

# From Asceticism to a Gospel of Prosperity: The Case of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon

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## Abstract

Within the last decade, the Pentecostal terrain in Cameroon has witnessed a rise in new groups coming in, with the prosperity doctrine as their economic message. Within this period Full Gospel Mission, one of the older generations of Pentecostal groups in the country, which adopted complete asceticism as an economic message from the on set, has embraced accumulation. This change has enabled the church and its members to engage in business ventures and it has also brought members closer to non-members in material display. This paper examines the external and internal factors, which have pushed the Mission to embrace accumulation and concludes that the smooth transition has been enhanced by the economic crisis affecting Cameroon.

## Introduction

In its beginning, Full Gospel Mission Cameroon adopted an ascetic doctrine, which did not give room for accumulation. In the last decades, the church has, to a larger extent, also embraced a gospel of prosperity, which has opened the way for members and the church itself to accumulate. The prosperity message itself is so broad in biblical sense. It is taken to include prosperity in economic and material terms. It also involves prosperity in body, soul and spirit, which has to do with issues such as healing ability, peace of mind, victory over Satan, blessed children, protection and deliverance. According to the gospel, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. A believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he

or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith (Gifford 1997). However, its usage in reference to material prosperity dominates the discourse on it to a point that whenever scholars and material prosperity theologians or those church ministers who teach that all Christians should be materially prosperous refer to it, they undermine the other aspects. Several well known church ministers from the United States of America helped to create this popular form of usage, most notably E.W Kenyon, A.A Allen, Oral Roberts, T.L Osborn, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and John Avazini. Each of them has made his own contribution. For instance, it was Allen who first made it an aid towards fundraising; he was the first to teach that God is a rich God, and that those who want to share in his prosperity must obey and support God's servant-the speaker himself. Oral Robert added the idea of seed faith: that you prosper by planting a seed in faith, the return on which will meet all your needs. The gospel has proved very successful among the religious entrepreneurs (otherwise called Get-Rich-Preachers) who constitute the media evangelist all over the world, for its 'seed faith' idea has brought in the enormous resources needed to sustain these extremely expensive ministries and the ministers. Indeed, it developed in those circles precisely because it was so functional in this regard. However, it is not only its functionality but also its general socio-economic context that is significant in this respect. Though the gospel is broad, my main concern here is to refer to it as it is in popular discourse i.e. in reference to material prosperity.

The prosperity message is gaining ground amongst new Pentecostal groups in Africa (Marshall 1992, Gifford 1992, 1998, Maxwell 1998 and Akoko 2002). While this is going on, some of the older Pentecostal groups are moving away from the traditional doctrine of asceticism to the prosperity gospel. One such example is the Zimbabwe Assembly of God Africa (ZAOGA), which achieved this in the 1980s but with tough resistance from the old generation of pastors who joined the group from its inception in the 1960s and 1970s. The old generation of pastors in the church, dissatisfied with this development, accused the new ones of introducing a doctrine which only did not comply with the biblical teachings on suffering as a necessary part of a believer's life but also made material wealth and not holiness as a basis for position in church thereby leading to the rapid promotion of businessmen whose lives fall short of Pentecostal expectations (Maxwell 1998). Full Gospel Mission Cameroon has undergone this kind of transformation from asceticism to a more or less gospel of prosperity.

Full Gospel Mission Cameroon is the oldest Pentecostal church in Cameroon after the Apostolic Church and the biggest in terms of adherents and establishments. It was founded in 1961 and according to statistics from the office of the National Superintendent in 2000; it has a total membership of roughly 59,062 with 518 assemblies (local churches) located in all provinces of the country. Membership has been increasing very high and the Mission has penetrated all nooks and crannies of the country and beyond. The high rate of growth can be

attributed to some of its doctrines and practices such as divine healing/protection, good leadership, political liberalization, evangelization strategies, its caring culture towards the needy and a shift from complete asceticism to a gospel of prosperity.<sup>1</sup> The church has gone down in record as the first in Cameroon, which has extended its activities beyond the national frontiers. Its presence is felt in Chad, the Central African Republic, Nigeria and in its future projects plan (5 years) 2001—2005, it intends to penetrate the Republics of Congo and Gabon before 2005. It also goes down in record as the first Pentecostal church to have been introduced into Nigeria from Cameroon instead of the usual tradition of being introduced into Cameroon from Nigeria.

In a release, prepared by the Missionary founder of the church, Rev W. Knorr, Full Gospel Mission embraces asceticism as an economic message, while leaving the door open to accumulation.<sup>2</sup> An issue that can be underscored with the message is that it gives every biblical explanation to justify asceticism and accumulation amongst 'believers'. In justifying asceticism in the message it is stated that *through greed our hearts can be bound by worldly possessions, so that they can hinder us in our Christian walks*. The statement implies that the Mission believes earthly possessions (wealth) can exercise an evil and negative influence on its beholder, for instance, many people have fallen into the temptations of stealing, defraud, smuggling, counterfeiting money, or unfaithfulness in making offerings and correct tithes in order to get rich, (covetousness or love of money). It is this danger of greed or covetousness, which someone who possesses wealth or has the desire to do so is exposed to, that makes the Mission to embrace asceticism.

