

A Clear Signal from CAR's Latest Coup

BEST's Urgent Need Is for a Better Location

Up until the 1970s, anyone in the sub-Saharan region of Africa who wished to obtain a graduate degree in theology was forced to obtain it overseas—involving major expense and disruption of ministry and family life. It thus became a priority for the then recently formed Association of Evangelicals in Africa to make training at the master's level available within the continent. This was the passion of Byang Kato, who became the first African general secretary of the AEA in 1973. (It had taken Kato, a Nigerian, three years at London Bible College to earn his bachelor of divinity degree, and another four years at Dallas Theological Seminary to receive his master's and doctoral degrees.)

The number of tribal languages in Africa is astounding. But colonial powers ruled most of the continent for long enough to make English and French (plus, to a lesser extent, Portuguese) the languages of diplomacy and higher education. And for Protestant higher education, the French region is much less adequately served than the English region. The AEA planned to sponsor two seminaries at the master's degree level: one in Nairobi, Kenya, to serve students from those countries with advanced education offered in English, and another to serve students from countries with advanced education in French.

Searching for a strategic location for the Francophone school, Kato considered the Central African Republic because of its "hinge" location, with the Congo River basin and Rwanda to its south, and the other nations of the former French West Africa to its west. And on a visit to the then-president of the CAR, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, Kato was able to win from him donation of a eight-acre site for this school near the national university, with access to its library assured.

Sadly, Byang Kato was drowned in the Indian Ocean during a family vacation to Mombasa, Kenya, in 1975. But his vision was picked up by his AEA successor Tokunboh Adeyemo, another Nigerian. The English-language institution, the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, was launched in 1983. Its first students studied in a building previously devoted to raising chickens! The school has since grown and developed to the extent that it was reorganized in 2011 as Africa International University. It has been supported by College Church since 1980, and now offers both PhD and DMin degrees in theology, plus a range of majors to serve the church more broadly.

A building for the French-language school was erected in the Central African Republic capital Bangui, and the first class of the Bangui Evangelical School of Theology was enrolled in 1977. Under several presidents, including Dr. Isaac Zokoué, and now Dr. Nupanga Weanzana, the number of BEST graduates is

approaching the 1,000 mark. The master's degree program was established in 1977, and the doctoral program was launched in 2006. It also has been supported by College Church since 1979.

But several down sides have emerged for the CAR location. The 4.6 million citizens of the Republic, roughly the size of Texas, have endured arbitrary leadership, coups, rebellions, hunger, and destitution since gaining independence from France in 1960. While the CAR is at the heart of the continent's land mass, it is by no means a transportation hub. And its chronic poverty and staggering unemployment rate has spawned lawless elements as well.

The infamous Lord's Resistance Army, which has mutilated victims and abducted children to use as soldiers and sex slaves, was launched in northern Uganda about 25 years ago. As Ugandan forces began to close in, the fugitive LRA warlord, Joseph Kony, shifted his rebel forces to southern Sudan. More recently, as Southern Sudan won independence from Sudan's Muslim north, his forces melted across the border into the forested savannah of northeastern CAR. This is an area with no paved roads, little electricity or running water, and no police posts or health clinics. Several watchdog organizations report that the struggling LRA is killing elephants across Central Africa for illegal trade in ivory in order to acquire food and other supplies.

Back in 2005, small-scale rebellions erupted in the loosely governed and remote north of the CAR. They merged into a loose coalition of rebel groups called *Seleka*—the word for "alliance" in Sango, the country's dominant tribal language. For months its members had been fitfully pushing south toward Bangui. In March the rebels resumed their advance on the capital, claiming that President François Bozizé, who himself took power in a 2003 coup, had reneged on a peace deal brokered in January to integrate some of their men into the national army. Their convoy entered the city on March 24. President Bozizé fled the presidential palace by helicopter to Cameroon, and the rebels went house to house, looting. Michel Djotodia emerged as the Seleka leader, declaring himself head of state, suspending the CAR constitution, dissolving its parliament, and initiating a three-year "consensual transition."

