

The Joint Action Group of Churches: A Catholic-Protestant Local Ecumenical Experiment in Kumba-Cameroon, 1970-1996

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Abstract: The heightening of local ecumenism in confessionally mixed communities across the world was a spillover of the ecumenical revolution which gained intensity after the Second Vatican Council. Within this era, dialogues between Catholic and Protestant churches quite often culminated in the creation of local ecumenical movements. This was the context in which Catholics and Protestants of Kumba in South West Cameroon, led by their clergy, dialogued and launched the Joint Action Group of Churches (JAGC) in 1974. The overriding intention was to contribute to the new ecumenical movement in a manner capable of enhancing Christian unity, missionary endeavours and fraternal goodwill. The operation mechanism that was fashioned alongside the various sources of income that were identified enabled the group to engage in beneficial evangelical, social and economic activities. And prior to its dissolution in 1996, the group had successfully unbolted the doors of separation between Catholics and Protestants. This paper, based on primary and secondary data, is aimed at recording the history of this local ecumenical experiment. It opens up with an introductory background that contextualizes Catholic-Protestant cooperation. This is followed by an examination of the origins of the JAGC and its mechanism of operation. The paper further discusses the myriad activities of the group alongside the problems that resulted in its dissolution. The paper argues that the JAGC, in spite the impediments that caused its demise, offered the Kumba Christians an opportunity for engaging in joint ecumenical commitments that were not only beneficial to the local population, but also to the new ecumenical movement.

Keywords: Catholics, Protestants, ecumenism, local ecumenism, Kumba, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Efforts toward ecumenism are traced to the early Christian Church. The latter's unity was often threatened by the secessionist activities of schismatic sects [1]. Building on Biblical underpinnings and on the belief that the fullness of salvation is attributed only to those in communion with the See of Rome, Catholic Councils after the 1054 schism gained the status of ecumenical councils. But when the unity of the Catholic Church as well as the Christian Family was further shattered by the sixteenth century reformation that resulted in the birth of Protestantism, the word ecumenism disappeared from popular usage. This was because the reformation caused the unprecedented fierce rivalry between Catholics and Protestants. These two Christian traditions, for a long period, that is, from the early sixteenth century to the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, rivaled one another in ways that were injurious to the unity of the Christian Church. Each claimed to be unique in name and correct in its own doctrine [2]. Consequently, the unity of Christians was obscured by Catholic-Protestant mistrust and rivalries.

The already bad situation was aggravated by incessant divisions within the Protestant family evidenced by the emergence of rival traditions such as Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Baptists, among others. This faded opportunities of reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants given that the latter could not arrive at any unanimous decision as regards their connections with the former. Interestingly enough, an unusual cooperation among rival Protestant traditions surfaced in mission fields across the world. The 1910 World Missionary Conference which emanated from such cooperation initiatives provided the potential for the birth of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. Although the WCC was, from the beginning, a pure Protestant body, it reintroduced ecumenism into popular usage. This time around, it was an ecumenism marked by a shift from intensive ecclesiastical questions to extensive worldly questions. This "ecumenical revolution", as labeled by Robert Brown, came with opportunities for Catholic-Protestant dialogues and cooperation in top and local levels across the world [3].

The ecumenical revolution within Protestant circles took the form of unity and mission and fraternal good will and concern for all men. This was the outcome of numerous conferences convened by the WCC between 1948 and 1961.[4] This completely transformed their perceptions about Catholics and began destroying the walls that had for a long time impeded cooperation between the two Christian traditions. Protestants, building on New Testament evidences such as Eph. 4:4-5, Gal. 3:27-28, 1 Cor. 1:12-13 and Jn. 17:20-21 rediscovered how much they shared with Catholics. Consequently, they began inviting Catholics to WCC gatherings. This, among other things, pushed Catholics to come on board the new ecumenical movement and to engage in dialogue with Protestants[5]. Catholic commitment to this new course began at the highest level of the church when Pope John invited Protestant observers to the 1962 Second Vatican Council. The Decree on Ecumenism that resulted from this Catholic gathering placed Catholics on a good course of dialogue with Protestants. Commenting on this, Harding Meyer observed that the Decree “marks the momentous “conversion” of a deepening division and estrangement between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians over four centuries, into a history of growing contact and mutual understanding.”[6] Indeed the promulgation of the decree in 1964 resulted in fruitful and successful Catholic-Protestant dialogues the world over. Brown interpreted this as recognition that both Catholics and Protestants caused the division of Christendom and must reach out toward one another [7].

