The Legacy of Paul and Clara Gebauer

Allan Effa

Paul Gebauer, who made myriad contributions to a wide number of fields, could be described as a missionary statesman, strategist, educator, anthropologist, and art collector, all with a heavy dose of personality. From the perspective of mission history he is most remembered as a key architect of the Cameroon Baptist Convention and as the catalyst for the development of the North American Baptist Missionary Society. His service in Cameroon, from 1931 to 1961, was interrupted only twice: when he served as a chaplain in the U.S. army for three years during World War II and when he spent two years acquiring a master’s degree in anthropology at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Despite a heavy administrative load as the director of a growing missionary body, he collected priceless ethnographic information among several people groups living in what was then known as British Cameroon.

Clara Kratt, who married Paul in 1935, brought considerable strengths to this missionary-couple team with her formal training in art and experience in education. Together they forged a new way of doing mission among Baptists of western Cameroon, leaving an enduring mark on a church that today numbers more than 82,000 members.

Significant Influences

Paul was born in 1900 as one of ten children in the family of a successful shoe merchant in Silesia, which at the time belonged to Germany but today is part of Poland. His father, a staunch Baptist, established a chapel in conjunction with his business, seeking to win to Christ his neighbors in Bolkhain, and he also established mission chapels in some of the neighboring communities. Three of Paul’s sisters married Baptist ministers, and his brothers were likewise involved in a variety of Christian ministries alongside their regular professions.

At the age of eighteen Paul was drafted into the German army and served during World War I for approximately a year. Upon his return he taught Sunday school, was involved with the young people of the church, and worked as an apprentice to a local mechanic.

In the fall of 1925 Paul emigrated to the United States, eventually settling in Detroit. He worked in a number of trades during the day while completing high school at night. He quickly developed fluency in English and was able to attend Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1928 to 1931. While at Louisville, Paul must have come under the teaching and influence of William Owen Carver, who taught missions and world religions. Carver was a strong proponent of the view that “the native Christian should be the true evangelist of his people and that the wise missionary recognizes and encourages the native’s autonomy and adjusts the missionary methods to it.” Carver’s philosophy was akin to what is today termed contextualization. He believed that Christianity must “pass through the molds of native hearts and minds and will become . . . indigenous to the soil of every civilization.” When Paul articulated his philosophy and strategy of mission at the launching of the work among the Kaka people of Cameroon, the echo of Carver’s voice was heard rather distinctly.

In 1931 Paul graduated from seminary, became a U.S. citizen, and was appointed as a missionary to Cameroon under the German Baptist Mission. Like other Americans of German Baptist heritage, he served under the auspices of the German mission society, but became a forceful advocate for the establishment of a missionary work under North American Baptist direction in ways that he felt would be more progressive and more in line with his passion for an indigenous church. His first term of service was spent under the mentorship of the German-American Carl Bender, a strategist and ethnographer in his own right.

Paul’s working approach to mission was further refined and developed through his studies at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon (B.A., 1943), and his anthropological studies under the eminent professor Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University (M.A., 1958).

Clara Kratt, born in 1908, was the youngest child and only daughter of the six children born to Rev. and Mrs. Jacob Kratt, who had emigrated from Germany to the United States and settled in Portland, Oregon. Jacob served for more than forty years as the pastor of Trinity Baptist Church of Portland. Clara’s interest in art led her to enroll in a three-year program at the Chicago Art Institute after completing high school in 1925. In 1928 she accepted a position as a high school art instructor in Madison, Wisconsin. In that same year her father was appointed to serve on the board of directors of the Cameroon mission. For the next six years she taught and engaged in “independent work in art metal and art appreciation.” Her contributions to ministry would later be felt, particularly in her early efforts in education among the Kaka people and in a lifetime of seeking to integrate Cameroonian art forms into the worship and architecture of the emerging Cameroon Church.