The BEST campus has emerged intact from the chaos of the power shift. The head of peace-keeping forces from neighboring countries had assigned a police detail for its protection. As Bangui changed hands, seminary president Nupanga responded to a query from the Overseas Council—The Indianapolis-based agency that facilitates our evaluation and support to seminaries and their students abroad—with this message: "We are in the midst of trouble but Lord is watching over us. People are looting shops, private houses, etc., but we are safe. We rely on Lord. Water has been reestablished yesterday evening. We are waiting for electricity. We are running the generator during daytime because tonight it will attract attention of people in the city where there is darkness. Lord bless you." What Dr. Nupanga didn't mention is

that the police detail was bolstered by students who took turns patrolling the school property perimeter at night, and that the campus also provided protection for others in the vicinity.

While the school has remained secure, the outlook for the nation remains dubious. New elections are theoretically to be conducted within 18 months. But the aid group Merlin's country director, Arvind Das, reported on June 12 that thousands of children are dying as a result on the ongoing insecurity. At the outset of the July/August rainy season, their families have fled into the bush, where there is no food. The few clinics outside the capital have mostly been looted, their medicines removed and their medical staffs having fled. "We've had [medicine] deliveries come into the country," Das reported, "and even before we could receive them they were looted." Acute malnutrition and outbreaks of malaria and measles are now predicted. Before the coup, one in ten CAR children died before their fifth birthday. Das predicted a rise to three in ten for most of the country.

This leaves the prospects of BEST continuing to attract students from the 17 French-speaking countries of Africa problematic. If its graduate programs remain in Bangui, a pronounced shriveling of the student body is seen as inevitable.

John F. (Jack) Robinson, a retired seminary professor living in Winfield, has, with his wife Theo, taught at BEST regularly over the past 30 years. The Robinsons are members of the BEST adjunct faculty and were recently assigned with several colleagues to scope out the potential for moving the advanced degree programs of the seminary to a relatively central but more stable location. Last month they and a small team spent a week in Cameroon, the CAR's adjacent country to its west, exploring the feasibility of shifting some of the seminary programs to its capital, Yaounde. They and the team of consultants returned with a positive report and the outlines of a working plan.

In a three-to-five-year, two-phase transition, the master's and doctoral degree programs of the seminary would be shifted to rented accommodations in Cameroon by this fall. (The current buildings in Bangui would be retained as a branch campus to continue to serve the local CAR constituency with its existing preschool, primary, and secondary schools.) It is estimated that the move and initial rental will cost approximately \$200,000.

Within a few years, a new property would be obtained and campus building constructed. Plans call for adding a school of education plus other disciplines to transform the seminary into a full-fledged Christian university. A major thrust would be development of extension education via the internet. An advisory committee is being formed and several foundations—such as the British Langham Partnership, founded by the late John Stott—are already committed to helping fund this major undertaking. But additional support will be required.

Since BEST was first established to provide a master's-level school for pastors in Francophone Africa, the vision for making adequate training available has been raised substantially. Several schools already provide training at the master's level. But obtaining a doctorate overseas remains both disruptive and prohibitively expensive for most. So a current goal is to further develop doctoral programs in three affordable and accessible schools for the French-speaking portion of Africa. Besides BEST in its projected Cameroon location, the thinking is that the West Africa Alliance Seminary in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), and Shalom University in Bunia, Democratic Republic of Congo, should be upgraded to provide world-standard doctoral programs in biblical studies and theology for the French linguistic area's western and central regions. These schools would in turn provide faculty for theological schools at the collegiate and master's degree levels.

While evangelism may be a primary need for other continents, for Africa with its high and growing percentage of self-identified Christians, often clinging to pre-conversion lifestyles, the crucial need is for discipling in depth by a corps of thoroughly trained pastors and lay leaders.