

Peoples, Partnerships, and Unexpected Complexities

Darrell Dorr

Wycliffe's offer to broker an international partnership on behalf of the Kakanda of Nigeria (see the article to the left) is commendable. I hope that many American churches respond. But this prospective partnership is even more complex than it first appears.

One way to discover some of the hidden complexities is to utilize two of the Web-based mission databases introduced in the last issue of *Mission Frontiers* ("An Abundance of Data on the World's Peoples!", January-February 2004, page 7).

These tools not only provide a few answers, they also raise new questions and provide us with a case study that raises wider issues. Follow along as I explore.

JoshuaProject.net

Let's start with joshuaproject.net, which has recently been revised and updated. I read here that the Kakanda number 20,000 (half the Wycliffe tally), that Islam is the primary religion among them, and that one or more agencies either is working among them or plans to do so. Both agency and church progress are "unknown."

Now the surprise: I also read that this people is not considered "unreached" or "least-reached". (Hmm, the Wycliffe article has claimed "there is no known Christians among them.") This prompts me to check out Joshua Project's definition for these labels, used interchangeably on this site: "A people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group. The original Joshua Project editorial committee selected the criteria less than 2% Evangelical Christian and less than 5% Christian Adherents. Sociologists have recently researched what percentage of a population needs to be influenced to impact the whole group and the answer was 2%." All this suggests that Joshua Project thinks the Kakanda have exceeded the 2% threshold or the 5% threshold. I make a note to loop back to this.

Meanwhile, I also read that the numerically-small Kakanda are one of 13 related peoples in the Nupe "people cluster" (in which "relationships are often based on a common identity of language and name but sometimes on the basis of culture, religion,

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Dawn Kruger

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Typically a church partnership begins when a church in America wants to enhance its missions program by working with a people group overseas. They initiate a relationship that enriches the spiritual lives of everyone involved, and ultimately, sets the stage for Bible translation to begin in one more language.

But let's think backwards for a moment.

Pick a country...Nigeria, for instance. Let's say there is a church there, or better yet... four churches, already working together to reach people groups in their own country. Say they have a burden to reach a particular group, the Kakanda people, and they have engaged a commitment from the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) and a Nigerian mission called Christ To The Unreached Ministries (CTTUM). Initial research has already been done and the three partners are excited about beginning a program to reach this target group.

Now let's say the Nigerian partners know that although they are poised and ready to move forward with this program, they don't have the necessary resources to accomplish it on their own. They are looking for *one other church* that would be able to come along side and assist them in this endeavor.

Say this is true. Is there a church in America willing to step into this ready-made partnership?

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This information isn't speculation. Indeed, a group of four Baptist churches in Benin City in Nigeria have initiated such a partnership to reach the Kakanda people. Surveys have shown that there are approximately 40,000 Kakanda speakers living along the banks of the Niger River in the Kogi, Niger and Kwara states. The people of that region have blended traditional beliefs with another major religion; there are no known Christians among them.

These Benin churches are seeking a partner church that is willing to participate in the development of a holistic mission strategy that would include Bible translation, literacy development and training in Scripture use.

The Benin churches are prepared to help fund the project. NBTT is willing to work primarily in training and consultation; CTTUM will advise personnel and assist in the training as well. Wycliffe provides the common factor that unites the partners in a dynamic relationship, ultimately making Bible translation in the Kakanda language group possible.

What's missing is a church that can:

- send short-term teams to build relationships among the partners and help plan the strategy
- assist long-term teams willing to be trained in language work
- supply some of the funds needed to keep the project moving forward
- uphold the ministry in prayer

The Wycliffe church relations staff is prepared to facilitate a partnership initiative such as this. Office personnel can provide vision casting and leadership training where needed to assist a church in fulfilling the Great Commission through investment in a Bible translation partnership.

Starting a translation in every language that still needs one by the year 2025 is possible because more and more people, churches and mission agencies from different national backgrounds are getting involved in Bible translation work. 🌐

economy, or dominance of one group over another”) with a total population of 3.8 million. This raises the question: what is happening among these related peoples, and could activity among them be part of God's provision for the Kakanda? As a sample check, I look at the data for one of the largest peoples, also called the Nupe (1 million +), and read they are 4% evangelical, have a group of churches, and a functioning partnership of mission agencies. I see comparable developments among another related people of comparable size (the Igbirra). This suggests wider possibilities for the Kakanda partnership.

WorldChristianDatabase.org

So, with some wind in my sails, I proceed to the next Website, worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd, sponsored by Gordon-Conwell's new Center for the Study of Global Christianity and produced by the same editors (Todd Johnson, David Barrett, and team) who brought us the *World Christian Encyclopedia* and its companion volume, *World Christian Trends*.

