

Overview of Christian Reformed Mission in Nigeria¹

Purpose

You hear voices in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC): Nigeria is finished as a mission field. We can leave it. Have you not heard that we have left the great NKST church? Why then do you stay there? On the other hand, the mission board keeps recruiting for Nigeria – at least until the recent financial crunch when some of us were given termination notices. So what is the situation? That's what I want to help make clear to you.

The key to understanding it all is to realize that we have a number of different areas in Nigeria, each of which is at a different stage and each of which has its own characteristics.

How the SUM Got into Nigeria

West Africa came into the centre of European attention during the last couple of decades of the 19th century. European traders and companies began to penetrate the area's interior. This development forced various European governments to enter to protect the interests of their own business people. This brought the British to Nigeria and in 1900 they declared the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. In 1914, they joined this protectorate to the south and the country now known as Nigeria was born, named after the great river Niger.

All this economic activity also drew the attention to the religious situation. There were two religions: African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Islam. And it looked like Islam was on the march and poised to absorb Traditionalists. The cry went up in the UK, Germany and other countries for the need for missions to stop the further advance of Islam. The idea arose that there was a need to build a Mission Curtain (my own term) all the way across Africa south of the Sahara, Black Africa. One of the missions organized to achieve this purpose was the Sudan United Mission (SUM). This was organized by Karl Kumm, first as a British mission, but when the

¹ Home Service presentation, 1991; revised 1992.

dimensions of this huge task became recognized, the SUM soon became an international and interdenominational mission. They first entered Nigeria in 1904 to start working in the Pagan belt, now called the Middle Belt.²

CRC Mission History

Karl Kumm traveled to Canada and the USA to recruit people. Among his audience in Chicago was a CRC maiden, Johanna Veenstra. She responded and in due time found herself a member of the SUM posted to Lupwe. In time, Lupwe became the centre for a large mission outreach.

As time went on, more CRC ladies joined Johanna under the SUM. Ed Smith, a British Baptist, joined them after his marriage to Nelle Breen, a CRC missionary under the SUM. After quite some years, in the early 1940s, the CRC agreed to join the SUM as a denomination with the provision that she would be given her own area and work according to her own traditions. And so the area now covered by the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN) was allocated to the CRC. We were part of the SUM and became known as the SUM/CRC, a name we still use.³ Through the years, many CRC missionaries have served in this area. We at one time had many elementary schools and a large secondary school, Wukari Combined. We had the large Takum Christian Hospital. All of this was in due time taken over by the government. When we arrived in 1966, there were some 40 missionary units working in the CRCN area, the bulk of them in the Takum-Lupwe area.

This work among the CRCN has been blessed by the Lord. There is now an independent CRCN with many pastors, congregations, communicants and baptized members. It no longer owns secondary schools or a hospital, but it does have an extensive Rural Health Programme run exclusively by them. It has an

² See Boer, 1979, pp. 45-124 for the beginning of Western economic and mission interests in Northern Nigeria; 1984, pp. 9-33.

³ It was not till 2014 that the name changed toxxxxx, not the most ingenious of names but it allows the Mission to retain its popular acronym "SUM."

Agricultural Programme still supported to some extent by Christian Reformed World Relief (CRWRC), the denomination's development arm. It has 3 regional Bible schools, Veenstra Seminary and the Smith Bible College.

Today our missionaries there are involved in evangelism to the remaining adherents to ATR. The church has its own Mission Board with one missionary Mike Vander Dyke serving as its supervisor. The Thornburg family has recently started a new evangelistic work among the animistic Dakka people. Then we have four staff members, Anne De Jong and Weena Groenewold – Anne left unexpectedly just a couple of months ago – and Rev. Case Van Wyke and his wife Gremar, working among the nomadic Fulani, doing nursing, literacy and evangelism amongst them. We also have two missionaries involved in teaching at Smith Bible College. Then there is one in administration and one in maintaining equipment. Plans were to increase these missionaries, but with the current financial crunch these plans are now in limbo. No recruitment of new missionaries.