The above mentioned ecumenical revolution of the 1960s, fed by WCC gatherings and the Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, was peddled by Catholic and Protestant ecumenists armed with the conviction that separated Christians should do everything together[8]. They began talking and listening to one another with constant reference to New Testament texts relating to ecumenism. At the top and local levels, the dialogue among other things went beyond words as it quite often led to joint initiatives. Besides the aura of Catholic-Protestant ecumenical institutions that emerged, joint commitment to social action gained a pride of place, especially at the local level. Scholars of religion have defined this new form of ecumenism as the yearning of Christians to recover the unity they had obscured by their divisions and to engage in joint actions in the domain of mission and fraternal goodwill. Before the 1960s, as Brown notes, ecumenism was concerned only with churchy matters [9]. As regards the concept “local”, it is used in this study with regard to ecclesial entities (local church, local parish etc.). Hence, this study adopts Birmele’s definition of the concept as the area where Christians live with one another in communities or other groups [10]. In light of this, local ecumenism can be defined as ecumenical endeavours and experiences on the local

level. It rests to a great extent on the local clergy, the priests and pastors of the area[11].

In Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, different Catholic and Protestant churches began working together for social justice in various spheres: battling racism, poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, diseases among others. In a confessionally mixed country like Cameroon [12], the pursuance of this reformed ecumenical work unbolted doors which were keeping Catholics and Protestants apart from one another. This cooperation between Catholics and Protestants in Cameroon found expression at the top and local levels. At the local level, cooperation between Catholic and Protestant parishes and congregations became a common practice. As these parishes successfully pulled down the walls that had separated them, many opportunities for dialogue emerged. Consequently, local ecumenical bodies largely focusing on joint commitment to social action were established in some confessionally diverse societies in Cameroon [13].

One of such societies that hosted many Catholic and Protestant churches was/is the town of Kumba. Here, just like elsewhere, Catholic Protestant dialogue led by priests and pastors culminated in the birth of the Joint Action Group of Churches (JAGC), a local ecumenical experiment, in the 1970s. The creation of the JAGC was a promising decisive step which offered the Catholic and Protestant churches in Kumba an opportunity for surmounting their differences and had a great potential for ecumenical thought and action. The overall goal of this ecumenical group was joint concern for unity and mission and fraternal goodwill. Thus, the JAGC was intended to promote Christian unity, enhance the spread of the gospel and improve the livelihood of the population of Kumba. After functioning well throughout the seventies and eighties, the group was engulfed by a plethora of problems amounting to its dissolution in 1996. These events enlisted my interest in the JAGC and prompted this study. It examines, from a historical perspective, the origins, operation mechanisms, activities, problems and dissolution of this local ecumenical group.

The Study Area

The Kumba metropolitan town is located in the Meme Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. Presently the headquarters of the division, Kumba is located between latitude 3° and 4° north of the Equator and between longitude 9° and 10° east of the Greenwich Meridian. The town is sited on a Plateau of about 220m above sea level at the north-west of Lake Barombi-Mbo and shares boundary with the Kupe-Muanenguba Division to the south, the Ndian Division to the west, the Littoral Region to the east, and the Manyu and Lebialem Divisions to the North [14]. It is worth noting that Kumba serves as a transit for trade to

Nigeria via Ekondo-Titi, Mamfe and Douala by road and railway. This has made the town to be referred to as the economic capital of the South West Region. This economic status of the town attracted people from diverse backgrounds in addition to the Bafaw who were pioneer settlers. As the largest town in the South West Region in terms of size (about 286km²) and population (over 700,000 inhabitants),[15] Kumba witnessed intense missionary activities that culminated in the planting of Catholic and Protestant churches. Since the introduction of Christianity in Cameroon, therefore, Kumba has been known as the centre of Catholicism and Protestantism. Consequently, the town is dominated by followers of the Christian tradition, shared between Protestants and Catholics, while insignificant numbers are practitioners of indigenous religions, Islam, etc. Although Christianity in the area has been the focus of several recent studies, little is known about Catholic-Protestant local ecumenism, especially the JAGC. General studies have focused on the history of the Catholic and Protestant Churches in the area. Thus, an investigation on local ecumenism in the town that builds on the JAGC as a case study is necessary.