Paul’s marriage to Clara became the feature-page article of the October 1, 1935, edition of the denominational biweekly Baptist Herald. Paul and Clara had met several times during Paul’s first furlough. Destiny seemed to bring them together, for they returned to America on the same ship from the Baptist World Alliance meetings in Berlin in 1934. Following their wedding in September and shortly after their honeymoon, they were sent off by Paul’s home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Detroit, to begin a pioneer effort where no missionaries had previously resided. They went as the very first appointees under the newly formed General Missionary Committee of North American Baptists. On the other side of the Atlantic they organized under the name “Cameroon Baptist Mission.” Their assignment was to open a new field among the Kaka and Mambila peoples of the interior grasslands. Because this region had little previous contact with Christian missionaries or indigenous evangelists, the Gebauers felt this would be an ideal place to begin a fresh work for North American Baptists.

A New Strategy for Mission

Paul and Clara saw themselves as pioneers of a new era of mission strategy in Cameroon, in contrast to the methods of their coworkers from Germany. The Gebauers described the old way of doing mission as paternalistic, resulting in “spoiling” the
Africans and robbing them of their independence. They envisioned a church among the Kaka people that would be a genuinely African expression of Christianity. Paul’s strategy manifesto is eloquently articulated in an article entitled “The Pentecostal Field of the World” and is worth quoting at some length here:

We shall not take our culture to them, for they have one of their own. We shall not burden them with our American civilization, because theirs is one of their own. We shall not go to them on behalf of the cotton trade or tailoring profession of Fifth Avenue fashion shops but rather to encourage them to remain “Africans of the Africans” as to their styles and customs. We shall not offer another religion to them, for they are sick at heart about the many which they already have. We shall not discard their practical system of education, but we shall perpetuate and perfect it suitable to their peculiar needs. We shall not laugh at their art and crafts but encourage them to carry on and to perfect the expression of their appreciation of the beautiful.

In years to come we shall not burden them with occidental architecture of church buildings nor western modes of worship, with our theological difficulties nor our denominational warfare. . . . If Jesus is the One we claim him to be, the World’s Savior, the Kaka people, as they receive him, will forget the worship of evil spirits, the fear of demons, and the rites of cannibalism. They will turn their songs and their music into praises for Jesus. In him the African Church will arise in Kaka-land. There will be different forms of worship but the same Master. There will be strange music flowing from their lips but the same faith which they will confess, and the same baptism. African music will accompany their psalm. An African Christ will hang upon their cross. An African Church, the tribe of Jesus, will arise to the glory of God. 

Paul called for a critical examination of traditional customs and practices, avoiding the extremes of outright condemnation on the one hand and unequivocal acceptance on the other. He believed that such a posture required the missionary to be a careful student of the culture and seek an insider’s perspective before determining what is compatible or incompatible with Christianity. The explanation of his methodology and some specific cases of how he dealt with customs that appeared to conflict with Christian principles are candidly outlined in his annual report of 1939.

The Gebauers resolutely avoided the introduction of any practice that might encourage a lasting dependence on foreign missionaries or their resources. An illustration of Paul’s conviction in this regard was his intransigent refusal to supply white baptismal robes to new converts among the Kaka. Presumably this early group of converts expected to receive the same treatment as those converted under the German missionaries and promptly went on strike prior to their immersion when they found out they would be wearing nothing but their traditional loincloths! Fortunately, through the mediation of a Cameroonian evangelist, the strike was called off, and the service proceeded. Paul commented, “And by this small incident we helped to establish an indigenous church that will grow and carry on without the presence of missionaries and without aid from foreign countries.”