Still from the message, the following extracts reveal that the church also embraces the gospel of prosperity; *for those who loyally pay their tithes and give sacrificially, He (God) gives the wonderful assurance, 'Try me now in this, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it'. Let us also understand that, if some Christians become rich, it may be due to God's special gifts to just them, because He has accorded them a 'ministry of giving'. As He can trust them for their faithfulness and liberality, He is giving them material possessions in greater abundance, so that they in turn can bless His church and others.*

It can therefore be argued that the Mission does not outrightly want its followers to remain poor or that they should give up their riches when they want to follow God. It believes that if a person is able to overcome the temptations inherent in accumulation, he can accumulate as much as possible but if he cannot, he should stay in poverty in order to serve God better.

This release is less than a decade old and it should be noted that the Mission adopted complete asceticism from the beginning, with no compromise on accumulation but with the recent opening of the door for accumulation, the church as a body and its members have engaged in materialistic practices like other groups or individuals in the country. The aim of this paper is to analyze this

change from complete asceticism to a more or less doctrine of prosperity, which has taken place within this church in Cameroon.

### Transition to Prosperity

Asceticism, as practised by the church, was based on the biblical stress on 'holiness and on the passage *'blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the kingdom of God'* through which it aggressively embraced poverty and a retreat from the symbols of material prosperity. It placed a lot of emphases on perfection, strict personal ethics and biblical inerrancy. In this light, the ways of the 'world' were considered as the ways of sin, so 'believers' were exhorted to shun all unnecessary material and canal pleasures in compliance with the teachings. A strict dress code was enforced. All the members were to avoid expensive dressing and material things even if they could afford them. It was unacceptable for a woman to wear a trouser, jewelry, or make-ups and they were always expected to cover their heads especially when in church or at prayer. Keeping very long hair and styling were unacceptable. Men were to put on simple dresses; unflared trousers (despite the fashion of the time) and plain shoes (acceptable heel heights were specified).

Nde (1998), argues that the outward appearance of a woman was more affected by the ascetic doctrine since they could easily be distinguished from other women through their heads, no make-ups or jewelry and simple dressing. What is certain is that, though this church had some wealthy or relatively prestigious members, wealth and fortune was not the bases for prestige or status in the church community, which remained remarkably egalitarian in terms of the rigid social barriers, which exist in the broader Cameroonian society. The basis for rising in the ranks of the church hierarchy was largely the demonstration of piety, denominational fidelity, and possession of 'spiritual power', rather than age or wealth.

Preaching at the time was highly characterized by the condemnation of 'sin', which was believed to be deep-rooted in accumulation and in the quest to become rich. Practices such as lying, cheating, stealing, quarreling, gossiping, giving and taking of bribes, drinking alcohol, fornication, beating of spouse, losing of tempers or denying assistance to other members in need, were considered as 'sin'. Limited contact was allowed between members of different sexes. Marital fidelity was a central tenet and divorce was not permitted. In compliance to the preaching, this church, as a body, abstained from accumulative practices such as engaging in business ventures. This was not the case with the mainline churches, which were already highly engaged in business ventures in a bid to raise income for their activities. These practices of Full Gospel Mission made the society to believe than its message was meant for the poor and frustrated, in fact the scum of the society.

The gospel of prosperity, as practiced now, takes the form of not removing members or the church as a body from the avenues of accumulation. This has

had a tremendous impact on members in that it has re-oriented their economic lifestyles from asceticism to accumulation. The message has also had an impact on the church in that it is now engaged in accumulative practices, which never used to be the case. Members and the church can actually be seen now translating the Gospel of prosperity into practice. Like the new wave of Pentecostal groups coming in with a similar message, the church encourages members to be hardworking so as to accumulate wealth for themselves and give some to the church. Unlike the ascetic belief, members can now be seen displaying wealth, engaged in competitive business ventures with 'unbelievers', both at national and on international levels. The women get involved in small enterprises. Some go from office to office selling snacks, house decoration items prepared by themselves, cosmetics, jewelry etc. Some of the women in the civil service, who do not have the opportunity to move from one office to another, keep their own business items in their offices where customers come for them. Some of the businesses are carried out on sole proprietor basis while others are on partnership.<sup>3</sup> Since the message does not emphasize a dressing code, members can be seen appearing gorgeously dressed, not only for ceremonies but also in daily appearance, with women putting on elaborate hairstyles and make-up and the men modern suits. It is not a surprise to see some of the women running beauty centers, for example, the 'Front liners Beauty Center' in Molyko Buea is run by the Secretary of Full Gospel Church Molyko. This is a business center that takes care of women's bodies, heads and nails. In an interview with the proprietor, something which interest me was to know why she decided to go into beauty business when the popular belief is that Pentecostals consider any act of trying to make one beautiful as ungodly, her response was; *I know that these 'unbelievers' are making a mistake. God is a beautiful God. There is nothing in God that is in disorder. I believe that being with God, we need to keep our bodies clean. This does not imply 'masking' ourselves by trying to change our form or structure but just to take care of us. We have to take care of parts of our bodies such as legs, hands, hair and face. Most people do not have enough time to sit down and clean their toes, nails etc, which are the little things necessary for beauty.* By adopting body beauty practices, the ease with which Full Gospel women could be differentiated from sight in the past from other women (particularly those of the mainline churches, which do not place any restriction on these), is fading out.

