

'Home is a Holy Place' in Bamenda

It may be tempting to think of our sister diocese of Bamenda as somehow more backward than ours and looking to Portsmouth for ideas as well as financial support. This is certainly not so in the case of family ministry. It is only this year that Portsmouth has appointed a Marriage and Family Life Adviser (part-time) but Bamenda has employed a full-time worker in this field for the last 20 years. This is William Nforba. Together with his schoolteacher wife, Gracemary, he has introduced programmes such as Marriage Enrichment, parenting classes, and the Christian Family Movement which are now self-supporting with their own networks of leaders. Other services include marriage preparation, advice to couples in difficulties, and tuition in natural methods of family planning.

I was invited by the Archbishop of Bamenda to spend a fortnight there in October, chiefly to work with William and Gracemary. Their work is an excellent witness to the concept of "Home is a Holy Place" which we are now trying to emphasise in England. Families are important in Cameroon. There is no welfare state so people have to rely on their extended family, both economically and socially, to a degree which we have long since lost. The Church is important too. Cameroonians are enthusiastic about religion and those who are Catholics look to the Church for leadership and community. In many ways, it reminded me of the Church here in the fifties when I was a boy.

There were many aspects of family life there which took me back a bit. Children are deferential to their parents, and to teachers and grown-ups generally. They are also expected to share in the household and agricultural tasks as soon as they can. The average family size seemed to be about four children and it was particularly important for there to be at least one son. The husband is very much the head of the family. The law forbids abortion and homosexual activity, but not polygamy. Corporal punishment is still regarded as normal. And I gathered from my hosts that domestic violence is condoned more readily than in Britain.

Africa is moving very rapidly from the old to the new. Even in the villages, mobile phones and motor bikes are commonly seen alongside primitive farm tools. Many older people deplore the decline of old values in the face of media-led modern influences. But the challenge for its leaders, including the Church, is to take advantage of "progress" while preserving the best of the old traditions. I was aware that the training that I was offering I was offering in non-directive, non-judgmental counselling was part of the "new ways". However, I hope that, as the Cameroonians move forward they do so without being infected by the cynicism and secularism of our own society. I was impressed by the ideal which the presenter in the parenting class offered: that today's children be brought up to be "modern, Christian and African", ie combining the best of all three strands.