Origins of the Joint Action Group of Churches

The Joint Action Group of Churches (JAGC) resulted from diverse sources. The first contributory factor to the birth of the JAGC was the planting of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in the town of Kumba by white missionaries. The Mill Hill Missionaries evangelized in Kumba resulting in the establishment of Catholic congregations that were grouped under a single parish headed by a parish priest[16]. Consequently, a good number of the inhabitants of the town became Catholics. Besides, the Basel Mission work in the town culminated in the birth of congregations that were later placed under the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC). Kumba was the seat of the Kumba Presbytery of the PCC[17]. Similarly, the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC), the Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church also operated congregations in Kumba placed under the clergy and laity[18]. The presence of these five churches in Kumba made the town to be dominated by Catholics and Protestants. Like elsewhere, Catholics and Protestants in Kumba were divided since the clergy and Christians of these churches operated along denominational lines which were seen as a threat to Christian unity. It was this division that caused the need for inter confessional dialogue to linger in the minds of priests, pastors and Christians. But it was only after the Second Vatican Council that this local ecumenism potential was exploited.

The Decree on Ecumenism that was signed during the 1962 Second Vatican Council and promulgated in 1964 was a great booster to local ecumenism the world over. As a matter of fact and as already mentioned, the new ecumenism that was

inaugurated by the Decree amounted to bilateral dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches. At the local level, congregations and parishes of the two Christian traditions engaged in dialogues which offered them an opportunity to surmount their old divisions [19]. This was the context in which Christians in Kumba began exploring ways and means by which to do away with denominational differences in view of fostering unity. In experiencing the condition of being divided, the Christians of the Catholic and Protestant confessions began attempting to understand one another. They began to explore possibilities of a Christian community in the Kumba pluralistic society. So, from 1970, Christians in Kumba led by their clergy began holding joint Church services during special events like Easter Sundays, Christmas, New Year among others. As the dividing lines gradually gave way, the authorities of these churches identified the need to partnership together so as to address religious, social, and economic problems plaguing Kumba.

In fact, the persistence of social, ethical and economic problems that confronted the population of Kumba was a strong ecumenical motivation for Catholic-Protestant dialogues. These talks heightened the need for joint action to improve life on the local level. The dialogues took the form of ecumenical meetings which provided more opportunities for the creation of the JAGC. One of such inter-denominational meetings which contributed to the birth of the JAGC was that of July 1971 jointly convened by Rev K.H. Rathke, Presbyterial Secretary of Kumba Presbytery of the PCC and Father Rzan, Parish Priest of the Kumba Parish of the Catholic Church[20]. Co-chaired by these clergymen, the meeting was aimed at seeking solutions to the division among Christians and the problem of unemployment in the town of Kumba. This was the first time the authorities of the two churches were coming together to address these problems. Hence, the walls of separation and the plethora of problems facing the Kumba population called for solidarity among parishes. After insightfully examining the problems, the conveners of the meeting resolved to work towards unbolting the doors of division. As regards the issue of unemployment, all the participants (pastors, priests, educationists, and social workers) identified the need to meet with the unemployed youths so as to better appreciate the problem. Thus, a decision was taken to organize a school leavers conference aimed at checking this problem.

The above conference which was held from 21 to 22 January 1972 placed the local ecumenism project on a good course since it further brought Catholics and Protestants together. The conference was attended by 440 school leavers representing the various confessions in Kumba[21]. This was therefore an opportunity for the denominations to further break their differences and

strengthen ecumenical ties. The main goal of the conference was to investigate the problems faced by the unemployed youths, learn from them about their attitude towards work and share with them their problems. At the end of the conference which was held at the Social Center of the Catholic Mission, the participants expressed the need to have more of such conferences in the future. As the participants carried the news about the conference to their respective confessions, the other Protestant denominations that were still dragging their legs became interested in what the Catholics and Presbyterians had initiated. This was certainly one of the factors that motivated the authorities of the Lutheran, Anglican and Baptist churches to move towards the PCC and the Roman Catholic Mission. Besides, the authorities of the PCC and the Catholic Church, after the conference, made efforts to cooperate with leaders of these other churches in view of seeking solutions to various problems in the town.