It is common place to see members drive pass with nice and expensive cars or see them parked at the church ground during church worships or any other occasion, which brings members together. The pastors themselves promote and foster this image, by possessing expensive and nice foreign goods and also appearing gorgeously dressed when leading the congregation, which is often interpreted as a sign of God's blessing.

The attitude to material success has also enabled members to create new networks of accumulation; the pastors, for instance, use their positions to look

for avenues where international contacts could be created that would enable them either acquire wealth directly or make visits out of the country, in a bid to accumulate. The more these pastors travel abroad, accumulate and wear fine things, so the congregation sees that as evidence that God rewards accordingly.

For the rich members of the church, they too believe that the best they can do is to give to the church. This creates some kind of reciprocal relationship between the leader and his followers, through which the followers receive spiritual nourishment from the pastor and the pastor is in turn rewarded by the followers through giving to the church and the pastor. This reciprocal relation between patron and client continues, but is policed by the elements of doctrine that enforce ethical behavior. The relationships are further transformed in the sense that it is not the person helped who should be looked to for a service, but God who will bring the reward. Individuals who break the ethical codes either by taking advantage of the largesse without displaying a willingness to give or by using offers in a manipulative or extortionist way or denying them, are subject to the ill will of God. Unscrupulous or greedy pastors must however always bear in mind the fact that their legitimacy rests on keeping their accumulation in balance with the fortunes of their members and in ensuring that things continue to 'roll in circles'.

The church, on its part, has within the last decade, gone into many business ventures in the areas of Education, Health, and Printing. It runs 6 nursery and primary schools in the towns of Muyuka, Kumba, Tiko, Bai-Koke and Awing. These schools started after 1998 and according to Full Gospel Mission Education Secretary, there are prospects of opening more in many other towns in the country in the nearest future.

To be able to have qualified staff for these schools, a Teacher Training College was opened in Mbengwi in 2000. The College, which is bilingual, admits all, irrespective of denomination, with the General Certificate of Education. In 1998, a Secondary School was opened in Nkwen for both boys and girls, irrespective of denomination as well. Apart from the normal secondary school curriculum, it offers additional subjects in Medical Sciences, Computer and Industrial Chemistry. It has a technical college in Muyuka, which started in 1995. It offers trade courses, which include Home Economics, Woodwork, Building and Construction, Electricity, Accounting and Secretaryship. Admission too is opened to all, irrespective of denomination (Nwancha 2001).

In the area of health, it runs Health Centres in Garoua and Yaounde, which started in 1999 and 2000 respectively. According to the Medical Department, there are prospects of upgrading them to hospitals. However, before this time there had been existing two other Health Centres that were indirectly linked to this Mission, one at Mbakeng (opened in 1975) and the other at Banteng (opened in 1980). The two health centers were not directly opened by the Mission but by some foreign Missionaries who affiliated with the church. These were Rev. Dan-

iel Roth for Mbakeng and Sister Dorothy Flick for Banteng. The Mission has however, taken over full control of all of them. The Mission's lack of interest in having full control over these Centers from the start was because of its original position on the running of social services. This also indicates that some members of the Mission, before the crisis, saw nothing wrong with the church running social services or engaging in business (Shu 2001).

In Bamenda, it has a Printing Press (Gospel Press), which went into operation in 1986, with the intention of printing exclusively gospel materials distributed free of charge or at moderate prices. But with the crisis, it now prints work on commercial basis to people, irrespective of religion.

The Mission runs 5 Christian Literature Centers in Bamenda, Muyuka, Yaounde, Douala and Kumba. Each is stocked with Christian literature including audio and videocassettes, calendars, diaries, stickers, T-shirts, key holders to almanacs for sale. Each has a musical set that plays choral music at all time to attract the attention of by passers. These centers started before the advent of the crisis and were meant for evangelism. Christian books and materials were sold cheap but now they compete with other Bookshops on prices. The books are either internally printed or imported at subsidized rates from foreign partners (e.g. Kings way in Britain). They even supply imported books to other Bookshops, for instance, Presbook, to sell on agreed profits to be shared.

The decision to change from complete asceticism to accumulation is a crucial issue in the life of a church since it has to do with a doctrinal position in matters of faith and for this reason, only the highest decision making body of Full Gospel Mission-The General Mission Council-could have taken such a decision. This decision was taken within the last decades and that explains why most of the enterprises owned by the church were created after 1990. Unlike with the Zimbabwe Assembly of God, Africa (ZAOGA) Zimbabwe, where a similar change took place but faced resistance from the older generation of pastors and some members, the transition has been very smooth with Full Gospel Mission.

## **Factors Which Influenced the Adoption of the Gospel of Prosperity**

The reasons behind the adoption of the gospel of prosperity by Full Gospel Mission Cameroon after many years of complete asceticism can be attributed to a combination of factors, which can be grouped into external and internal.

### ***External Factors***

One of the greatest factors here has been the influence of prosperity preachers from abroad through their literature on the gospel of prosperity, which has always been widely available since the 1980s in Cameroon. This literature, is either in form of tracts distributed by members of Pentecostal groups free of

charge to people or books published and sold at moderate prices in bookshops run by churches, including the various Full Gospel Literature Centers in Cameroon and also during rallies, crusades or conferences. Examples of such works are those of USA Avazini John, E.W Kenyon, A. A. Allen, Oral Roberts, T.L Osborn, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, British Trevor Newport and Paul Yonggi Cho of South Korea.

