Church of Central Africa which in turn lead him to make an appeal to them. At that time

Chonason reported that his church body had three pastors, two assistant pastors and fourteen evangelists. He reported that membership had gone from 30 in the early 1960's to well over 6,000 but financial strength had not grown proportionately. Chonason's first request from the WELS primarily consisted of a need for literature. He wrote "We were to open a Bible College this year but our finances have kept us below the mark... As the first leg of assistance from you we need new Bibles, Testaments, Hymnals, Magazines, Tracts, Booklets etc." We were not the first church body he had contacted. Chonason had also made some contacts with the LCMS but found that he was not in agreement with their doctrinal statement and did not intend to make any further contacts with them.

Correspondence continued throughout 1970 but the Wisconsin Synod was not entirely clear on all the matters which seemed pertinent to such a request for aid. They waited. By 1971 the ELC-WC had declared complete doctrinal agreement with the WELS and even included "This We Believe" in their doctrinal statement. That sounded good. But their financial requests were also increasing. Instead of just literature the church now requested such things as help in medical and social projects. They wanted a library, a church building, and some sort of vehicle that the church leaders could use. They even wanted financial

support for agricultural projects. With a limited budget of their own, such requests were unacceptable to the Wisconsin Synod. Enough interest was generated by these requests, though, to warrant sending a representative to the Cameroon to gather first hand information.

Prof. Ernst H. Wendland of the theological seminary at Lusaka was chosen to make the personal visit to West Cameroon. For ten days in late December 1971 and early January 1972 he gathered information on the church, the possibility for expatriate missionaries, and the people of West Cameroon. The following are some of his findings:

"I believe that Chonason is serious about establishing a doctrinally sound Lutheran Church in West Cameroon. It is quite remarkable and commendable to see how much has already been done on an indigenous basis. What I have been able to see in a very short time is encouraging and indicates that some good, solid work has been done. Quite obviously help is very much needed, particularly in areas of sound advice as to worker training and printed materials to help do the job. This group has also had a real financial struggle to stay alive. Time is of the essence. These people have committed themselves to us over a year and a half ago. While it may be just as well that President Naumann was prevented from coming...the disappointment experienced in West Cameroon was as keen as anyone can possibly imagine. My visit no doubt helped to keep their hopes alive, but I had to make it clear that I was there only on a fact-finding basis."

Concerning the possibility of sending expatriate



missionaries Prof. Wendland writes:

"It is essential in the first place that the expatriate is sponsored by a recognized, registered church (classified legally as a "social organization"). There is no possibility whatsoever of any church body sending expatriate workers without this sponsorship. It seems to me that one of the biggest problems to be overcome here from a practical standpoint -- that is if we seriously wish to enter this field -- will be the rapport which we can at this late stage gain with government officialdom. Our only hope of still getting anywhere at all is through the fact that there is already a recognized Lutheran Church in existence. Even at that the government policy tends to be very suspicious of foreigners coming into the country, unless the government can be assured that whoever comes in is going to do something "for the good of the people." At this point one can do little more than to expect this to be a real problem, one which could be tedious if not insurmountable as far as bringing in expatriate personnel is concerned."

Concerning the people in the Cameroon he writes:

West Cameroon has its share of church bodies, some of very long standing. These have become almost hopelessly bogged down in educational and medical work, and are doing little real evangelistic work in the more primitive areas, where there still are opportunities to bring the Gospel. This kind of work is not easy, since some of these are remote and inaccessible to modern methods of travel. Bringing the true Gospel to such places for the first time is real, uphill work, but some of Chonason's men are doing it. In other areas there are people of Lutheran background, mostly from Nigeria, who want and need to be served. Chonason's group is the only truly Lutheran, in fact, the only nominally Lutheran group to do the job. No other Lutheran body is active in West Cameroon."



Prof. Wendland was also pleasantly surprised to find that the language of the people of the Cameroon was English! No special efforts needed to be made to learn an African dialect. Such a situation also suggested the possible use of English literature already in print in the Cameroonian field. Overall he felt quite positive about the ELC-WC. He suggested that both monetary aid and another visit were in order of work in the Cameroon were to continue.

