

The Continuing Pastoral Education Initiative of the Communauté Évangélique de l'Ubangi-Mongala

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For over eighty years, the Communauté Évangélique de l'Ubangi-Mongala (CEUM) and the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) have joined in a fruitful and mutually blessed intercultural partnership. The CEUM's primary ministry context is the northwest corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) covering a terrain roughly equivalent to the size of Ohio. The CEUM-ECC partnership endeavors to serve this region through initiatives in community health, economic development, primary and secondary education, and theological education.

Presently, the CEUM has over fifteen hundred “formed” or trained pastors serving nearly two thousand congregations with a combined membership of 213,000 baptized members.¹ CEUM pastoral training is offered upon multiple levels of education ranging from grade school to college. However, one challenge the CEUM has faced is providing its pastors consistent and meaningful continuing education opportunities. Until 2015 the only continuing education offered was a biannual training experience that was poorly attended due to geographical distance, the advanced age of a significant portion of the ministerium, and prohibitive cost. Moreover, the learning of those who did attend was often limited by the absence of accompanying written materials to review after returning to their ministry contexts. These conditions have contributed to a sense of isolation, disillusionment, and malaise among pastors. To complicate

¹ 2018 Presidential report to the CEUM General Assembly.

matters, the CEUM had few capable continuing education personnel to provide pastors with quality training.

To address this need, in 2013 the CEUM launched the Continuing Pastoral Education Initiative. This article highlights the steps taken by the CEUM-ECC partnership to elevate the CEUM's continuing pastoral education program, methodologies used in the implementation of the program, and the program's transformational impact on CEUM clergy.

The Continuing Pastoral Education Initiative

Methodologies. The Continuing Pastoral Education Initiative (CPEI), began when, in response to the CEUM's invitation, we gathered a team of four Congolese "master trainers" capable of providing edifying and pertinent training experiences consistent with the CEUM's evangelical heritage. The CPEI team's mandate is to preserve the CEUM's long history of investment in theological formation, deepen biblical knowledge, encourage pastoral excellence, increase faith through spiritual discipline, and restore pastoral dignity and unity. CPEI provides quality continuing education that resources Congolese pastoral needs by offering geographically decentralized annual training seminars and publishing volumes of practical theology in Lingala, the area trade language. The published books supply content for training seminars and are additionally made available to every CEUM pastor.

Preparation for annual training seminars begins a year in advance. The five-member CPEI team selects topics drawn from CEUM pastors' expressed needs. At the close of each seminar, questionnaires are distributed inviting participants to recommend topics for future seminars that would be most beneficial to their ministry context. The CPEI team tabulates results and usually selects topics based on number of requests. Each member of the CPEI team is then assigned to research and write two articles. The team's combined articles form chapters in the following year's volume on practical theology.

Topical research includes Bible study and the reading of relevant literature. Finding adequate research material is often a challenge with basically no resources in Lingala and limited amounts in the national language of French, especially written from an African context. One of the roles the missionary team member has played is to provide appropriate French books and articles for team members. English materials are also translated into French for team use. Team members provide at least one of their two article drafts by March 1 of each cycle. The full team then reviews these articles and provides recommendations and revisions. This

process is repeated for the second article by late summer to early fall. After several rounds of revisions, the final articles are printed as a book by the year's end.² This volume then serves as the material for the next cycle of seminar training, with plenary training modules led by article authors.

CPEI is now on its fifth cycle, having completed twenty-nine four-day training seminars to date, with an aggregate of over three thousand five hundred participating pastors. The CPEI team has produced five books on practical theology, with a sixth volume to be produced by the end of 2020. The volumes constitute an invaluable pastoral library for CEUM pastors.³

Metrics. Research questionnaires from select seminar participants testify to the effectiveness and popularity of CPEI. Of the 874 pastors who participated in five seminars offered in the Ubangi-Mongala region in 2019, 143 completed questionnaires, providing a 16.5 percent sample. Fifty-three percent of respondents reported they get to a seminar center within a day's travel—coming close to our initial goal of 65 percent—and 23 percent could arrive with two days' travel. Thus, 76 percent of the respondents have a continuing education center within two days' reach—a game changer in terms of access in the DRC. The most common method of transportation to seminars was bicycle (51%), followed by motorcycle (35%). Others came by canoe, commercial truck, or on foot. Sixty-two percent of respondents reported difficulties in their travel such as transportation breakdowns, bad roads, the elements, harassment from governmental authorities at check points, health problems, and accidents. Imagine if 62 percent of the Covenant ministerium were to encounter similar difficulties in attending a Midwinter Conference!

Yet 100 percent of the respondents said they were glad they came to the

² Over fifty articles have been published to date, including “The Prayer Life of a Pastor,” “The Problem of Polygamy,” “The Pastor's Love of the Word of God,” “How to Promote Reconciliation,” “The Blessings of Scars,” “What Pastors Need to Know About Islam,” “The Sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper,” “How Pastors Can Encourage One Another,” “The Pastor and the Environment,” “The Pastor and Human Rights,” “The Traits of a Good Pastor,” “Demonology,” “The Pastor's Children: How to Raise Them,” and “Pastoral Ethics in the CEUM.”