Another factor is the influence of prosperity preachers who have been visiting Cameroon and working closely with Full Gospel Mission. One of these Preachers has been Reinhardt Bonnke, the best-known Western crusader that has made much impact on the prosperity doctrine in Africa. Bonnke, born in Germany in 1940, acquired his pastoral training in the United Kingdom. He served as a pastor in North Germany before moving to settle in Lesotho as a pastor for the Apostolic Faith. In 1975, he created his crusade ministry, with headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa. His first crusades with revivals were concentrated in Southern Africa but when he became more ambitious of making it a worldwide affair, he founded the Christ for all Nations (CFAN) and moved the headquarters to Frankfurt in Germany. By 1991, he was conducting about 18 crusades a year, 12 of them in Africa, the area of his major concern. His crusades are usually properly organized and highly attended. Though he is a Pentecostal, he tries to make his crusades nondenominational by involving the local churches in the organization, which gives much publicity to them. For example, in his 20-25 February 1990 crusade in Bamenda, Cameroon, over 65 local churches participated and over 250,000 people attended.

Besides these public rallies, or in conjunction with them, Bonnke has developed other two means of spreading his influence. These are what are called 'Fire Conferences', which are special teaching seminars for all and 'Pastors Workshops', which take place during every crusade and are normally meant for pastors of the churches involved in the crusade. He takes these seriously because he understands pastors are very instrumental in spreading his theology. In a bid to spread his theology of prosperity and also to become materially prosperous, around the edges of every crusade ground are his numerous stalls selling Christian literature, tapes, CFAN T-shirts, bags and hats. These wares are often touted (sometimes at bargain rates) from the platform; even Bonnke himself during sermons will sometimes advertise his own books and cassettes. In some of his sermons, Bonnke does not belabor the prosperity gospel but uses expressions such as 'God will make you prosper', in the name of Jesus, I break the cycle of poverty', 'we open our purses and pockets right now and give; we shall cause you (God) to open your blessings on us', which reflect the teachings of the gospel.

Bonnke has visited Cameroon twice for his CFAN crusades; from 21-26 February, 1989, he was in Kumba (the national headquarters of many Pentecostal churches in Cameroon and headquarters of the South West Region of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon.) and from 20-25 February, 1990 he was in Bamenda



(the headquarters of the North West Region of Full Gospel Mission and then the national headquarters of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon). These crusades took place in the Anglophone part of the country and all the Pentecostal churches, which had existed in the region at the time, took active part. Mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) did not participate. Full Gospel Mission, being the largest Pentecostal group in the country, played a great role in inviting him to Cameroon and in the organization of the crusades.

Late Benson Idahosa of neighboring Nigeria is another person who is believed to have helped to shape the gospel of prosperity in Cameroon. Idahosa could be classified as the best-known Pentecostal leader Africa has ever produced. He was not only seen frequently on Pentecostal platforms in Africa but also in Europe and the United States of America. He was the founder of the multi-million Naira 'Miracle Center' in Benin City, Nigeria, where thousands of believers go there every week to 'seek their own personal miracles'. The Idahosa Bible College in the city is run as part of the Center. This College has helped to train many of the Pentecostal pastors in Cameroon as well as other African countries.

Idahosa, before his death visited Cameroon several times for evangelistic purpose. He accompanied Bonnke on the two occasions Bonnke visited Cameroon and during each crusade, he took active part and also presented a sermon. He held a three-day conference in Douala in May, 1993, which was attended by members of Full Gospel Mission. In the course of one of his sermons in Douala, Idahosa dwelled lengthily on the prosperity message. He claimed in the sermon that God had brought him so many clothes he did not know he could have them, a car that even the then Nigeria President Babangida could not match ('when my car passes in Nigeria, people gape') and so much food, all as a reward of his faith. In one of the sessions in Douala, he invited the crowd to receive a special 'anointing', which he argued was going to cause God to change their lives as he did to him. He explained that before his anointing, he used to travel economy class, but afterwards always traveled first class; before the anointing, he and the wife had always had to go without food if they had guest but since then, whenever a guest came, he could afford to kill a cow; after the anointing he got a better car, with air-conditioning and chauffeur, and expected to have a Mercedes 500 and a Concorde before November. Before this anointing, he had a three-bedroom house, now he had a seven-bedroom house, but was expecting to have twelve bedrooms by the end of the year. All these indicated no doubt that Idahosa's agenda was fundraising. He told the crowd that God had told him to start the first Christian University in Cameroon and as such he asked the crowd whether they would not be happy to see the first Christian University in Cameroon brought by a Nigerian. After this he gave his audience the chance 'to sow' and for thirty minutes, he lined up those who wanted to do so: first 10,000, then

5,000, then 2,500, then 1000 francs CFA. He kept on insisting that 'God will bless every seed sown', and 'I wish I were you, so that I could sow and expect a miracle'. After this, he invited everyone to come forward to buy a book he had written and a magazine 'for only 1000 francs CFA'. Many present took part in the exercise and before his death in 1999, nobody heard anything about the University again (Gifford 1997).