In addition, the involvement of the conference participants in one activity or the other, shortly after the conference, further spurred the religious authorities to envisage the creation of an ecumenical group involving Roman Catholics and Protestants in Kumba town. They started dialogue with the other churches and eventually convened an ecumenical meeting in early 1974. The meeting was attended by representatives of the five churches operating in the town. During the meeting, the authorities of these churches resolved to create an ecumenical group that was to continue with the social and economic activities initiated by the PCC and the Roman Catholic Church. After a lengthy discussion on the issue, they named the new local ecumenical body as the Joint Action Group of Churches[22]. The ecumenical group comprised of the Catholic Church and the four Protestant churches that were operating in Kumba, namely, Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, Cameroon Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church and the St. Paul Anglican Church. Its creation was a product of the ecumenical consciousness of engaged priests, pastors, elders and members of these Christian confessions. This confirms Birmele's observation that "local ecumenism is heavily dependent on the attitude and the personal engagement of the local clergy and pastoral co-workers." [23] The Joint Action Group of Churches, as evident in its motto "SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD", had the potential for resolving social and economic problems as well as enhancing unity between Catholics and Protestants.

Operation Mechanism

The creation of the JAGC evidenced the approval of the ecumenical concern in Kumba. As already mentioned, the overall goal of this local ecumenical movement was joint concern for unity and mission and fraternal goodwill. Indeed the JAGC was intended to promote Christian unity, enhance the spread

of the gospel and improve the livelihood of the population of Kumba. Its social action was expressed in the form of joint initiative in surveying and remedying the problems of youths, women, apprentices, local craftsmen and civil servants in Kumba as regards to unemployment, health, adjustments to urban life, traders, delinquency, alcoholism, and other professional deficiencies[24]. For the goals of this body to be attained, an effective mechanism of operation was required.

Just like any other ecumenical institution, the Joint Action Group of Churches had administrative structures. The basic units of the JAGC were its member churches. All the followers of these member churches were allowed to participate in the activities of the institution. But their main contact with the group was through the clergy and laity who represented them in that body. While the member churches were the basic units of the JAGC, its main organ was the General Assembly which fashioned its policies[25]. Its members were representatives of the group's member churches. The General Assembly met once a year and took major decisions relating to local ecumenism. And after every two years, the members of this body elected from among themselves an Executive Committee whose duty was to execute decisions taken by the General Assembly. The Executive Committee was comprised of a Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, and the Treasurer. They held office for a period of two years, and were eligible for re-election. Overall, the Executive Committee ensured the day-to-day functioning of the group and managed its finances. At times, the meetings of the Executive Committee that were mostly held on emergency basis were attended by leaders of JAGC's member churches in an advisory capacity[26].

In an effort to ensure the proper functioning of its administrative structures, the authorities of JAGC put in place some guiding principles on the basis of which the organization was to operate. When the institution went operational in 1974, it was reached that all executive positions: chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary and treasurer among others were to be elective. And the task of electing these officials was placed on the General Assembly[27]. A few years after its creation, it was noticed that some churches failed to send representatives during General Assembly meetings. Consequently, a new guiding principle which obliged all member churches to always send representatives to General Assembly meetings was enshrined in the constitution. Furthermore, all churches had to pay an annual registration fee of CFA 1000 francs. This was just a measure aimed at ensuring that the churches remained committed to the goals of the association. Finally, it was established that in the event of dissolution, all property and projects belonging to JAGC shall go to a local charitable organization with similar aims.

As regards the sources of finances, the JAGC obtained some of its finances from the various charges which it levied on its member churches. Such charges were not fixed and depended on the projects at hand. But what should be underlined is that it charged its member churches specific amounts of money whenever a project was initiated. For example, it charged its member churches the sum of CFA 25,000 francs each when a chaplain project was launched in the Kumba Central Prison in the 1980s[28]. Moreover, the joint ecumenical services that were held during important events served as a source of income. There were equally voluntary donations that came from well-wishers and followers of the member confessions. Furthermore, grants from the World Council of Churches, All African Conference of Churches' program for Urban Industrial and Rural Missions and the Federation of Churches and Evangelical Missions in Cameroon were also important sources of its finances. The other important sources of its finances included the sale of JAGC booklets and fundraising activities. It was with these funds that this local Catholic-Protestant ecumenical institution strove to achieve its goals by indulging in myriad of activities.