The synod took these suggestions to heart. Money was set aside from the "Aid to Sister Synods Fund" and sent to Cameroon. An "Aid to the Lutheran Church of West Cameroon Fund" was established out of private gifts. The students of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary responded with \$613.70 worth of theological books and Northwestern Publishing House contributed over \$6,000.00 worth of old sunday school books and other miscellaneous books to the struggling church in Cameroon. In April, 1972 another team of men was sent to Cameroon. The following is a summary of their findings:

1. It is clear to us that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of West Cameroon of over 4,000 souls is a church body which has committed itself to orthodox Lutheran doctrine and practice.

2. This church has appealed to us for guidance and assistance, particularly in training its workers, establishing a responsible church administration, and



providing the materials and temporary counseling to achieve the same;

3. We are convinced that this could be done most effectively, economically and expeditiously by making it possible for our staff in Central Africa to release one man for three, one-month teaching and counseling visits;

4. We strongly urge that any further assistance from our Synod be deferred until the ELC-WC is properly registered with the Cameroon government and provisions have been made to assure us that there will be no interruption of the work in Central Africa;

5. That our Synod make it entirely clear to the ELC-WC that this guidance program does in no way commit us either to a declaration of church fellowship or of continuing support. Rather, this program is to be looked upon as a testing period which will enable both parties to buy time before an eventual commitment.

Even though this approach may seem overly cautious at first glance, it was necessary for the WELS to take such a position especially in light of the registration problem. It seemed unwise to appropriate funds for a church whose very survival depended on a government registration they did not yet possess. Yet, despite all the problems progress was made. The members of the WELS responded wonderfully to the request for private gifts. The Lord indeed blessed the efforts of both the Cameroonian people and the WELS people in many ways. The support was there. The ripe fields were there. It seemed that all was well with the ELC-WC.

II. Regrouping

Then came the near fatal blow. Again a bit of background is in order. As we noted earlier Paul Chonason was the organizer and president of the ELC-WC. He had proved to be an able and talented leader of the church in Cameroon. But already in his earliest visit to the Cameroon, Prof. Wendland was concerned about the fact that he retained sole control of nearly every facet of the church bodie's government and finances. This was discussed with Chonason and in subsequent meetings he agreed to arrange something more practical in relation to these matters. Nothing was ever done, though. The result was the near deadly blow spoken of earlier. After the three man team from the states left the Cameroon in April 1972 a peculiar incident occured. A check for \$500.00 was sent to the ELC-WC from the WELS to help alleviate their financial problems. For some unexplained reason, the bank where Chonason cashed the check gave him \$5,000.00 instead of \$500.00. A spending spree ensued. Chonason bought a vehicle to use in his church work. He bought office furniture and a host of other things that should not have been priorities for his church. It just so happened that at just about that time (September 1972) Supt. Theodore Sauer made a visit to the church at Kumba, Cameroon on his way from Zambia to the States. The news of what Chonason had done reached him and several of the other Cameroonian pastors accused

Chonason of misappropriating the funds he received from the States. There was a squabble between Chonason and some of the other pastors, the government had to step in to make peace, and as a result the forms for government recognition of the church body were discarded by the government. Years of work were now reversed. Pastor Njume was elected president of the body and Chonason left, but the government, now disenchanted with the organization, demanded that the church not operate anywhere in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Njume wrote to the WELS:

Finally, with deepest regret, anguish of spirit and agony in my soul, I wish to inform you that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon is finally closed. A letter from the Minister of Territorial Administration at Younde (Capital) was read out to us yesterday by the Senior Divisional Officer in his office at Kumba in the presence of Security officers, which we both parties were made to sign, that the church shall no longer operate anywhere in the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Immediately, all the properties of the church were rounded up by the police and have become properties of the state.