A Passion for Indigeneity

Commitment to the establishment of an indigenous church guided the Gebauers’ strategy from the beginning of the work in Kakaland. The very first efforts of evangelism were made by Bekom evangelists from the Belo region who were entrusted with the responsibility of baptizing converts and planting new churches. Primary among them was Robert Jam, who invested a lifetime of itinerant evangelism in planting churches among a number of different ethnic groups. These men, along with their wives, were cross-cultural church planters in the fullest sense, having to learn new languages and settle among peoples historically considered hostile. The missionary’s work was therefore more administrative than evangelistic. Responsibility for the expansion of the church was placed in the hands of each believer. This strategy affirmed the work and giftedness of national clergy and laid the foundation for the emergence of churches that were self-governing and self-propagating: “We have, therefore, made it a rule on our youngest mission fields, Kaka and Mambila, that your missionaries remain in the background in order that your African fellow-believers may not only accept fullest responsibilities right from the outset but also have the privilege of baptizing their tribesmen into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

With the baptism of the first twenty Kaka converts and the establishment of an organized church, Paul and Clara ensured that, right from the outset, the local Christians “should be put on their own feet.” Deacons from within the membership were immediately appointed (two male and one female), and the missionaries’ role was restricted to that of an advisory voice in the matters of the young church. The Gebauers saw these policies as being in line with the Apostle Paul’s: “We believe with that great missionary of old that the Spirit of God will guide these young Christians into all truth. We believe that these beginners can be trained to listen to the voice of God more than to the voice of their missionaries. We leave to them all financial worries and we plan with them the extension of the work.”

The concepts and even some of the terms Paul Gebauer used to enunciate his vision for the Kaka church seem to have been taken from Roland Allen’s Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours? Although he never quotes Allen directly, the similarities in their thinking make it quite likely that the book had a formative influence on Paul and Clara’s missionary strategy.

World War II broke out during the Gebauers’ first furlough as a couple. All missionaries from Germany were repatriated, and the responsibility for the entire Baptist work in British Cameroon fell into the hands of George and Louise Dunger, North American Baptist missionaries who had joined with the Gebauers in 1938. When Paul reassumed the position of field director after his service as a U.S. army chaplain, he was determined to promote the ideal of the three-self formula throughout the Baptist constituency: “We are agreed to bringing about the indigenous church. Dollar-dependency has been cut consistently with reference to churches and church workers. From the German policy of being paymasters we have advanced to wipe out all foreign help within a visible period. From a policy of complete foreign control we have advanced to complete native government in our churches. Self-propagation has taken a weighty step forward. An ideal has become a reality.”

Clara’s Educational Work

The Kaka people proved to be particularly receptive. During their first year of ministry Paul and Clara had twenty baptisms, established one church, opened eight chapels, and reported 675 converts seeking baptism. Paul devoted himself to the construction of a mission station, while Clara began to teach literacy classes, Bible studies, and crafts, with the aim of developing a group of Christian leaders who could take the places of the

April 2006 93
Bekom evangelists. The arrival of a missionary nurse, Edith Koppin, allowed the fledgling mission to begin to offer medical services as well. Clara’s contribution to the work among the Kaka included the establishment of the first school at Mbem. She shared Paul’s respect for the preservation of all that was noble and good in the Cameroonian culture and sought to develop an educational system that did not alienate the emerging generation from its cultural roots. When the school opened in April of 1937 with fourteen students, it bore the unique imprint of the Gebauers’ philosophy. Besides teaching elementary courses in reading, writing, and mathematics, there were courses in health, local traditions, and nature studies. Clara, the school manager, announced:

It is the general aim of the school not to alienate the boys from their village life, and as much as possible to keep them from becoming dependent on the European for the supply of their needs. For this reason they are housed, native fashion, in strongly built huts, are allowed to wear no European clothes but only clean loin-cloths and are taught to write on banana leaves with a sharpened stick until the price of a slate has been worked off. Classes are not held to a rigid time schedule but they are encouraged to take time for repairing bridges, road making and other practical projects.

Emphasis is placed on relating all instruction as much as possible to native life and on inspiring a greater appreciation for native crafts and tribal organization. When the Mbem school opened its doors for its second year of training, enrollment had more than doubled, to a total of thirty students.