Activities and Achievements of the Joint Action Group of Churches

The Joint Action Group, as earlier noted, was concerned with enhancing Christian unity, missionary work and joint social action. Throughout the period under study, the JAGC streamed its activities towards promoting unity among Christians, evangelization and working together for the improvement of the wellbeing of the Kumba population in quite specific ways.

The Promotion of Christian Unity

One of the commitments of the JAGC was to bring the Catholic and Protestant churches in Kumba into living contact with each other and thus promote the cause of Christian unity. This was expressed through the World Day of Prayer (WDP), the Week of Prayers for Christian Unity and occasional joint worship services. As regards the WDP, it became one of the ecumenical activities of the JAGC thanks to the worm relationship it had with the WCC. The WDP was conceived by the WCC in view of praying against numerous problems plaguing the world[29]. The day was commemorated the world over on the first Friday of March each year. On such a day, Christians from various denominations were expected to hold joint ecumenical services marked by prayers against global problems. Overall, the WDP was intended to help resolve human problems, enhance the respect of Christian values and dialogue among churches. The maiden World Day of Prayer took place in March 1948 in Amsterdam during the inaugural meeting of the WCC[30].

Following its creation in 1974, the JAGC recognized the WDP and became significantly involved in it. So during the weeks that preceded every WDP, the clergy of member churches of JAGC mobilized their Christians. The day was often marked by the holding of a joint ecumenical service involving Christians of member churches who were led in prayer by their priests and pastors. They prayed for the sick and against the mistrust dividing the Christian population. Their prayers were also directed towards prisons, the aged, and the poor. Finally, the officiating clergy prayed for better living conditions and for the religious commitment of the various churches[31]. In 1975 for instance the JAGC celebrated the WDP in the Presbyterian Church Fiango in Kumba. This crowd pulling ecumenical event which was marked by the above activities evidenced the co-operation that existed among Catholics and Protestants in Kumba

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity also constituted one of the ecumenical initiatives of the JAGC. It originated from the need to check disparities and various forms of divisions among Christians through prayers. It was in this context that the JAGC chose the period from 18 through 25 January of each year as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The week was marked by various prayers on selected themes that were categorized according to the days. Such themes hinged on New Testament evidences of Christian unity such as Eph. 4:4-5, Gal. 3:27-28, 1 Cor. 1:12-13 and Jn. 17:20-21. During such prayers on unity-related themes embedded in these Christian doctrinal texts, Catholics and Protestants rediscovered how much they shared with one another[32]. In order to give the joint ecumenical event more meaning, the authorities of JAGC produced an ecumenical prayer service order of worship hand book that contained special prayers of Christian unity. The hand book was refashioned every year to suit the realities on the ground. What followers is an excerpt of the January 1990 prayer that was drawn from the order of worship hand book. It reads:

All mighty God, we confessed to you our sins against the unity of the church. We sometimes judge brothers and sisters of other denominations harshly. We often closed our eyes when we see them in need. We quickly criticized their ways of worship, discipline and teaching which differ from our own. We think ourselves better than others. We are very slow to admit our own shortcomings. We are not much worried about our divisions. We are not eagerly desired to be made one. We do not constantly pray for Christian unity. We are not only easily ready to make sacrifices for the unity in your son Jesus Christ. Forgive us and reconcile us to your holy estate through Jesus Christ your son our Lord Amen [33].

The above prayer shows the commitment of JAGC to fight against divisions among churches. By so doing, they wanted the almighty God to help them set

aside those things that divided churches and Christians. They also wanted God to enable them see the gifts of their various traditions not as hindrances to unity but as means of mutual enrichment. The sustenance of this unity building event from 1975 to 1996 was indicative that Catholics and Protestants in Kumba had acknowledged that there is a measure of ecclesial reality to be found within their corporate life. This undeniably helped in pulling down the walls of division evidenced by the emergence of this new ecumenical encounter.