³ Funding for CPEI was initially provided by ECC churches and individuals through a Friends of World Mission project. In 2016 two Christian foundations made a four-year commitment to fund program operation. In early 2020 the same foundations renewed their commitments. CEUM churches and pastors also contribute financially though seminar participation fees (\$3.50 per person), book purchases (presently \$3 per book), and in-kind gifts. Pastors are responsible for transportation costs, which usually exceed participation fees or purchase of subsidized books. Hosting churches provide participating pastors with housing and food.

seminars and wanted to return the following year. When asked why they came to the training seminar, 42 percent of the 2018 respondents named fellowship with their colleagues, and 54 percent increasing knowledge and receiving good teaching. Ninety-eight percent of the 2019 respondents said they were able to pay their participation fees in full—no small deal. CPEI has in aggregate a higher pastoral participation rate than the biannual pastors' conference, due largely to the increased access enabled by lower fees and geographical decentralization of the training centers (though this decentralization does not afford the opportunity for participating pastors to connect with the entire ministerium).

Tangible Intangibles. CEUM leaders and pastors testify to many additional, less easily quantified, benefits of CPEI. Vice-President Vungbo notes that CPEI training and materials are culturally relevant, practical, and applicable no matter the educational level of the pastor—and more widely accessible because they are in Lingala, which covers a broad spectrum of tribes and is more readily understood than French. Moreover, they refresh the memory of participating pastors, reminding them of their previous training. Vungbo notes that CPEI training events provide an environment of participant care and excellent worship experiences. He credits CPEI with promoting a greater sense of unity in the CEUM. CPEI preserves the initial investment of pastors' theological training and enables pastors to be more effective for the present and future needs of their churches. It reinforces what pastors learned and introduces program participants to new fields of practical theology that were not possible to explore in the classroom.

Additional accounts of the program's efficacy come from CEUM pastors. After one training event, Rev. Hilaire Goyenge of the Karawa region encouraged fellow participants to go home and use the materials to train church deacons as he had. Rev. Mawe recently declared, "If we were to lose all other of the CEUM's programs, may we always have this training." In one recent seminar, upon conclusion of the "Pastor and His Family" module, pastors took part in a guided prayer session interceding for their families. They cried out the names of their loved ones—for their return to the Lord, for God's provision, or for forgiveness for their own failures toward them. Pastors raised their arms as tears streamed down their faces; others knelt in earnest petition. Upon completion of the module of reconciliation, two pastors immediately sought to reconcile publicly. Pastors of the Gbadolit e region took up a seminar challenge to form peer-mentoring relationships with fellow pastors. To date, thirty-seven pastors of the region are actively engaged in this strategic form of discipleship.

Connecting the Vision

All too often, well-meaning educational initiatives fail because they are touristic rather than incarnational. Visitors who come for a short time and “show how it’s done” with little follow-up serve only to discourage those they intend to inspire, leaving a disconnected vision. As Jonathan Bonk states, “These theological and missiological tourists—superbly trained, well-funded, and well-equipped—can often make local teachers and indigenous missionaries feel tawdry, poorly provided for, and backward.”⁴ By contrast, CPEI’s incarnational response to the CEUM’s continuing pastoral education challenges serves as an integral part of the CEUM and ECC’s whole gospel endeavor. Congolese leaders are developed as a new class of trainers and authors is equipped. Disciples are deepened through continuing education in practical theology that enhances pastoral competence. Churches—and the CEUM as a whole—are strengthened through CPEI. CEUM President Mboka and Vice-President Vungbo acclaim CPEI’s contribution in unifying the church.

The CEUM-ECC intercultural mission partnership also intersects with the larger framework of missiological research. In his book, *Transformation After Lausanne*, Al Tizon refers to this type of partnership as a form of “glocalization” stemming from “our attempts at missionary equality and mutuality, i.e., partnership in mission between churches across cultures.”⁵ CPEI embodies the vision of a true partnership in theological education by which the grip of Western domination is loosened while the hand of Congolese self-theologizing (practical theology) is strengthened, which is an absolute necessity in doing theology responsibly.⁶

Carl Gibbs delineates five training levels of theological education in a cross-cultural context: (1) disciplined believers, (2) lay leaders of small groups, (3) bi-vocational leaders of larger groups, (4) full-time trained leaders, and (5) scholars.⁷ Gibbs believes that the two highest levels, full-time trained leaders and scholars, contribute the most to the stability of a church.⁸ CPEI’s focus is the full-time trained pastors (level 4) who form

⁴ Jonathan Bonk, “Non-Western Theological Education Entering the Twenty-First Century,” in *Evangelical Mission Entering the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jonathan Bonk (Pasadena: William Carey Library, Evangelical Missiological Society 10, 2003), 129.