Vainglory has indeed become the mother of all vices and the bride of the devil (As Chonason had said). The doctrinal books, car, Suzuki, tables, chairs, typewriter, duplicating machine, etc. have become properties of our government. The money is also lost to Chonason.

We, the three pastors (Bruno N. Njume, R.E. Udofia, and Isaac Eduok) have labored in vain. (to save the church) This is only materially, but we are spiritually rich in Christ!

The situation was a grave one. Pastor Njume had been trying faithfully to put an end to the one man government. He had been insisting on a concise reporting system of all receipts and disbursements and on several other more practical and acceptable ways of carrying out the business end of the church work. His ministry of the gospel as well as that of most of the other pastors was a faithful one, but this setback seemed almost insurmountable. In April 1973 he wrote to the WELS representatives:

Let me make by last prayer to you. It is my last hope in fellowship and friendship with you:

1. I would suggest that you seek a license all by yourself to open a branch of your church in Cameroon. I feel that with the assistance of your ambassador you may achieve this.

2. If the above is no longer possible, I pray you to consider my position:

- a) I have a very poor education, b) I have a large family duty, and c) I have no home in Cameroon and no job.

What will you and your Synod do for me as a token of our good fellowship? Would you sponsor me as an individual, if I took up God's service with another church? Or, would you sponsor my training in Zambia and, after return me home to try another establishment? Or would you seek license to operate a branch of your church in any other country in Africa and transfer me to assist in operation?

Any solution accepted for me should be implemented in haste! I cannot afford to stay here doing nothing, with also such a large family; pity me!



Would the struggle continue, or was the church in the Cameroon dead? No one knew for sure. The members of the WELS were asked to pray for Pastor Njume, his colleagues, and the 4,000 souls in the Cameroonian field. The synod adopted a position of proceeding with utmost care. But no one wanted to give up. In the Cameroon Pastor Njume busily began to regroup his church. By the grace of God the Governor of the Southwest Province at Buea directed the authorities at Kumba to permit the ELC-WC to resume church activities and public worship. Although the Governor stressed that this order was provisional and that a permanent order would be issued only if the church body received federal recognition it was a step in the right direction.

The three pastors (Njume, Udofia, Eduok) wasted no time in resuming full spiritual activity. Worship services and instruction classes were again begun. Even canvassing for new members was pursued with vigor. Things were looking up. The Mission Council and faculty of the seminary in Lusaka, Zambia agreed to allow now Pres. Njume to complete his theological training there if he could find the time. In a short time the church regained the full confidence of the government who assured the WELS that they would see to it that full government protection would be given to the Cameroon Lutherans. A team sent by the WELS

returned very enthusiastic and confident that the ELC-WC would survive the recent setback and soon be back to normal. They presented suggestions that the West Cameroon field be placed under the general jurisdiction of the Central Africa Executive Committee. They even suggested that two seasoned WELS missionaries be called to live in the Cameroon to give theological training to the present and future church workers and to guide them toward becoming an independent orthodox Lutheran church body. The Lord's blessings were certainly showering down on the scarred church body.

III. ELC-URC

In 1975 the name of the church body was changed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the United Republic of Cameroon (ELC-URC). In that year and the following year the suggestions which the visiting team had made were approved and enacted. The ELC-WC field was turned over to the Executive Committee for Central Africa for supervision. Provisions for two expatriate missionaries were made. Provisional fellowship was established with the WELS and the whole program seemed to be on the roll again.

The missionaries were never called, though. Again the reoccurring problem of national registration was plaguing the progress of the church. Things looked better in this matter when the Northwest and Southwest

Provinces gave official approval for work to be done in their areas. And yet this still did not mean federal recognition would become a reality. Again visitations were made in 1977 and 1978 to see how things were progressing. This time the findings were not so positive. A number of distressing things were involved. Pastors Kock, Cox, and Janosek reported:

Previous visits have clearly advised against any expansion of the ELC-URC until national registration is achieved and until we are able to evaluate specific expansion projects. We cannot be committed to additional expenses that already go beyond what we are able to handle and supervise. Yet, under the persuasiveness of Njume, additional congregations have appeared on the list of the NW Province. Lay-workers with very minimal instruction were engaged to carry on the work in the name of the ELC-URC.