Another great figure that cannot be left out when discussing the spread of the prosperity doctrine in Cameroon is Reverend Billy Lubansa of the Democratic Republic of Congo nationality. Fondly known amongst the Pentecostals in Cameroon as 'Super Papa Billy' he is the President-founder of the Flaming Fire of God Ministries International, which started in 1986 and is based in Kabwe Zambia with Liaison offices in Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Buea in Cameroon. Reverend Billy Lubansa is an international Pentecostal conference speaker and he gives as his 'spiritual mentors' Ray McCauley, Reinhardt Bonnke, Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagen. He is also a diplomat who worked with the International Association of Pan African Institute for Development for many years before retiring to settle back in Zambia to full-time running of his Ministry. While working with the Institute in Zambia, he attended Bonnke's 1986 Fire Conference in Harare and there had an experience that led to his founding of his Flaming Fire Ministry. He was transferred to the Pan African Institute for Development (West Africa) in Buea in 1990, from where he retired in 2001. While in Cameroon, Reverend Lubansa preferred working with other Pentecostal groups rather than establishing a branch of his own Ministry in Cameroon because he believed the well-established Apostolic and Full Gospel Missions churches would frustrate the plan. Compared with Zambia, he found the Pentecostals churches in Cameroon dead. After he attended a Full Gospel church he believed he got nothing and after attending an Apostolic Church he was not also satisfied because he felt the sermon lasted for just ten minutes. Because of this he revealed; '*Then I saw why God brought me to Cameroon... My mandate was to get the local churches out of the doldrums*'. He then started mixing with the activities of the various Pentecostal churches, preaching in churches and organizing crusades for all with 'signs and wonders'. Cameroonians were amazed with his performance and activities because they believed a black could not do these. Rev Lubansa made no secret of the fact that he was trying to change the ecclesiastical face of Cameroon but did this with tact, for instance, his working with other groups rather than establishing a branch of his own church in Cameroon.

With regards to his prosperity position, he complained that the people of Cameroon were never taught about giving; '*at the offering, they give brown coins (5, 10, 25, CFA): 'God would not mind', the pastors used to tell them. I started breaking that teaching. I gave a seminar 'Being delivered from the power of poverty' (for which he used the books of Copeland). An Apostolic Church pastor told me*

that the missionaries had told them, 'You don't need education, or big churches because you are going to heaven'. This was implanted in them. We have to uproot all those things. They used to preach 'Blessed are the poor'. They must change to 'Jesus came to bring abundant life, prosperity'. They taught that money was evil. We need to have it to spread the kingdom'. Lubansa used to accomplish this uprooting of the old teaching through his program on local radio station, Buea, invitations to speak at other Pentecostal gatherings or crusades. He also achieved this through his 'church growth' or 'fire conferences' that were organized on regular basis at the jungle village of the nearby Botanic Garden in Limbe. These, usually highly attended, international conferences were meant to be nondenominational but were attended only by Pentecostal groups and with international Pentecostal speakers invited from all over the world.

Another person, who has had an imprint in the spread of the gospel of prosperity in Cameroon is Nigerian Reverend Dr Tunde Joda. He is a medical doctor and the founder of Christ Chapel International churches, with headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. His church, which is amongst the most popular Pentecostal groups in Nigeria, has branches in Cameroon. Popular not only because of its relatively relaxed attitude to dressing and strict morality expressed by a retreat from 'worldly' concerns, but also the youthful and articulate personality of the founder. Tunde Joda led emotional and charismatic services, which gave rise to several new churches in the 1980s onwards, with similar doctrinal position on prosperity, the centrality of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, healing miracles and monetary rewards in Nigeria. Tunde Joda, who worked closely with Billy Lubansa in organizing the fire conferences in Cameroon, pays regular visits to Cameroon for revival purposes and the running of his Ministry. His fortnightly publication entitled *Prosperity now*, is widely distributed and read in Cameroon. A copy is sold at a token of 100 francs CFA, making it very affordable to many people. Each edition tackles a particular theme on the prosperity gospel, for instance, while that of October, 2000, Vol. 1 No. 2 was entitled *Money Cometh to me now*, and that of January, 2000, Vol. 2, No. 1 was on *Poverty or Prosperity: The choice is yours*, that of 2000 Vol. 2 No. 7 was on *Opening your Faith account*. His general argument in the three editions is that the more a 'believer' gives out money for the service of the Lord, (literally, banking in faith) the more the Lord in the form of material prosperity rewards him.

### **Internal Factors**

When talking of Pentecostalism in Cameroon, one great figure that has spear-headed its spread in the last decades is Zacharias Fomum (a Yaounde University 1 professor and son of a late Presbyterian pastor). He defected from the Presbyterian Church to join Full Gospel Mission at a time he was an elder in the Yaounde Presbyterian Church congregation in the mid seventies. From 1978, he actively engaged in evangelistic outreach, which attracted many people to the church

but about 1985, he founded his own church, the Christian Missionary Fellowship International (CMFI) with headquarters in Yaounde. Though he runs his own church, he is regarded in Pentecostal sphere in Cameroon as an authority in matters of spirituality. Because of this, his ideas on spiritual matters are usually taken to be the gospel truth and have a lot of influence on Pentecostal practices in Cameroon.