⁵ Al Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 222.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷ Carl Gibbs, “The Training Pyramid,” in *Theological Education in a Cross-Cultural Context: Essays in Honor of John and Bea Carter*, ed. A. Kay Fountain (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 106–107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

the backbone of the CEUM. While promoting stability in the church through continuing pastoral education, CPEI strives to balance being flexible to the felt needs of participants with being prescriptive regarding the essential doctrinal underpinnings of the CEUM's evangelical heritage, a balance Gibbs advocates:

Prepackaged curriculum should not become a pedagogical straitjacket that does not allow for contextualization. On the other hand, simply teaching to the felt needs of the students is not adequate. There are many prescribed needs—many of which are in the Bible—that the student may not sense an urgency to study. “Real needs” are where a student's felt needs and the prescribed needs overlap.⁹

One of the primary benefits of CPEI is the mentoring relationship between the missionary trainer and the four Congolese master trainers. Jurgens Hendricks affirms mentorship in education as a potent means of empowerment: “Empowerment does not happen only through formal education. Mentors, too, have unique abilities to guide and empower people, and this can also happen within the context of education.”¹⁰ This has certainly taken place within the six years of CPEI's existence. The relationship between the missionary trainer and Congolese master trainers is of a mutually beneficial nature where the parties learn from one another, with the Congolese master trainers setting the agenda (for they know what will work with their constituents) and the missionary trainer assisting in giving birth to their vision through exposure to resources and experience. Team members competently conduct their training modules and engage in collective problem-solving with increasing confidence. In large part, the missionary trainer now merely accompanies the Congolese team, taking a secondary role with the Congolese leaders at the forefront. In some cases, the missionary trainer does not accompany the Congolese team at all (for example due to health concerns given the rigors of distant road travel or political conditions unfavorable to expatriate involvement), facilitating a good transition strategy.

CPEI was created to expand CEUM writers in the realm of practical theology. Priest, Barine, and Salombongo state, “Writing and reading, and not merely orality, are important in the contemporary world for the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰ Jurgens Hendricks, “Empowering Leadership—A New Dawn in African Christian Leadership,” in *African Christian Leadership: Realities, Opportunities, and Impact*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Kirimi Barine (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 162.

strength of the African church.”¹¹ They go on to state, “The identification, coaching, and training of Christian writers in Africa must be strengthened and expanded.”¹² This has taken place as the CPEI team’s original four Congolese master trainers have written fifty practical theology articles, and the writing team expands as team members reach out to additional pastors to co-author articles. Two articles from Kinshasa-based CEUM pastors were published in the 2020 volume; two additional articles from Kinshasa-based pastors are expected to be included in the 2021 volume.

Final Thoughts on the CEUM-ECC Partnership

Trust is a critical element in intercultural mission partnerships. Trust requires patience through the obstacles. Significant delays in communication have proven mutually frustrating for CEUM and ECC partners. Such delays usually stem from technical difficulties and competing priorities, as CPEI team members carry additional church responsibilities. Such circumstances have provided opportunities to trust rather than jump to premature assumptions that would endanger the partnership.¹³ By God’s grace and despite difficulties caused by vulnerable infrastructure and political instability, the CPEI program has never once had to cancel a scheduled seminar until global COVID-19 restrictions came into place in spring 2020. At the time of this writing, the team is on track to complete all seminars that were postponed.

In his book, *Whole and Reconciled*, Al Tizon notes seven critical areas in a life of discipleship that require cultivation: (1) a devotional life of worship, (2) a wise life of Bible study and obedience, (3) an interdependent life in Spirit-filled community, (4) an ethical life of personal and social holiness, (5) a peculiar life of contrast and distinction, (6) a missional life of local and global witness, and (7) a reproductive life of mentoring or making disciple (both in the qualitative and quantitative sense). We believe CPEI embraces many of these areas of discipleship in the form of peer mentoring and training others. Worship is the team’s priority for every meeting. Vigorous engagement with Scripture is required in addressing pastoral issues as team members work on their respective

¹¹ Robert J. Priest, Kiri Barine, and Alberto Lucamba Salombongo, “Reading and Leading—Challenges for African Christian Leaders,” in *African Christian Leadership: Realities, Opportunities, and Impact*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Kiri Barine (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 194.

¹² *Ibid.*, 195.

¹³ Mary Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships-Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 65–66.

articles. Each team member is cared for and held accountable by the others. Contributions from other CEUM pastors are strongly encouraged by the team. Therefore, we submit that the CPEI program is worth considering as a model for equipping pastors for relevant ministry in terms of continuing pastoral formation. CPEI program is worth considering as a model for equipping pastors for relevant ministry in other contexts.

A true intercultural mission partnership offers both parties opportunity for change. In the case of CPEI, there has been a change of approach in how training is delivered. Never before has the CEUM nor the mission used such an intensive platform for consistent and effective continuing education. CPEI has broken loose from the moorings of traditional formal training in the classroom and one-off seminars that have had little cohesion in terms of practical theology. The team has given this missionary co-author the name *accoucheur* (midwife) as the one who helps give birth to their dreams. And the team has provided inspiration with their graceful resilience to consistently and passionately equip their pastoral colleagues—a drive based on true compassion and a sincere desire to encourage a more effective ministry. For us as authors, the relationship has truly been an “iron sharpening iron” experience. We are forever grateful to the CEUM and the ECC for this unique and unprecedented ministry opportunity.