

Visit to Bamenda: 17 October – 4 November 2008

I offered to go to Bamenda in the hope that my skills and experience, in particular as a Marriage Care counsellor and with the Portsmouth clergy supervision scheme, might be of use to our sister-diocese. Archbishop Cornelius accepted my offer and his secretary arranged a work programme for me. This was largely with the diocesan Marriage and Family Life Office, run by Mr William Nforba, but also included meetings with groups of priests and religious and with Sister Sheila McElroy, one of whose roles is to promote counselling in the diocese.

I reached Bamenda at midnight on 18 October, my journey having been delayed by a day in Paris after I missed the tight plane connection there. I left on 2 November and stayed at Bishop's House, Buea, that night before catching the return flight from Douala late on 3rd. I received a warm welcome at every stage in my trip and enjoyed comfortable accommodation in Archbishop's House. The archbishop was away in Rome at the synod but I was well looked after by Father Ignatius Waindim and Father Gregory Cheo. There was not much scope for sightseeing or for personal exploration of Bamenda city. However, I travelled a lot around the city when going to various meetings and William and his wife Gracemary took me out on both the Saturday and Sunday of my middle weekend there. So I had a good chance to satisfy my curiosity - which, of course, was part of my reason for volunteering - about a country and people so different from here.

Not being familiar with the social culture of Cameroon, I was keen to learn how **marriage and family life** there differed from our British ways. I was struck by the following:

- The strong economic and social pressures on people, especially women, to get married.
- Similarly, the greater pressures to have children, especially to produce a son. Four children seemed the normal family size compared with two in contemporary Britain.
- The greater influence of the extended family and of the home village (even for people now living in the city). This could take the form of unwanted interference but more commonly provided welcome security (eg the care of orphans) in a country with no welfare state.
- While not widespread, polygamy is legal and socially accepted, especially for village chiefs.
- Children are more deferential towards their parents, and are also expected to contribute to domestic tasks as soon as they are capable of doing so.
- Men are more important than women - though the latter seem to do most of the domestic work!
- Although not condoned, domestic violence is accepted as commonplace.
- Although Africans seem more spontaneous in their emotions and less self-conscious than we Britons, public expressions of physical affection between men and women seem to be frowned on: no holding hands, let alone kissing, in the street!
- The long shadow of HIV/AIDS.

The Marriage and Family Life Office

It was started by the former archbishop, Paul, 20 years ago - a far-sighted move considering that Portsmouth is setting up something similar only now. It has been run throughout by William Nforba, with considerable unpaid help from his schoolteacher wife, Gracemary. The concept of the “domestic church” is strongly present in their work. Their main achievement, as it struck me, was the promotion of several pro-family movements across the archdiocese:

- the Christian Family Movement, consisting of couple-based groups meeting regularly for scripture study and social action;
- the Integrated Family Life Education Programme - four-session parenting courses;
- Marriage Enrichment weekends, in which married couples are enabled to discuss important aspects (eg sexual, financial, communication) of their relationships - a reflective process not common in African culture. This often led on to the couples participation in
- Marriage Encounter, following the familiar programme of this international movement;
- the Family Lay Apostolate.

I took part in examples of the first three of these and was impressed by the size and enthusiasm of the membership. The Nforbas have built up teams of presenters and leaders whose skill is at least equal to that of similar volunteers in England. Cameroonians have a natural eloquence so there was a high level of engagement. However, the content of the presentations on parenting and marital interaction was more basic than one would expect in an English setting. I guess this is because these subjects do not get the same exposure there as we have in our magazines, self-help books etc.

Other activities of the MFLO include:

- **Natural Family Planning.** William and Gracemary are accredited teachers of the Billings ovulation method. They also train other teachers. I got the impression that they are consulted as much by couples wanting to have a better chance of conceiving a son as by those wanting to limit their family. This work is supported by an annual grant from an American organisation, Couple-to-Couple.
- **Marriage Preparation.**
- **Counselling.** This seemed pretty basic, more a matter of offering advice than the non-directive, detached process we know in England.
- **Training.** I assisted William and Gracemary at a well-prepared three-day course in Communication Skills for postulants in different religious congregations, both male and female. They also provide an annual Enneagram workshop for the same group and offer leadership training in local parishes.