(The) Church Council (is) not entirely composed of Church members. Some make up a "Board of Trustees" who are not church members. The government forces this arrangement on us (ELC-URC). They may or may not worship with us. If they want to, they may commune with us.

Children are not baptized as infants. They are merely "presented" or "dedicated" by the parents. They are then recognized as Christians. Water Baptism is not applied until age 7 when they are "able to repent."

In addition to these matters, the pastors found that in order to maintain possession of some land in Nyandong a joint theological/agricultural school was being planned. Njume insisted that the agricultural training was necessary since the government looked favorably on such programs and since he wanted the school to be self-supporting. It was also found that the doctrine of the Rapture was being taught and that



at times other elements were substituted for the wine and unleavened bread in Communion.

These matters obviously needed immediate attention. The visit in 1978 raised questions concerning the provisional fellowship relations existing between the WELS and the ELC-URC. There seemed to be a difference in the two church bodies concerning fellowship principles and how funds sent by the WELS should be put to use. It was decided that the WELS desperately needed to sponsor a series of teaching seminars for the leaders of the ELC-URC before full fellowship could ever be realized.

Over the next several years a number of seminars were held to educate the Cameroonians. Courses in Christian Doctrine, Bible Study, Practical Theology and the Confessions were taught (Appendix A is a typical seminar schedule). The effect these courses had on the Cameroon pastors is expressed in this excerpt of a report by Pastor Cox and Prof. Wendland:

Discussion on the part of the African pastors was constantly encouraged, and resulted in lively participation on their part. Repeatedly the men expressed thanks for our explanations, and their approval of our position as it was explained to them on the basis of Scripture. While certain practical applications of the work may still differ, no serious doctrinal difference was apparent. They asked patience on our part in our understanding of their practice concerning the mode of baptism, since it is the African way" to immerse adults in a body

of water. Following the previous meeting with Kock, Cox, and Janosek (1978) they have re-introduced infant baptism by simple application of water. They fully accepted true Lutheran doctrine and practice regarding the Lord's Supper, also as to the elements used. Their subscription to the inerrancy of the Bible was unequivocal.

In many ways the men from Cameroon expressed their gratitude for taking these steps to guide them in finding a doctrinal and confessional foundation based on Scripture. Significant strides were made, we feel, toward reaching a better understanding of our own unique position among other church bodies. That we could celebrate the Lord's Supper together at the close of our sessions meant much to both of us.

The first Seminars were held primarily for the pastors of the ELC-URC but later seminars included church workers and concentrated on worker training for future pastors. This latter consideration became necessary because of the death of one pastor and the impending retirement of another. With only five pastors (cf. Appendix B) to begin with a potential shortage of qualified pastors was staring the ELC-URC in the eye.

The problem of the Nyandang theological / agricultural school was also cleared up. Njume agreed that it would be best to stay out of the type of social venture an agricultural school would involve. Instead requests were made for a Bible school to be built at Nyandang. The WELS was much more receptive to a program of that type. In fact the program received a high priority in their planning. There were several reasons for this. First of all, the ELC-URC had rented

worship facilities since its founding. These facilities were expensive to rent and one never knew how long the landlord would allow the congregation to continue using the building. Secondly, land at Kumba could be purchased for a fair price and land at Nyandang was free if the church would put a building on it. By May 1985 land was secured in both of these areas and worship facilities were built.

But even this project was not without problems. After the land at Kumba was purchased and construction begun the lawyer who had sold the land decided to hold out for more money. He managed to obtain a court injunction to halt the building project and for a time it looked as if all would be lost. Njume immediately went to work on the situation and in a short time had the matter cleared and the injunction lifted. Another hurdle was cleared.

