

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne For the Life of the World

December 2013, Volume Seventeen, Number Four



Into ALL the World

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Lutheranism in Mud Huts:



The Rise of the Burkinabé Lutheran Church

By Heath A. Trampe

Imagine living in a country where less than a quarter of the inhabitants are literate and over three quarters are unemployed. Imagine a country where the life expectancy is nearly 25 years lower than in America, and the median income is less than \$4 a day.¹ Clean drinking water is scarce, and potentially deadly diseases like typhoid, yellow fever and malaria are everyday realities. Burkina Faso, in West Africa, is one of the poorest and least educated countries on the planet, with little hope for change.²

What is one of the most troubling facts concerning Burkina Faso? There are no ordained Lutheran pastors among the Burkinabé. When they seek spiritual guidance, they overwhelmingly turn to the animist religions of their forefathers or to Islam, which is the dominant religious presence in the country. These are a people dying to hear of Christ and His work on the cross. Dying to be baptized. Dying to receive our Lord's true body and blood. For this reason,

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Dr. Timothy Quill, director of International Studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne; the Rev. Michael Barnes and the Rev. Heath Trampe from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Indiana District; and the Rev. Frederick Reinhardt, the LCMS area facilitator for French-speaking Central and East Africa, traveled in July 2013 to Burkina Faso to continue the work begun by Rufus K. Kormah Yentemah just a few short years ago.

Seeking refuge from the civil war in his native Liberia, Yentemah traveled to Ghana nearly two decades ago. He then approached the Rev. Dr. Paul Fynn, president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana, to inquire as to how he might serve. Fynn suggested Burkina Faso, and Yentemah soon found himself in Fada N’Gourma, where he subsequently started The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Burkina Faso (EELBF) in 1996. Although he had

Top left: Rev. Fred Rheinhart

Top right: Dr. Timothy Quill leads a homiletics workshop for vicars in Burkina Faso.

Bottom: Rev. Trampe and Rev. Barnes with the Fada congregation.



trained only one year at *Le Centre Lutherien d’Etudes Theologique* (CLET) in Dapaong, Togo, Yentemah worked diligently with the Togolese seminary to raise up future clergy for this impoverished nation. Progress was encouraging as several Burkinabé had worked their way through the seminary en route to becoming ordained Lutheran pastors...and then Yentemah died. His untimely death halted the momentum of the Burkinabé vicars and they found themselves in a difficult position: just this side of ordination, with little to no prospects for fulfilling their vicarage requirements.

Barnes, having previously taught intensive classes at the CLET—including those for all of the current Burkinabé vicars—was sympathetic to the plight of these men. His plan to visit Burkina Faso to ascertain the needs of the vicars, as well as the future of the EELBF, was well received by Quill, who graciously lent his expertise to the mission. “The LCMS has been working in French-speaking West Africa for two decades. However, for many in our Synod it is the ‘invisible mission field.’ Many

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Americans can hardly find Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and other Francophone countries on a map,” commented Quill. “I am thrilled that LCMS pastors and congregations have taken an interest in supporting these missions, especially in the much needed area of theological education of the clergy.”

Trampe, associate pastor at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, was also added to the group. St. Peter’s has supported the work of the CLET in West Africa for the past few years, and the congregation was excited to send a representative to aid in the work of this trip and see, with congregational eyes, the work of the Spirit in this foreign land.

The practical impetus for the trip was to teach the vicars, along with a group called “evangelists”—so named because they had not attended seminary or, in a few cases, had not yet completed the primary seminary requirements for vicarage—in a variety of subjects. Eschewing the modest cement block structure that served as our classroom in favor of class under the perfectly blue African sky, Quill led a homiletics workshop for an excited group of five vicars with Reinhardt as translator. Since Burkina Faso is a Francophone country, English is a rarity and translators are a necessity. Trampe led a discussion on Luther’s *Large Catechism* for eight eager evangelists with Barnes as translator, while Barnes later taught the entire group Gerhard Forde’s *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

To say that the classes were a success would be an understatement. The Burkinabé, despite their relative lack of formal education (especially among the evangelists), proved to be eager and capable students who displayed a clear desire to learn more about Lutheran doctrine and practice. The author was often taken aback by their displays of gratitude and genuine desire to grow in understanding. The classroom discussions were highly fruitful, and each of the teachers felt the one week intensive was a success.

The delayed benefit of our trip to West Africa may come from the work that took place behind the scenes. Before ever sitting down with the Burkinabé vicars, our group traveled to Dapaong

to meet with the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Togo, including the leaders of the CLET. Our discussions with Director Kombondjar Souk provided us with a greater understanding of the seminary’s future direction. It also allowed the CLET to ascertain which foreign professors they might be able to secure for the upcoming academic year. Having the American clergy come to teach and preach for them is a system which has worked well for them in the past and, considering the international experience that LCMS clergy receive via these teaching opportunities, this partnership is truly a blessing for everyone involved.

Multiple meetings with Vicar Tchiriteme Tanpo, president of the EELBF, allowed us to discuss his vision for the future of the young church body, as well as what kind of partnership to expect from the LCMS in the future. We were blessed by our time with President Tanpo, and were greatly encouraged by his growth and maturity since being elected to his current position just one year prior.

Traveling to West Africa is a great adventure. The cultural customs of the Burkinabé are entirely unlike those we practice in America. Their methods of cooking, the materials they use to build their houses, even their dress are different than our own. It takes very little time among the Burkinabé Lutherans, however, to discover what an intimate connection—a true brotherhood—we have as Lutherans and children of God. May our church bodies continue to work together in the future as we bless and find ourselves blessed by our Burkinabé brothers! 🇸🇩

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Theological Seminary and serves
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1. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uv.html>
2. <http://www.dandc.eu/en/article/decentralisation-burkina-faso-coming-against-obstacles-because-local-people-are-distrustful>

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