Furthermore, the JAGC promoted Christian unity by organizing special joint worship church services[34]. Such joint church sermons were quite often necessitated by the imminence of national and local events or by any disturbing situation in Kumba. This explains why the clergy of the member churches of the ecumenical institution also went on a retreat in preparation for the joint service. This was intended to heighten their faith and to spiritually prepare them to be able to officiate the crowd pulling service. The joint services started in 1975 and were continuously held until 1996 when the JAGC was dissolved. The joint services usually took place at the grandstand in Kumba that had enough space to receive thousands of Christians. During such church services, the pastors representing the member churches preached on themes relating to the issues at hand. They focused on themes like environmental degradation, poverty, unity, crime wave, justice and peace among others. Overall, unity-oriented ecumenical work between Catholics and Protestants transformed their divisions into a new Christian community.

Evangelism

Evangelism also fell within the realm of JAGC's activities. The institution's concern for mission to non-Christians pushed it to initiate evangelism in prisons, hospitals, among others. The JAGC carried out numerous missionary visits to the Kumba Central Prison. During such visits they distributed bibles and gospel tracks to prisoners. This was quite often followed by the holding of sermons marked by preaching in the prison compound. In 1979 for instance, the JAGC, led by Rev. Father E.M. Moses Tazoh and Revs. S. D. Ntui and Ngume undertook an evangelization campaign in the Kumba prison. The commitment expressed towards the project by prison authorities and prisoners pushed the authorities of JAGC to see the construction of a chapel in the prison compound as a dire necessity. During its Executive Committee meeting of 11 May 1982 the JAGC resolved to allot CFA 1,000,000 francs for the construction of a chapel in the prison yard. As already noted, its member churches were charged a contribution of CFA 250,000 francs for the project[35]. In late 1983, the prison chapel building which was equipped with benches and a pulpit was completed[36]. This marked the intensification of evangelism work in the prison. Every

Sunday a pastor was dispatched by JAGC to conduct church services in the prison. The net outcome was that some prisoners were converted and baptized as Christians.

Besides, the JAGC was involved in evangelization work in the Kumba District Hospital. This was encouraged by the success it recorded in the Kumba Central Prison[37]. After preaching to patients at individual levels throughout the 1980s the JAGC built a chapel in the hospital. The building was inaugurated on 18 October 1990. The inaugural ceremony was marked by the holding of the maiden church service in the hospital. The post inauguration period was marked by church services on Sundays and during special occasions. It became common to find the clergy preaching the Gospel to patients and health workers.

Socio-Economic Activities

In addition to the unity and evangelical activities, the JAGC indulged in socio-economic activities. In the early 1970s when the association was born, there were many problems affecting school leavers. Most of those who graduated from primary schools failed to pursue their education and largely remained unemployed. It was in this context that the JAGC identified school dropout as a serious problem affecting youths and explored ways and means by which to check the problem[38]. From 21 through 22 January 1974, a school leavers' seminar which brought together sixty youths was organized at the Social Centre of the Catholic Mission. The plenary sessions focused on themes such as causes of unemployment, the value of labour, life in a township among others. Lectures were delivered on these themes by experts, namely Elisabeth Epie of the Education Department, Sophie Eben of the Labour Office, Sister Jema Angelina of Saint Francis Teachers Training College and Hans Schaer of the Presbyterian Rural Training Centre in Kumba.

The seminar placed these youths on the path of getting a job in the near future. During a late 1976 meeting held with these youths, it was revealed that out of the sixty youths who participated in the 1974 seminar, twenty had started doing something in different fields. This left the authorities of JAGC satisfied for the little achievement they made in checking the problem of unemployment among many youths. During the meeting, the youths thanked the JAGC authorities not only for pushing them to start searching for jobs but said how proud they were for their new jobs.

The JAGC also enhanced education by running a "meet the class seven pupils program" which was intended to encourage pupils graduating from primary institutions to pursue secondary education. In order to

render this program effective some persons were assigned to the various primary schools in Kumba after consulting the authorities of these institutions. In June 1977 for instance, the JAGC organized a seminar for class seven pupils in thirteen primary schools in Kumba. During the seminar, speakers were drawn from various sectors including the police, social welfare, health, community development and labour. Through the program, the pupils were made to understand the importance of secondary education[39]. This seminar alongside those of 1979, 1984, 1988 and 1992 helped in rolling back the alarming rate of school dropout among youths in Kumba.