It is important to realize that we took over this ministry from the SUM, a non-Reformed group. We did not start it from scratch. This has had some important effects that hamper the church even today. Among other things, it suffers from an identity crisis.

Let's shift to NKST, the Tiv-language acronym of the Church of Christ among the Tiv in Nigeria. In distinction from CRCN, which covers many tribes, each with their own language, the Tiv church belongs to the Tiv, one tribe, one language. This one we also inherited from someone else. The Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) from South Africa had worked the area since around 1910. After many years of apparently fruitless work, a strong church emerged. During the 1950s, apartheid politics began to heat up and the South African missionaries recognized that sooner or later they would have to go. Rather than wait for that and rush out, they decided to prepare properly.

They contacted the CRC to take over their work. That was a natural. Our work with CRCN was next door. We were Reformed and even Dutch. And so a gradual transfer took place during the 1950s and 1960s.

By the time we came in 1966, our missionaries were running Bristow Secondary School and Mkar Teachers Training College, Mkar Christian Hospital, an orphanage, Benue Bible Institute, while they were also engaged in some so-called evangelistic outstations. We also had an extensive literature ministry that was based in NKST, but served CRCN as well. All in all there were some 40 missionary units there as well.

The secondary school and teachers college were taken over by the government. The church has taken over the other institutions, though missionaries continued to serve in them. The church started its own theological college so that it could teach its own pastors instead of sending them to the ecumenical school in Jos. More recently, NKST has started its own ICS – Institute for Christian Studies with the hope that this will eventually turn into a Christian university. It is the first of its kind in Nigeria. I am grateful for her vision in this respect.

In the year of our Lord 1992 – *this* year – the last missionary left NKST. For some years we had been phasing out and this year was it. This is a year of visible *victory*. As a mission and as a church we should be proud and grateful that the Lord has brought things to this stage.

But again, here we have a church we did not start from scratch. We took over from someone else, this time Reformed, but Reformed in a doctrinal sense rather than one with an emphasis on a Reformed world view. It was a somewhat pietistic mission from which we took over that had little concern with witness to the world.

Not *everything* we do in Nigeria has been taken over from others. During the 1980s we became involved with the *Kamberi* people in Niger State. The Kamberi are a people left behind in Nigeria's march into modernity. They are surrounded by Muslims who have completely isolated them from the rest of the world and who have used and oppressed them in every way. They adhere to Traditional religion.

Since the early 1980s we have a team of missionaries there that seeks to bring them a wholistic Gospel. That is, a Gospel intimately related to solving some of

their felt needs – like water, improved agriculture and medical work. We also have linguistic work going along with planning for literacy. Missionaries come and go. A full complement of missionaries there would mean five units, but right now we are down to three couples, six missionaries.

Here we have a work started by us. Still in an early stage. Not many have been baptized so far. The reason is not that no one wants baptism. No, missionaries do not want to create the break in the community that we have made in our earlier work. They are awaiting the consent of the community so that *most if not all* will come to the Lord together. In the long run, that will be a more productive approach and will avoid the communal disruption and opposition that we have sometimes created in the other areas.

So, though requests for baptism come in, they are trying to keep the lid on it for a time till the larger community is more ready. Another way in which we seek to correct past mistakes is to be more open to the African worldview in terms of healing. Instead of a purely medical approach, Africans have a much more spiritual approach to sickness and health. Our missionaries try to respond to that by combining modern medicine with greater emphasis on healing by prayer and *expecting results from that*. I organized a seminar for them on this subject and they have since reported a few prayer healings that quite astounded them.

Jos Based Ministries

So far, I have described three areas in which we work. They are all rural in character. In each case we are dealing with people that only recently have come or are coming out of the traditional animistic tribal religions, except for our work among the Fulani. But we also have a set of ministries based in Jos that are geared to bringing the Gospel to contemporary Nigeria. Let me give you a quick rundown.

Hillcrest School – This is a school set up especially to cater to the education of missionary children (MKs). It has an American Christian curriculum and is owned by a dozen mission organizations. It has some 400 students from grades 1-12 and a staff of about 40. The CRC has eight staff members there, based on the

number of students we have. However, half of the students today are Nigerian; a quarter from non-mission other nationalities and a quarter are MKs. This is *one* institution we have set up for ourselves primarily. Fran has been on staff at Hillcrest for the last ten years.⁴ The intention of this school is simply to make it possible for families with children to work in Nigeria.