Here I find even more information and am prompted to ask more questions. I first read a higher population estimate for the Kakanda of Nigeria (25,050, as of the year 2000), as well as confirmation they are part of the larger Nupe “culture”. I also find an initial text note, indicating a 92% affiliation with Islam and a 5% affiliation with animism.

Remembering that Joshua Project has hinted at the presence of Christians among this people, I click on the “Christians” link on this site. Whoa – a flurry of additional detail is before me: 2.8% (or 701) affiliated Christians and church members (as of 2000), and the presence of a small number of “alien Christians” (of another culture resident among the Kakanda). Furthermore, I see an alphabet soup of acronyms for eight mission agencies reportedly working among the Kakanda, and another cluster of five acronyms representing denominations among this people.

I can't find any key to the acronyms anywhere on this Website, so I pull my copy of the hefty *World Christian Trends* off the shelf and consult the index of abbreviations. I puzzle out (I think) seven of the eight agencies: Church Mission Society, SIM International, Evangelical Missionary Society, United Missionary Society, Missionary Church Association, Board of World Ministries, and the United Bible Societies. Likewise, I piece together (I think) the five denominations: Consejo Pastoral Nacional, United Missionary Church of Africa, Seventh-Day Adventists, Evangelical Churches of West Africa, and Deeper Life Bible Church (Nigeria). Another link suggests that radio station ELWA has broadcast mission programs to the Kakanda. Wow: there seem to be a lot of cooks in the Kakanda kitchen. But where did this data come from, and is it accurate and current?

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Remembering that the main point of the Wycliffe article has been to foster partnerships on behalf of “Bibleless peoples,” I click one more link – “Scriptures” – in the World Christian Database. Here is confirmation and elaboration of what Wycliffe has told us: among the Kakanda there are no Scriptures published; no Scriptures in any second language; the JESUS Film not available in the mother tongue or its cluster of languages; no audio Scriptures; and no Scriptures for new readers, the blind, or the deaf.

Checking Back with Our Sources

How are we to piece together these various reports on the Kakanda? It’s time to check back with our sources.

Regarding the question of whether the Kakanda should be considered an unreached people, Joshua Project’s Dan Scribner reveals to me that Joshua Project administrators had no “on-site reported” data for percentages of evangelical Christians or Christian adherents among the Kakanda. Instead, in this instance (and others like it with data gaps) Joshua Project made a “best guess” based on the country of location; since Nigeria is home to so much Christian vigor, the Kakanda were not marked as unreached.

Scribner comments, “Certainly Nigeria is an amazing ethnic and religious mosaic, and the Kakanda could just as easily have been marked as unreached / least-reached. Given the fact that they are primarily Muslim, marking them as unreached might have been a better initial assignment in hindsight. We continue to evaluate and adjust unreached / least-reached flags for peoples with data gaps, particularly those living in some of the difficult African Muslim-Christian intersection countries. More importantly, however, we are seeking on-site information regarding percentage of evangelical and Christian adherents so that the unreached status is no longer an estimate but accurate and based on hard data.” (Prompted by this case study, Scribner has since clarified his Website’s descriptions of Joshua Project definitions and methodologies.)

Meanwhile, a check with the author of Wycliffe’s article, Dawn Kruger, leads us back to her sources in West Africa, including two research surveys by the Nigerian agency CTTUM in 2001-2002. These sources confirm that they did not find a single indigenous believer (“indigene”) or church among the Kakanda, and they claim the same is true of another small, adjacent people in the Nupe cluster, the Kupa.

How, then, do we reconcile these field reports with what we’ve seen in the World Christian Database (WCD)? WCD director Todd Johnson tells me that he can’t yet investigate the matter adequately, but he does offer one clue: “One thing to keep in mind is that our work-among information reflects work among peoples over the past several decades. In the case of Nigeria, there was a detailed research project carried out in the early 1960s, which I suspect is where the initial WCD info came from.... Our method is not to report merely what is happening

at the present moment but to try to fairly represent work that has taken place among the people group in recent mission history.”

Where does this leave us?

So where does this leave us? Wycliffe’s offer of Scripture-focused partnership is still attractive, but our Internet trawl has suggested new complexities in international and multi-agency partnerships: complexities about peoples and clusters; complexities about organizational affiliations; and complexities about how mission data is obtained, verified, and published.

One final note: one other Website I consulted in this case study is *nigeriamissions.org*, the site of the robust Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association (NEMA). To add another layer of complexity: what do NEMA leaders have to say about the Kakanda? I sent an E-mail inquiry to NEMA Executive Secretary Timothy Olonade; look in the next issue of *Mission Frontiers* to see what he reports. 🌐

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