The JAGC also made an effort to find solutions to the numerous problems faced by mission schools in the town of Kumba. In a memorandum addressed to the Minister of National Education through the Senior Divisional Officer of Meme Division on 22 February 1992, this ecumenical group frowned at the nonpayment of subventions to mission schools by the Cameroon Government[40]. The memorandum reiterated the importance of private confessional educational institutions in the education of Cameroonians. The preparation of pupils and students to be worthy members of the society by these schools through moral and civic education was also emphasized. It was in light of the foregoing that the JAGC called for an urgent positive response by government to the repeated requests tabled by authorities of mission schools.

Furthermore, the JAGC carried out humanitarian work by providing various forms of assistance to the disabled, prisoners and patients in hospitals. It assisted the Ephaphata Institute of the Deaf on numerous occasions[41]. In 1981 for instance, it donated tables and chairs amounting to CFA 265,500 francs to the primary and secondary schools of the Ephaphata Institute[42]. Speaking at the donation ceremony, the JAGC Chairperson, Rev. Henry Awasom, thanked God for inspiring the proprietor to create the institute[43]. Between 1986 and 1990, the JAGC contributed CFA 600,000 francs towards the construction of a two classroom building at the deaf institute[44]. Besides, the women associations of JAGC member churches visited the institute on 17 November 1987 with various gifts (rice, bong-beds, oil, salt, kitchen utensils, clothing and bed spreads) amounting to CFA 700,000 francs[45]. Generally, the JAGC, apart from giving the deaf children the opportunity to pursue their education, improved their livelihood.

Still in the humanitarian sphere, the JAGC donated generously to the Kumba Central Prison in an effort to ameliorate the wellbeing of the prisoners. For example, in 1990 a JAGC delegation led by Rev. A.T. Mbok donated the sum of CFA 220,000 francs towards the purchase of bong-beds. After this visit, the JAGC,

with the approval of the prison authorities, assigned some nurses to attend to the health needs of the prisoners once every week. The free consultations, tests and medication they provided undeniably improved the health of the prisoners[46]. Besides taking care of the prisoners' health, the JAGC engaged in what it termed Christmas prison meals. It fed prisoners in the month of December beginning from 1990. During such joint feasts, various items including soap, rubbing oil and clothing were donated to the inmates. These initiatives certainly improved the living standards of the prisoners and made them to understand that they had not been forgotten[47].

In the economic sphere, the JAGC engaged in agricultural and commercial activities. With funds from its member churches, it opened a food crop farm in 1976. Every year, crops were harvested and sold in markets in Kumba and neighboring towns. Some of the farm produce was generously donated to inmates in the Kumba Central Prison. The encouraging quantities of food crops emanating from the farm pushed this local ecumenical body to open a provision store in 1978 [48]. The goal was to obtain foodstuff from the farm and neighboring villages in view of selling them at affordable prices in Kumba town. Besides, the initiators of the project wanted to create employment opportunities for the youths and to encourage the local population to develop interest in the cultivation of food crops.

Problems and Dissolution of the JAGC

The JAGC was visited by some problems that placed it on the path to dissolution. The problems of the institution began in the late 1970s when some of the clergy who founded the group were transferred out of Kumba[49]. As already noted, local ecumenism depends to a great extent on the priests and pastors of the area. The JAGC came into existence because of the commitment of the local clergy to local Catholic-Protestant ecumenism. So when frequent transfers began in the late seventies, some of the priests and pastors who were committed to the growth of the group left Kumba. Certainly, those who took their places lacked the determination of their predecessors at a time when the initiatives of the group significantly depended on the consent and cooperation of the local clergy. When frequent transfers heightened in the 1980s, the Christians whose participation in this local ecumenical experiment rested on the frontline role of the clergy began backtracking. This resulted in a general lack of interest in the activities of the JAGC. It also affected its finances given that some Christians terminated the financial assistance they had been allotting to the institution.