Fomum's Ministry owns and runs the Christian Publishing House in Yaounde, which has a branch in Lagos, Nigeria. He has published over eighty books and many tracts which are sold or distributed free of charge world wide on Christian literature, with a good number of them on issues relating to the gospel of prosperity. One of such books in which Fomum has espoused the prosperity doctrine is, *the Christian and Money: Banking in Heaven Today*, which was first published in 1988 and a fourth and latest edition in 1999. In the preface of the books, he writes; *'in this book, the possibilities of banking in heaven are shown to the believer. All believers are carrying out banking. Some bank in earthly banks, others bank in their stomachs, others in clothes, cars, and the like, while some bank in heaven. We send this book out with prayer that it should stir the hearts of those who belong to the Lord to acquire permanent riches by investing in the Lord and in his gospel here and now.'* Fomum begins this work, which is on the necessity to 'give' to the Lord and the Lord's work, by advising 'believers' to always, as a necessity, consecrate themselves and all their property before 'giving' the Lord's share of these property. He argues that when 'giving' to the Lord, the 'believer' should copy the example of Jesus Christ, who gave His all and became poor for our sake, by 'giving' in the same way and to the same extent. In this light, he reveals that the measure you 'give' will be the measure the Lord will give back to you as a reward of giving, that is, if you give to God the best, the topmost, you will always receive from him the topmost. He also recommends in the work that 'believers' should use all of their abilities to make as much money as they possibly can and after making it, should 'give' it for the work of the Lord and to the poor and by doing this, they will not be trapped by the Lord. It should be noted that 'giving' in the book is in reference to money, hence he writes; *it is time to put all the money you have into the business of the Gospel and let it be used while the doors are open. Do not store it up in a will. Let it be used now.* Apart from accomplishing his spread of the prosperity doctrine through literature, Fomum also accomplishes this task through his sermons in church and various crusades, which he organizes on a regular basis or others, which he is invited as a guest preacher.

It is also very likely that the economic crisis, which is affecting the country, contributed much to the change. Before the Mission could embrace the gospel of prosperity, the economy of Cameroon was in a boom. Cameroon was regarded by most international financial institutions as a 'middle income developing country and one of the economic success stories in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Gross National Product had increased from CFA 300 billion francs in 1970 to 2,000 bil-

lion in 1982. Also, with an average growth rate of 6 percent between 1977 and 1982, Cameroon's economy was ranked one of Africa's most credit worthy nations, with a triple-A rating. Cameroon was also described as 'the paradigm for Africa development' and 'an agricultural success story' partly because of the administration's encouragement of agricultural development rather than relying heavily on oil production as some African countries such as Nigeria and Gabon had done following petroleum's discovery and exploitation. Western, particularly French financial support was important in the socio-economic progress Cameroon experienced during this period. The foundation of French economic involvement in Cameroon was established in a series of financial and economic agreements between France and Ahmadou Ahidjo's government<sup>4</sup> in 1959 and renegotiated with only minor changes in 1973. These agreements allowed France to become heavily involved in providing financial and technical aid to almost every phase of the Ahidjo's administration. For example, in 1960, the first year of Cameroon's independence, French aid to Ahidjo's administration totaled a Francs equivalent of 50,000,000 US dollars, representing 80% of total revenue collected by the government (Jua 1991, Konings 1996, Takougang and Krieger 1998).

As a result of the economic boom, Full Gospel Mission, like the other churches was rich because members were able to make substantial contributions for the running of its activities. In addition, more sources of funding from Western Missionary bodies were available to various churches as compared to what operates at the moment. These enabled churches to carry out their activities successfully. In addition to these sources of income, the mainline churches in Cameroon engaged in business ventures in order to raise additional money for their activities. They engaged in business ventures in the areas of education, health, printing, agriculture etc. Full Gospel Mission, like other Pentecostal churches, did not engage in business ventures, which could provide the church additional income for its activities. The reason was simply because of its ascetic doctrine, which did not provide for accumulation. Some of the questions that confronted the Mission with regards to this were; should it run social services or be engaged in business ventures? Is running such activity by the Mission in compliance with the scripture? Would the undertaking of these activities be beneficial to church growth? However, there was pressure coming from the state government and even some of its members for it to engage in the provision of social services, which had been the case with the mainline churches. The leaders of the church had for long resisted this because they argued it was going to be an impediment for church growth. In line with this, members were not encouraged to go into business ventures because the church feared that they could fall into the temptations of materialism which could impact negatively on faith and the church as a whole.<sup>5</sup> While Full Gospel Mission was resisting the provision of social services, the mainline churches had long been involved in the provision of such services, most especially in the areas of health and education.<sup>6</sup> Though considered as

social services, these institutions were and are still huge sources of income to the central bodies of the churches. Institutions managed by the church were and are still highly valued by the public compared to those managed by the state for what is qualified as better services and the result is a consistently high demand for the services. This enables churches to raise much profit from the institutions. In addition, it used to be state's policy when the economy was in a boom to make grants-in-aid to religious bodies for the running of some of these services, for instance, schools and hospitals, since they were carrying out services that the state would have been obliged to undertake in their absence. This state policy went further to enable these churches to make additional income from the institutions. It could be argued that the availability of various sources of funding to Full Gospel Mission, contributed to its adopting an ascetic doctrine from the onset as opposed to the gospel of prosperity. With the economic crisis,<sup>7</sup> contributions from members and external financial support to the Mission have dropped drastically and for it to survive, an alternative has been to embrace the gospel of prosperity, which makes funding available for its activities. An examination of its income generating enterprises reveals that most of them started during this period of the economic crisis in Cameroon.