Unfortunately, however, Clara’s experiment in education was short-lived. Soon after the Gebauers left for what became an extended furlough in 1940, the schools were forced to conform to the government’s pattern and curriculum, largely modeled after Britain’s. Nevertheless, by affirming the value of many traditional ways while introducing Western education, the Gebauers set a standard for the development of a church that could be both authentically Christian and unashamedly African.

Students of Culture

Paul and Clara demonstrated an appreciation for the culture on a scale that was unique for missionaries of that era. They modeled and legitimized the role of missionaries as ethnographers. While others might have regarded such work as wasteful and a distraction from the more urgent task of evangelization or education, the Gebauers took pains to understand the cultures of Cameroon and encouraged others to do the same.

Clara focused her interest primarily on the collection and preservation of material art. In 1971 the Portland Art Museum purchased a significant portion of this collection (the Gebauer Collection), which includes many rare sculptures, masks, shields, handbags, and tobacco pipes. Seventy-nine of those objects were selected and featured in Paul’s work *Art of Cameroon.* Clara, more than just an art collector, was convinced that a people’s art serves as a vital bridge to their cultural heritage. So throughout their ministry the Gebauers encouraged local artists by incorporating into the buildings they erected these artists’ furnishings, woven shields and baskets, and plaques, as well as posts made by traditional carvers. The architecture of the churches at Mbem and Nkwen (in Bamenda) set a standard of incorporation of Cameroonian art that unfortunately failed to become normative. Music was another area in which local forms were empha-

sized. Large drum huts were built adjacent to the chapels, and the drums were used to summon people to worship. Indigenous music, which was suitable to the tonal languages of the region, local instruments, and dances were employed. In summary, the Gebauers “refrained from introducing any Western music or instruments.”

Paul spent a portion of 1938–39 as an apprentice to a traditional diviner, learning the art of spider divination among the Kakas. His extensive field notes formed the substance of what later became his M.A. thesis. It was subsequently published under the title *Spider Divination in the Cameroons.* Paul’s meticulous work, documenting a practice that has since disappeared, earned him the respect of his mentor, Melville Herskovits, “a man of strong, usually justifiable, attitudes and, as a rule, no admirer of missionaries or colonials. His high praise of Paul Gebauer was therefore most impressive.”

Mention should also be made of the images Paul captured with his camera. No fewer than 9,000 black-and-white photographs and more than 2,400 slides were part of the collection acquired by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. The photographs portray a way of life long since forgotten. Despite a lack of formal training in photography, his work was masterful. “They looked nothing like a scholar’s photographs—they were a photographer’s photographs. They showed the eye and technical skill of an artist, and the easy familiarity of one who was photographing his friends and neighbors.”

A significant incongruity in the Gebauers’ ministry revolved around language acquisition. Unlike Carl Bender, who became fluent in Duala, the Gebauers never made the effort to learn a Cameroonian language other than the lingua franca, Pidgin English. With more than 280 regional languages spoken in the country, Paul and Clara may have found it difficult to choose a particular one to learn. They depended on the assistance of African translators and were unable to promote the development of literature in the various vernaculars of Cameroon. Later in his career Paul lamented this decision, insisting that this deficiency in missionary practice must somehow be overcome.

Paul’s Military Demeanor

Paul’s experience of serving in two world wars under two different armies affected the way he conducted himself, as well as the language he used to describe the missionary mandate. He was a strong advocate for the mission station concept, calling it a “modern necessity” and “the hub of training programs.” The station was not just a missionary’s home, but “a citadel out of which your modern apostles walk or speed in cars after well-laid plans of attack.” Military terminology peppered his articles in the *Baptist Herald.* For example, in describing the work of his “African Apostles,” he reported that “Robert Jam opened up the most doubtful sector, the extreme north of the land, Noah Ndimbu probed the southern approaches, and Johannes Tonto attacked the center of the field.”