Organizational training was also needed for the leadership of the ELC-URC. Provisions were made for Pres. Njume to visit the Lutheran Church of Central Africa in order to expose him to the organization and workings of another African Church. In 1984 Njume made one visit and in 1985 another is planned. Njume's gifts coupled with this practical look at a working situation should be a valuable asset to the ELC-URC.



Finally, one more major program has been planned to date (May 1985). In 1984 a plan involving eight training workshops was planned for the ELC-URC. The workshops would be spread out over a four year period with two workshops per year. The purpose of the workshops is to give a group of potential church workers training for the public ministry. To date three of those workshops have been held and the remaining five are still planned. The reaction has been enthusiastic and encouraging. The progress of the students has been commendable. The distinct possibility exists, and it is sincerely hoped that at the end of this four year training workshop some of these been will be ordained into the public ministry.

Conclusion

The struggle for survival which the ELC-URC has carried on for the past 15 years has been a tough one. There have been many ups and downs. Membership has dropped dramatically from Chonason's early figures. But much has also changed for the better in that 15 years. The WELS has now begun to de-emphasize national registration in the hopes that now the once frail ELC-URC will now be able to stand on her own two feet. It has become more and more apparent that the doctrinal inconsistencies which surfaced in the ELC-URC were more



a matter of ignorance than a conscious effort to spread false doctrine. The zeal of the pastors and church workers to study and learn the Bible so that they can spread his message in a true and pure way is almost unsurpassed. The Lord's guiding hand has certainly been evident in her short history. All this makes the ELC-URC a growing instrument for the spreading of the Word.

The United Republic of the Cameroon is a populace country. It is a country where the ELC-URC is the voice of confessional Lutheranism. May God grant that that voice continue to sound loudly in the Cameroon and that her struggle for survival continues to be a winning one.



APPENDIX A

The following is a sample of a teaching seminar. It is taken from an actual seminar presented in 1979.

Class Schedule - Devotional Services

7:45 a.m. - Opening Devotion
8:00 a.m. - Doctrine
9:00 a.m. - Bible Study
10:00 a.m. - This We Believe
11:00 a.m. - Practical Theology
12:00 - NOON RECESS

3:30 p.m. - Doctrine
4:30 p.m. - Practical Theology
5:30 p.m. - Closing Devotion

Excluding devotions, this amounts to six teaching hours for a full day, and three teaching hours for a half day, or a total of 66 teaching hours for the entire session.

Time in early afternoon and evening was reserved for study, personal needs, and exercise.

Course of Study Covered

Doctrine- Of God and Man; Of Jesus Christ; Of the Means of Grace and Of the Church

Bible Study- The Book of Joshua, Chapters 1 through 12 (the contents of each chapter were studied, with practical applications)

This We Believe- God and His Revelation; Creation, Man, and Sin; Christ and Redemption; Justification by Faith; Good Works and Prayer; The Means of Grace; The Church and Its Ministry

Practical Theology- The Christian Church; The Ministerial Office; The Call; The Work of the Ministry in General; Baptism; Instruction of Young and Old; Confirmation; Administration of The Lord's Supper



APPENDIX B

The following is a list of the pastors active in the Cameroon in 1981. This helps to define the geographical locations of the work as well as the size of individual congregations.

1. Pastor Udofia - Kumba Field; 5 congregations, 1 preaching station; 77 communicants and 119 souls; assisted by 4 lay preachers.
2. Pastor Mukiwah - Konye and Nyandong Fields; 9 congregations, 12 preaching stations; 241 communicants and 331 souls; assisted by 5 evangelists and 6 lay preachers.
3. Pastor Eduok - Muyuka Field; 1 congregation, 6 preaching stations; 22 communicants and 63 souls; assisted by 2 lay preachers.
4. Senior Evangelist Koffi - Nyen, Mbemi and Munam Fields in Bamenda Area; 13 congregations and 4 preaching stations; 593 communicants and 752 souls; assisted by 6 evangelists and 4 lay preachers.
5. President Bruno Njume - organization of work in all fields and visitation to all areas; assistance with preaching in Kumba area.