Another factor, which contributed to its opening up to the gospel of prosperity has been the influx of new Pentecostal groups within the last decades, each coming in with the gospel of prosperity as an economic message. Some of its members, who did not support asceticism, were defecting to these new churches. A good number of members in the new groups were once members of Full Gospel Mission before defecting, for example, when Zacharias Fomum defected from the Mission and founded his Christian Missionary Fellowship International (CMFI), which supports the gospel of prosperity, many members of Full Gospel Mission defected to the new church.

All these factors, coupled with the fact that members of the church were unable to receive in concrete terms the expected rewards of asceticism in an economic-ridden country like Cameroon, contributed in making the transition very smooth.

## Presenting the Message

The message of prosperity is passed on to members through many ways amongst which are in sermons during regular Sunday worships, rallies and the media. When an Assembly has a project, which entails much money to accomplish, the theme of most of the sermons during the period would dwell on the gospel of prosperity and also when an announcement concerning the project is being made, members are often reminded of the gospel in a bid to persuade them to raise money relentlessly for the project. One such example is the library/rest house project of the Molyko Assembly, which on one of the Sundays, the leaders of the

assembly intended to raise funds for the project. The pastor's sermon that day was devoted to prosperity. In this message he reminded members that they only get rich by trusting in God and paying their tithes and that no one should expect financial success, if he does not fulfil his Christian obligation of giving for the service of the Lord. In line with the message, he reminded members of the importance of the library/rest house project for the growth of the church and the Molyko Assembly in particular and therefore appealed to them to fulfil their Christian obligation of 'giving' to make the project succeed. During the announcement slot of that worship service, the elder of the church reminded members of what the pastor had preached about before bringing out the strategy that was to be used in raising money for the project. He appealed to members to make pledges of at least 5,000 FRS CFA each for the project. A good number of members responded to the appeal and made various pledges. However, some who had a low income and could not pledge up to that amount were given the opportunity to pledge something lower. He started by appealing to those of them who could afford 4500 FRS CFA to raise up their hands and some did. He did it for other amounts below that in descending order and eventually almost every member of the church made a pledge to pay an amount of money for the project within a period of two months.

In another sermon on the Revival Gospel Radio on 27 July, 2003 during the weekly half-hour program of Sunday on Full Gospel Mission, the elder of the Bolifamba Assembly of the Mission, Nkweta Benjamin, decided to preach on this theme and his message was entitled 'Principles of seed faith'. In the message, he likens the growth in faith of a believer to a seed, which if sown will produce much yield. He argues that only when we begin to 'sow our seeds in faith' properly, can we expect rewards from God. He believes that the proper way of sowing in God is by selecting the best seeds to plant and when this is done, the harvest too will be good. That is to say, we have to give to the Lord the best we have and in a greater quantity, the return that will be much more than what we gave him. He further reveals that *'God wants to come to your rescue. He delights in obedience. Your giving proves that God opens the windows of heaven to you and causes the devourer to be rebuked. He invites people to verify his trustworthiness by their giving. I want to say that God's prosperity plans include tithing. Many people are handicapped by their own poverty and too often their poverty is caused by their own disobedience to the word of God. There are many ways of disobeying this word; one is robbing God. Those who withhold their tithes and offerings to the Lord are actually robbing him and as a consequence, are robbing themselves of the blessings of riches that the Lord can bestow upon them. When you break the law, the benevolent law of God cannot work on you. I want to say that nothing will keep a wise believer from tithing and giving, but he or she will never be found to tithe or give offerings just to get something in return. Rather the act arises from obedience and God always reward obedience.'*

Material things are also used to spread the gospel. These include inscriptions on pens, T-shirts, stickers, which are stuck on bibles, front doors, walls, briefcases, and handbags and in cars. Some of the inscriptions read, 'every believer should give for God's work in order to receive his blessings', 'it is time to put all the money you have into the business of the gospel and let it be used while the doors are open. Do not store it up in a will. Let it be used now', 'open a bank account for God now', 'God blesses in abundance so that those blessed may be able to give for every good work. God never blesses anyone so that he may hoard the riches'. As a strategy to spread the message these things are usually sold cheaply to the public or even distributed free of charge.

Tracts on the gospel of prosperity, printed by the Gospel Press Bamenda, are highly used to spread the message. The tracts are given to members of the church to distribute to the general public free of charge everywhere. Each tract is devoted to a particular theme of interest on the prosperity gospel, for example, one, which was entitled 'Truths about Money' argues that money is very important to a Christian and God, unlike Satan, wants all his followers to be rich. It argues that the devil can be much more effective in neutralizing your testimony if you are financially weak and impotent and as such God wants to arm you with all his spiritual armour, and with the finances you need to effectively bring the message of salvation to a dying world. It believes that in a spiritual warfare money is one of the necessary tools to provide desperately needed Bibles for the entire world and it is as well important in evangelisation.

The lifestyle of some of the church leaders also help to spread the gospel, for instance, some live a life of affluence by owning expensive property such as cars, houses, dresses etc. In compliance to the gospel of prosperity, they equally indulge in business ventures along with the church and other members of the public. The result is that when 'believers' see all these practices coming from their leaders, they emulate them. It is therefore commonplace to see members gorgeously dressed with well-nodded ties, particularly those who have to go on stage for any activity during Sunday worship or rallies, for example, preachers and translators, announcers, ushers and elders. It is also normal to see members who possess expensive, durable and latest fashion things and also running businesses as an indication of prosperity.

## Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to bring out the various factors, which have pushed Full Gospel Mission Cameroon to open up to the gospel of prosperity, after a long time of complete asceticism. Though many factors have been given to account for its embracing the gospel of prosperity, these were made easy by the economic crisis, which has rocked the country since the mid eighties. The church, as a body, at this time had become self-sustenance and highly needed money to



run its activities and was therefore compelled to go into business ventures and also appeal for financial support from members. In this wise only the gospel of prosperity could effectively be used to appeal to members to support the church financially. On the part of the members, the gospel was welcome because of the hardship ushered in by the economic crisis and the inability to receive, in concrete terms, the reward of asceticism as a solution to their economic woes. The gospel of prosperity in this wise, provided an opportunity to members to accumulate in a bid to overcome the crisis.

Asceticism made members of the church to keep distance from non-members and even their own family members who did not belong to the church because of what they argued was the incessant love of materialism by the general public, which was unbiblical. It also made the general public to believe that Full Gospel Mission was meant not only for the poor but also for those who prefer to suffer in life. The effect of this on the church was that membership was growing at a very slow rate since many people did not like the ascetic practices and some of its members were either defecting to new Pentecostal churches or backsliding to the mainline churches. This smooth transition within the last decades has undoubtedly been one of the factors, which have accounted for the rapid increase in membership within this period. This recent decision of not retreating from the world has enabled members to embrace the opportunities of the material world thereby bridging the gap that had existed between them and others on material wealth. For some members, this has provided a means of enabling them to make the best of rapid social change and for others it has provided them a code of conduct which guards them from falling into poverty and destitution. For all, the gospel has provided a pattern for coming to terms with, and benefiting from modernity's dominant values and institutions.

The coming in of new Pentecostal groups with the gospel of prosperity as the economic message, the eventual embracing of the gospel by the biggest Pentecostal church in Cameroon and the fact that the mainline churches are associated with practices, which are in compliance to the gospel, is so significant because this could be the beginning of some kind of unity not only amongst the Pentecostal groups but the entire Christian church in Cameroon because doctrinal differences have always been at the forefront of disunity amongst churches in Cameroon. It is normal to hear church officials opposing the doctrines and practices of other churches in sermons and the media in Cameroon<sup>8</sup>. This lack of unity has also led to the inability of the Christian churches to put up a common front in fighting the ills of the society, especially the decaying political structures, resulting from poor governance.

## Notes

- 1 For detail explanation of the factors, which have accounted for the rapid growth of the church, see, for example, Akoko R. Unpublished "An overview of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon and the factors accounting for its rapid growth."
- 2 See, "What Does the Bible Say? Our Position on Prosperity" by Rev. Knorr
- 3 See, for example, Akoko R.M. 2002. "New Pentecostalism in the Wake of the Economic Crisis in Cameroon." *NORDIC Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2002, pp. 359-376.
- 4 Ahmadou Ahidjo was the first president of independent Cameroon in 1960. He handed over power to his constitutional successor, Prime Minister Paul Biya in 1982.
- 5 See, for example, Nwancha, E. 2001 "Our Social and Educational Involvement." In *Full Gospel Mission on its 40th anniversary*, pp. 54-58. Edited by Knorr. Bamenda: Gospel Press.
- 6 See, for examples, Chiabi, E. 1997. *The making of modern Cameroon. A history of sub state, nationalism and desperate unions, 1914-1961*, New York : University press of America, Keller, W. 1969. "The history of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon," pp. 65-73 and 101-102. Limbe: Presbook, Kubuo, J. 2000. "An overview of the Buea Diocese, 1890-1990." In *Pilgrimage of faith, (a history of the Buea Diocese)*, pp.11-51. Edited by Njeuma, M. Bamenda: Copy technology, Weber, C. W. 1993. *International influences and Baptist Missions in West Cameroon: German-American Missionary endeavor under international mandates and British colonialism*, pp. 87-133. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- 7 For more on the economic boom and crisis in Cameroon, see, for examples, Jua, N. 1991. "Cameroon: Jump-starting an economic crisis." *Africa Insight*, 21, 1, Konings, P. 1996. "The Post-colonial State and Economic and Political Reforms in Cameroon." In *Liberalization in the Developing World: Institutional and Economic Changes in Latin America, Africa and Asia*. Edited by A.F. Fernandez Jilberto and A. Mommen. London: Routledge, for a comprehensive analysis of the causes of the economic crisis in Cameroon and Takougang and Krieger. 1998. *Africa State and Society in the 1990s: Cameroon's political Crossroads*.
- 8 For more on disunity amongst the Christian churches in Cameroon, see, for example, Dah, J.N. 1988. *One hundred years of Roman Catholicism in Cameroon (1890-1990)*, Titi Nwel 1995 "The churches and the democratic upheavals in Cameroon 1982-1993." In *the Christian churches and democratization of Africa*, pp. 168-187. Edited by Gifford, P. Leiden: E.J. Brill, Gifford, P. 1997. *African Christianity: Its public role*. London: Hurst and co and Casterman J-B. 2003. *Responses against the Roman Catholic Church*. Yaounde: Maxwell Care.

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- Rev. W. Knorr (Missionary founder of Full Gospel Mission, Cameron)
- Regina Shekinah (Proprietor , frontliners Beauty Centre Molyko Buea)