I was able to help them in the following ways:

- **Written material.** In their isolated and economically poor situation, they are, compared to us in Britain, desperately short of source material. I was able to give them several books, including Egan’s “The Skilled Helper”, the compendious “Marriage Preparation” binder assembled by Marriage Care and sundry notes I have drawn from counselling courses.

- **Marriage Counselling.** I ran a morning's course on the sort of counselling we do in Marriage Care.
- **Sharing experience from Portsmouth,** in particular the "Home is a Holy Place" material.
- **Project writing.** See next paragraph.
- More generally, considering how much they have had to operate by themselves, it was a great boost to their self-confidence to have a (presumed expert) visitor from a more developed country to whom they could show their work.

The financial position of the MFLO (so William told me) is that the diocese provides him with a modest salary, free office accommodation, and help with his motor expenses. In addition, he has received quite a generous subsidy from the American NFP organisation (see above) but this is due to finish in 2010. (The work is also, in effect, subsidised by virtue of his wife's earning a good salary as a teacher in a government school.) He is anxious to increase the income of the Office but the diocese has made it clear it expects its agencies to raise new money from outside sources, ie by charging service-users or applying for project grants from NGOs (in practice, from international charities). I understand that the neighbouring diocese of Buea and Kumbo have adopted the same policy.

William had asked me in advance for training in how to write a project application. I am scarcely an expert in this field but there seemed some obvious business principles to follow and I was also able to borrow a textbook from my aid-worker daughter. On the strength of this, I led three sessions with William and two of his volunteer assistants. They want to launch a project to help single mothers in the spheres of education, income generation and overcoming social prejudice. Hopefully, they will now be able to draw up a realistic, costed plan. They envisage it will go, via the archdiocesan office, to a body like CAFOD or Christian Aid but I recommended they scan the internet for other possibilities. It would seem natural for the Portsmouth-Bamenda committee to look at their plan when considering how to allocate funds next year.

Counselling Services I had several long conversations with Sister Sheila who has done a lot, almost single-handed, to promote the counselling approach in a culture which is traditionally authoritarian and directive. Apart from the counselling she does herself, she has run many courses in counselling skills for nurses and others in the helping professions. She also found money to enable a volunteer assistant, Robert, to come to England and take a degree in counselling at the University of East Anglia. Apart from him, though, she lacks a tier of supervisors or senior counsellors who can sustain the skills and application of the people she has trained. She is aware that she may not be working in Bamenda for many more years herself and wants the work she has started to flourish after she has gone. She asked if I could return for a longer period to help build up and train this second tier - an invitation which I need to think about.

My present visit was useful in giving her a rare opportunity to talk about these issues with an outside professional. I was also able to give her some training material. I was pleased to find she was making good use of "Foundations for a

Good Life”, the education programme which Marriage Care launched a few years ago for use in schools. And I was privileged to attend a meeting of the HIV/AIDS support group which she runs each Tuesday morning.

Work with Priests. The diocese arranged meetings of its priests and also of members of religious congregations to coincide with my visit. I gave two talks to the priests, one about marriage and counselling, the other about the Portsmouth supervision scheme. There were a lot of questions about counselling, especially its non-directive and non-judgemental character which may have been unfamiliar to them. There was less interest in the supervision scheme but I arranged for copies of our Guidelines to be distributed to each parish. With the religious (chiefly women but also some men), most of whom are engaged in teaching, nursing or other helping services, I spoke about counselling and supervision. This led to some debate, generated chiefly by Sheila and her fellow Irish sister, Colette, about the value of supervision as a way of dealing with the emotional impact of interpersonal work and of learning how it can be done better.

Conclusion

I am glad I made the visit. There was much to learn and to admire. The context - the Catholic setting and the marriage work - was familiar yet also very different. Cameroon, like the rest of Africa, is in a state of rapid transition. Mobile phones and emails flourish alongside primitive technology in agriculture. I read, in the Cathedral newsletter, a lament for the decline of traditional values, such as respect and social cohesion, in the face of modern influences. But “progress” is inevitable and the old ways were scarcely all ideal. I’m aware that the messages I was bringing about counselling and supervision are part of the “new ways”. Much as I enjoyed the simplicity and spontaneity I observed, I think it natural and desirable that it be enriched with greater self-awareness and discernment. However, I hope the Cameroonians can move forward 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.

John McCormick 27 November 2008