Muslim Ministry – This was started by Ruth Veltkamp. Though I have my own assignment, I have been asked to help out in this ministry, for there was need for a theologian. So I cooperate with Ruth by giving advice to her as well as to these converts. I also help them in organizing classes and worship services. Many of them come to me either in my office or at home. In fact, they come so frequently, that I sometimes have to devise means to get away from them and get some rest.

This ministry concentrates on a few Muslim theologians who have become Christians and who now are doing evangelism under Ruth's guidance. They travel to various cities in the north and bring the Gospel to other Muslims on a one-to-one basis. They continue to behave, live and dress very much like Muslims. In other words, they do not throw their culture overboard. They still love to talk Arabic. They still love to quote from the Qur'an, but slowly their thinking is changing as they get more exposure to the Gospel.

These men have been baptized by us. But they do not identify with or attend existing churches on a regular basis. There are deep historical and other factors that make it difficult for them to identify with the people that make up these churches. And so the aim is to develop a separate church among such people, a church of ex-Muslims that will know how to cater to them with their very different culture from that of existing churches. Where I am given the opportunity, I present a complete talk on that issue, for it is very complicated.

There is a second group of Muslims with whom we are working as well. These tend to be young people who do not hesitate to identify with existing churches. In fact, they are scattered throughout a number of denominations. However, these

⁴ For a complete account of Fran's involvement in Hillcrest, see our *Every Square Inch*, the Jos chapters in both volumes 2 and 3.

churches do not always know how to cater to such people. Hence, they tend to come to us for special help or teaching.

Between these two groups there is some friction. Those that identify with the churches accuse the other group of not being Christian and of being interested only in money. The first group, the one consisting of former Muslim leaders, resent that charge and so they do not want anything to do with them. The result is that we are working with two different groups of Muslim converts that cannot work together. This will become complicated as we go along.

And the charge that the first group is interested mainly in money is not without grounds. When a Muslim becomes a Christian, the Muslim community will do him in, persecute him without limits. Burn his house, his crop, his shop. Destroy his family by taking their wives and children back to the wives' families. They will make him lose his job. They will physically harm, poison and even kill. Imprisonment and harassment are the order of the day. People in such a predicament need encouragement and such encouragement is often in the form of money – rent for a house, buy food or clothing, get medical treatment, bail them out of jail, etc. etc. Until recently, their stories were believed and they were given money for these needs. Some of us became suspicious and began to check up on the stories only to find that many of them were fabrications. So now we are in a period of transition in which we no longer give money without a thorough investigation *before* we give it. The result is that these requests are not coming in as much. The temptation of “easy” money, in other words, has placed a shadow on that ministry that we are now seeking to undo. In the meantime, this problem has caused much friction, hostility and suspicion, something that will take some time to overcome.

Music Ministry – Bill Evenhouse is the main missionary in this ministry. Together with a number of Nigerians he is seeking to accomplish two things. *First:* he is trying to witness to the Lordship of Christ through music. That is, help Nigerians realize that the Gospel of Christ is for all of life, not just for a religious slice of life. And so he and his staff create songs with that kind of emphasis. A major project right now is to turn the CRC's *Contemporary Testimony* into music

with the text in the Hausa language to appeal especially to Muslims who see Christianity as a religion with little to offer for all of life. This is an exciting ministry.

Second: Evenhouse is trying to teach other Christian musicians to create music with a wholistic thrust so as to establish a wholistic Christian musical tradition that will become independent from his ministry in the long run.

Today, the music of this ministry is scattered throughout Nigeria in many of Nigeria's 400 languages. It is making a real musical impact. Nigerians of every generation or age simply love music. Music puts life into them. We should be proud of a Reformed tradition that is so ready to affect culture in the name of Christ. I am proud to be associated with it.