The fear of being dominated by the Catholics and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon pushed the other Protestant churches to be reluctant towards

JAGC's activities. The fear rested on the occupation of most positions in the Executive Committee by Catholics and Presbyterians. The clergy and members of the Baptist, Lutheran and Anglican churches began seeing the JAGC as a Catholic-Presbyterian ecumenical body. This perception and fear did not only affect the participation of these churches, but also provided the potential for some of them to pull out of the group[50]. Although efforts were always made to surmount these worries relating to unequal treatment, the Anglican Church withdrew from the JAGC in 1988. This marked the beginning of the demise of the local ecumenical institution. Shortly after the withdrawal of the Anglican Church, the JAGC entered a period of financial crisis which spanned from 1989 to 1996 when the body was dissolved. During this period which was marked by an injurious economic crisis in Cameroon[51], the finances of the JAGC dropped significantly. This was because the economic crisis affected the finances of Christians in Kumba like elsewhere in the country. Amazingly, the JAGC increased its generous donations to the Kumba Central Prison, the Ephaphata Institute and the hospital without due regard for its financial resources.

In 1994 due to the aggravation of the financial crisis, the provision store and farm were liquidated. This was a controversial move given that the store and the farm were important sources of its income. Angered by this decision, the Lutheran Church terminated her membership and stopped her Christians from participating in its activities[52]. The response of the remaining churches to this second withdrawal had a bearing on the future of the JAGC. Instead of taking measures to encourage the disgruntled churches to return to the group, the Executive Committee that was dominated by Catholics and Presbyterians resolved to drive on without the Anglicans and Lutherans. This hardened the walls of misunderstanding in the group and faded all opportunities for the return of the withdrawn churches. If the Executive Committee of the group had taken measures to efface these barriers, it would have been a decisive element for the ecumenical rapprochement of the Catholics and disgruntled Protestant traditions. And since the Baptists preferred that all should be done for the Anglicans and Lutherans to rejoin the JAGC, they were swift in expressing their dissatisfaction with the decision to drive on without these Protestant traditions. It was this lack of reconciling and integrating practices in the JAGC that resulted in the withdrawal of the Baptists in early 1996.

The implication of the above withdrawal was that the JAGC was reduced to a Catholic-Presbyterian local ecumenical experiment. It is necessary to mention that the Catholics and Presbyterians took the initiative to create the group before persuading the other Protestant traditions to come on board. Consequently, local ecumenical events of the institution such as joint church services and World Day of Prayer ceased to be

crowd-pulling. This was an indication that the good days of Catholic-Protestant cooperative ecumenical work in Kumba were over. This was the context in which the JAGC's Executive Committee resolved to dissolve the group in late 1996[53]. But they agreed to continue with joint ecumenical work in various fields whenever the need may arise.

CONCLUSION

The JAGC was among the first Catholic-Protestant local ecumenical endeavours in Cameroon in general and in Kumba in particular. Coming into existence on the heels of the ecumenical revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and fed particularly by the Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, the JAGC developed almost in the same circumstances as the other Catholic-Protestant local ecumenical groups in Africa with which it certainly shared similar experiences. It offered the Christian community in Kumba (Catholics and Protestants) an opportunity for joint ecumenical work in the spheres of unity, mission and fraternal goodwill. Irrefutably, as the study asserts, the activities that were carried out by the JAGC during the two decades of its existence were beneficial to the inhabitants of Kumba and the ecumenical movement. Although the institution was successful in unbolting the doors of division between Catholics and Protestants, it failed to surmount the heightening fears of domination expressed by the small Protestant traditions. This resulted in withdrawals that placed the group on the path to moribund. Indeed the inability of the Executive Committee of the group to arrest such fears frightened the Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists into withdrawal. No wonder that the JAGC's financial crisis aggravated in the mid nineties and further provided the potential for the association to crumble like a pack of cards. Even the joint ecumenical work was shaken to its very roots given that the walls of separation had resurfaced. But the dissolution of the group did not completely end Catholic-Protestant joint ecumenical work. However, the post JAGC dissolution era was simply marked by occasional joint ecumenical engagements between Catholics and Protestants. The reestablishment of the JAGC alongside its sustenance hinges on renewed fruitful dialogues between Catholics and Protestants in Kumba. The priests and pastors of these Christian traditions, aided by the top-level administrators of these confessions, should heighten their commitment towards local ecumenism, revisit what went wrong with the JAGC, and take measures to revamp the institution. The Christians in Kumba have to support their clergy as they struggle to once more unbolt the doors of separation.

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