Paul carried this militaristic demeanor into his relationships with fellow missionaries and Cameroonians. He was character-
ized as a “very straightforward person.” Despite his appreciation for the ways of the people and his disdain for colonial thinking, he “treated people like the German officers did and related to the evangelists like an employer, not a partner.”

A northern European time-consciousness would sometimes impel him to leave church services in the middle of a sermon. On one occasion, as a guest speaker at a church in the United States, the service went so long that, when it was time for him to offer the message, he simply offered a benediction and sat down.

In spite of Paul’s cultural understanding and advanced anthropological training, there were times when personality and upbringing won the upper hand. Perhaps he, like the disciples in Gethsemane, battled the reality that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Clara, in contrast, compensated for his faults by her gracious and tender spirit.

### Lasting Contributions

Under Paul’s leadership the Cameroon Baptist Mission expanded its personnel to a total of fifty-two by the time the Gebauers resigned in 1961, with a ministry that included an extensive network of schools and medical posts. The Baptist churches experienced considerable growth as well, due largely to a philosophy that encouraged the Cameroonian church to be responsible for its own advancement. In 1951 the mission’s 160 churches formed the Cameroon Baptist Convention, under full direction of national leaders, ten years before Cameroon obtained independence from British colonial rule.

Paul and Clara set a standard for missionary scholarship and cultural research, and they strongly encouraged new missionaries to do the same. After concluding their missionary service, Paul went on to publish articles that explained in considerable detail the architecture, dances, and tobacco pipes used by various groups of people he had studied. The documentation and preservation of the material art of early-contact-period ethnic cultures of Cameroon’s grasslands is a legacy the whole world can enjoy.

### Closing Years

After nearly thirty years of missionary service, the Gebauers resigned in order to devote more time to teaching and to their children, Anne and Walter. A new chapter opened for them in 1962 when Paul, took a position on the faculty of his alma mater, Linfield College, in McMinnville, Oregon, teaching modern languages and anthropology. He had previously received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from Linfield (1952), and in 1957 Queen Elizabeth II had bestowed upon him the Order of the British Empire. Clara worked for many years in the Linfield College library.

During retirement Clara was an active volunteer at the Portland Art Museum, and both Paul and Clara devoted time to organizing and writing descriptions of the many pieces of art in the museum’s collection. A number of publications emerged from their years of accumulated field notes.

In 1971 Linfield College established the Gebauer Anthropology Prize in honor of Paul’s missionary and teaching career. It is awarded annually to the top thesis or dissertation in the field of anthropology.

In a fitting finale to a lifetime of devotion to learning and adventure, Paul died suddenly in his sleep on June 23, 1977, while he and Clara were visiting the Grand Canyon with a group tour. Clara passed away on July 5, 2004, at ninety-six years of age.

### Notes

3. Quoted in ibid., p. 87.
4. Ibid., p. 96.
5. Bender’s remarkable story is narrated by his daughter, Helga Bender Henry, in Cameroon on a Clear Day (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1999).
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 312.
14. Ibid.
19. In one of his reports circulated to all the missionaries, Paul lamented the “lack of mental growth” among his coworkers and encouraged them toward “personal research” and “cultural advancement” (“After Five Years,” p. 3).
21. Ibid., p. 131.
22. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. For an in-depth analysis of the growth of the Cameroon Baptist Convention, see Lloyd Kwast’s Discipling of West Cameroon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).
31. Among subsequent missionaries, the late Gilbert Schneider holds the greatest distinction for his ethnographic work, photography, and linguistic studies.
Selected Bibliography

Works by Paul Gebauer


1964  *Spider Divination in the Cameroons.* Milwaukee, Wis.: Milwaukee Public Museum.


1979  *Art of Cameroon.* Portland, Ore.: Portland Art Museum.

Works About Paul Gebauer