Urban Mission--xxxx

Institute of Church & Society (ICS) – At the request of a group of Nigerian churches I was asked to set up this ICS for them back in the mid 1970s. So, for fifteen years I have been associated with them.⁵ There was a need for a place or organization that would encourage Christians to let their light shine in society at every front or area of life. And so we hold occasional conferences to help Christians think about the relationship between their faith and their daily occupation or some cultural or national problem. We have held such conferences on science, on healthcare, on business, politics – you name it and we either have had a conference on it or we hope to do one sooner or later. Out of some of these conferences emerge long-term projects. We ran a *Community Development* programme that is unique for its being squarely and explicitly based on Bible study, that lays a very close connection between development and Christ. Another conference has led to a programme for the *Rehabilitation of Handicapped Children of Poor Parents*. Some 25 children have already been helped and more are on the waiting list. A third conference has led to a *National*

⁵ For a complete account of my involvement in the ICS, see our *Every Square Inch*, the Jos chapters in both volumes 2 and 3.

Campaign for Wholistic Health Care that now has a budget of several million dollars and includes a programme for AIDS. This programme has become too big for the ICS and has been handed over to the Christian Health Association of Nigeria. I still serve as its chairperson. In connection with the Bible League and the International Bible Society, we run an extensive *Bible Correspondence Course* that enlists several thousand students. We are developing a *Library* to help university students and seminary (we have four in Jos) students to integrate their studies with the Bible. This library is the only opportunity they have to develop a Christian worldview in relation to their studies, *the only one*, apart from counseling sessions I have with them directly. The ICS also has an *Evangelism and Literacy* programme scattered throughout all the shopping centers in Jos as well as in some government offices. Still on books, we run *two bookshops* to which people come from all over Nigeria, even from Lagos, the hub of the country, because they recognize the important materials we have to offer them.

A current emphasis is on Nigeria's external debt. Time is too short to talk of it and so please read the pamphlet of which I will leave a few copies in the hands of your mission rep.xxxx In short, it is an attempt to make Nigerians see the connection between economic affairs and the Lordship of Christ. Muslims generally refuse to read Christian tracts, but they read this one with great interest. So, it also serves an evangelistic purpose.

In addition to all these, we *produce literature*. Some of it comes out of our conferences while some of it is in response to current popular interests. These are all for sale.

Well, there you have it. Some areas in mid-stream, like CRCN. Another phased out altogether. Some new. Some regional; some national. Now you can see why some people are confused. Phase out Nigeria? Yes, one part of it has been phased out. But there are those others at different stages, new ones even.

Here you also have a picture of a wholistic approach to mission unparalleled in any other of our mission fields. One with which I am proud to be associated, one that others admire and approve, one that speaks to a natural wholistic bent in

Nigerians, one that is expressive of the Reformed faith as a way of life, not merely a way of church.

However, there are forces in the church that want us to retreat into a churchy kind of mission and drop the challenge of witness to society as a whole. These forces are now using the excuse of lack of giving to have their way. *You* as a denomination and perhaps as congregation or as individuals, are no longer supporting our world outreach as you used to do. Because of that, the mission board is forced to curtail. That is sad, very sad. Some of us who have been prepared to spend our entire working lives in mission abroad are now threatened with dismissal – after we have spent most of our strength in the service of mission and have been totally shaped by it.

But it is even more sad when you realize that this excuse of lack of funds is now used to keep the ministries in the rural areas going, but to shut down the Jos ministries, shut down the ministries to contemporary Nigeria, shut down the ministries that witness to all of Nigeria about the Lordship of Christ and the application of the Word of God to all of life. No one is doing this besides us. Nigerians know how to evangelize. We do not need to teach them that anymore. However, the ministries we have in Jos are not things just every Nigerian can do and *these* are the ones they want to close down. It is a case of shrinking vision. Of forgetting that historically Calvinism has been a culture-shaping force in the mainstream of life, something that will be lost if we forsake contemporary Nigeria and retreat to its backwoods.

So, I end by challenging you not to restrict *your* vision or *your* participation in world mission. I also challenge you to *stand up and reject this retreat into backwoods Nigeria, into yesterday, at the expense of witnessing to the forces of today and tomorrow.*