

CRC Missionaries a Networking Culture

Note: Missionaries are often accused of competing with each other among the same people. A former CRC missionary to Latin America wrote an article in The Banner, the official denominational magazine, castigating his CRC colleagues for their competitive behaviour with regard to other missions.. I could not speak for his Latin American situation, but I was highly incensed and insulted at this accusation. If there is anything that cannot be said of CRC missionaries in Nigeria, it is that. So I submitted this counter point, which was published under the title "Nigeria: No Tangled Fishing Lines (Sept 11, 1989, pp. 10-11). The article is 25 years old now and the remaining CRC Nigeria missionaries are only a few, but the spirit of networking that prevailed 25 years ago, is still in place. Here my response is published once again to make it clear that such accusations could not stand then and still cannot.

They could surely use some training in sport fishing. They are fishing too close to each other. They are all competing for the same fish. Their lines have gotten so tangled that no one is catching anything. They are simply wasting their time; in the process they look pretty silly—though they may be enjoying themselves.

That summarizes the point of both the cover of *The Banner* of February 20 (1989) and of the accompanying article, "The Great Commission: through Protection or Ecumenism?" by my friend and colleague Jim Dekker. Together, the cover and the article picture Christian Reformed missionaries fishing for converts in waters already crisscrossed by the lines of other fishermen. Dekker says that Christian Reformed missionaries are unecumenical – that they do their own thing without

regard for the efforts of other churches or missionaries. The cover implies that in the process they catch nothing.

I want to correct that picture, at least as it concerns the missionary situation in Nigeria. We have our problems in Nigeria, but the following examples show that Christian Reformed missionaries work well with others.

The Sudan United Mission. Johanna Veenstra, the first member of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) to serve in Nigeria, went to Nigeria under the Sudan United Mission (SUM), a complicated international conglomerate of missions. Veenstra was no one's competitor. Christian Reformed individuals who came after her – the Bierengas, Nelle Breen, and others – followed in her footsteps.

When the CRC entered Nigeria as a denomination, it did so as part of SUM. SUM worked out agreements that were expressly designed to enhance cooperation between its missions and to prevent the kind of situation Dekker describes.

TEKAN--The Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria. The churches that came out of the work of the SUM missions created the Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, popularly referred to by its Hausa-language acronym *TEKAN*. TEKAN's ten member churches together count about 5 million adherents (in 1989). The CRC's Rev. Edgar Smith was its first general secretary; his wife, Nelle Breen Smith, produced a series of Bible studies that served TEKAN's Women's Fellowship for two decades. This series is now being replaced by a new one produced cooperatively by Christian Reformed missionaries, the Christian Reformed World Literature Committee, and the Women's Fellowship of the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN). Apart from CRC staff, the chairperson of this Hausa Literature Committee is Rev. David Angye, a CRCN pastor and church statesman, while the one employee of the Committee belongs to another denomination, but within TEKAN.

One of TEKAN's major projects is the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), where several hundred pastors and secondary-school religion teachers have been trained. Edgar Smith was a major force in getting it going. Rev. Harry R. Boer was TCNN's first principal. For years the CRC has had one or two teachers at

this college. During the 1990s that included me, while CRC's Dr. Timothy Palmer has been there for some 20 years!

Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN). The CCN, a national ecumenical body, counts the everywhere-present Edgar Smith among its former chairpersons. From 1977 to 1994, I have worked for the CCN's Institute for Church and Society (ICS), an organization that seeks to encourage Nigerian Christians to take their social responsibility seriously. In this context was "Mr. Ecumenicity Personified," working with every denomination that would have me, running conferences, seminars and workshops indiscriminately throughout the country. Amongst other things, I was the founder of the non-denominational Action against Bribery.

Joint Efforts in Evangelism. Christian Reformed missionaries have been in the forefront of various joint evangelistic projects in Nigeria. Peter Ipema served for years as general secretary of the Islam in Africa Project, an effort that includes churches from many nations and traditions, all bound together in their desire to bring the gospel to Islam. Ruth Veltkamp became recognized as an interdenominational authority on Muslim evangelism and was consulted by many organizations. Lee Baas long served with New Life for All, a revival movement that gave many churches a shot in their souls and brought thousands of individuals to Christ.

Cooperation in Health Care. CRC missionaries have been leaders in ecumenical health-care projects. Harold Padding was one of the founders of Christian Central Pharmacy, an ecumenical effort to buy and distribute drugs to Christian health institutions. Dr. and Mrs. Herman Grey, Christian Reformed medical missionaries, were sought after across the country because of the contributions they made to original and locally relevant medical technology. And I am currently coordinator for holistic health care for the Christian Health Association of Nigeria, which treats more than 10 million patients per year and includes almost every denomination in the country.

Cooperation in Literature. Christian Reformed missionaries have contributed greatly to the range of Hausa-language Christian literature. Margaret Dykstra's Bible workbook is a major text in the Bible schools of many Nigerian

denominations. Harry R. Boer's ecumenical textbooks for African theological schools are widely accepted. Commentaries by Rev. Robert Recker, Ralph Baker and myself are also used widely. The Hausa-language branch of the CRC's World Literature Committee is producing literature for preachers, evangelists, schools, and the general public. Of the Hausa branch's five members, two are not Christian Reformed.

A Tangled Web? To outsiders, the web of relationships in which Christian Reformed missionaries are involved looks very complicated, even tangled. The CRC, in Nigeria at least, has indeed fished from crowded wharves, but it is always helping, encouraging, and supporting others. It learns from them; it never competes with them. All of us – both foreign missionaries and our Nigerian partners, are pulling in nets strained to their limits. The Lord has blessed our expedition in Nigeria beyond our wildest dreams, but we always fish in concert with others.

Actually, our North American church could learn a thing or two about ecumenical cooperation from its fishermen in Nigeria. Actually, since that time, I believe she has.