

❖ Foreword

Mennonites in Congo: Looking toward the second century

In 1911–12, thirty-three years after the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries in our country, God raised a call among American Mennonites in two small Illinois groups to send pioneers to the interior of our country to announce the good news. Today, this first century of contacts with the Christian world through American Mennonite missionaries has marked our way of being in the world and has left traces that can be seen in former mission stations.

It is essential for the churches born of the Congo Inland Mission, now called Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (CIM/AIMM), to take another look at their history. Although this history seems distant to some Congolese populations, it is nevertheless a component of the heritage that the Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCo) and the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo (CEM) have in common. These churches face challenges represented by evangelization of cultures, the promotion of justice, the struggle for development, the defense of peace, and the search for the ways of democracy. While Congolese Mennonite churches cannot rely entirely on their past for direction, a review of our history will help us accomplish the mission of the church in this third millennium.

The Mennonite mission was dedicated to announcing the word of God and publishing Christian literary works destined for the inhabitants of the evangelized territory, with the goal of forming an autonomous Anabaptist Mennonite church. It was also occupied

with education in order to form an intellectual elite. In the health sector, the mission established its work in hospitals, dispensaries, maternities, and leprosariums throughout the mission stations, and it trained nurses to work in them. The missionaries even created cooperatives to promote farming for the good of the local population.

All these accomplishments testify to the greatness of the missionaries' spirit of sacrifice and their care for training and improving the social welfare of the Congolese. We owe our gratitude to them for this work of great breadth.

From 1960 to today, the question of the autonomy of the churches has been linked to historical changes in Africa. The political movement toward independence and the precipitous upsets in the Belgian colonial regime showed that the time was also ripe for profound changes at the level of the congregation. The political situation influenced the vision not only of the Congolese but also of the leaders of the mission.

In February 1960, just four months before Belgium suddenly granted independence, Congolese and missionary delegates met at Ndjoko Punda (the site of the first Mennonite mission) in a "conference of integration," to define processes for the Congolese church to gain autonomy and for mission assistance to continue. As a result of this meeting, the local church was born and took the name Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo.

Former missionary and historian Jim Bertsche said in a November 2011 interview, "It is important to emphasize that the missionaries did not feel they had the right to name the church; the name 'Mennonite' is the doing of the Congolese." He added that the name was chosen by Mathieu Kazadi, first president of the new church, who said, "We know you very well. You are American Mennonites; you are our parents and we are your children. This church will be called the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo."

Missionaries promised the church continued support in funds and missionary personnel as long as deemed necessary and according to the capacity of the Mennonites supporting the mission in North America.

Satisfied with obtaining this autonomy, the Congolese courageously met in Nyanga in August 1960, after the missionaries had been forced to flee because of the independence troubles. This gen-

eral assembly of the new Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo put in place a first indigenous leadership team.

When the missionaries returned to Congo in 1961, they and the Congolese agreed that the Congolese were not ready to direct the work of their church entirely by themselves. Two missionaries joined a collegial leadership team: Vernon Sprunger as assistant legal representative, and Arthur Janz as assistant treasurer. The presence of these two missionaries contributed to the church's good operation.

In February–March 1970 a session of the General Assembly of the Protestant Council of Congo was held in Kinshasa. An outcome of this general assembly was a solemn declaration by the majority of the members of this nonprofit association dissolving the missions as institutions separate from the church.

With the end of the missionary institutions in Congo, many discussions took place on the relation between the church planted in a foreign culture and the mission or mother church. Terms such as *fusion*, *partnership*, *mutuality*, *interdependence*, and *internationalization* were offered to describe the future relationship. The Église du Christ au Congo (ECC—Church of Christ in Congo), now the umbrella organization of the unified Protestant churches, adopted the term *fusion*, and the Mennonites followed suit.

The process of fusion of these two organizations, the mission and the local church, which began in 1960, was solidified at the general conference held in June 1971 at Nyanga, and a new leadership team was put in place. All the properties, institutions, and programs of the mission were transferred to the local church, as was the responsibility for the Mennonite mission in the country. In the course of this same year the church name changed to “Communauté Mennonite du Zaïre” (CMZa, now CMCo, for Mennonite Church of Congo). By this time, as the stories in this collection will make clear, a group of refugees fleeing post-independent violence had formed a second Mennonite group in south Kasai. This group now adopted the name “Communauté Évangélique Mennonite,” or CEM (Evangelical Mennonite Church).¹

The end of collegial management was sanctioned by the departure of the last American missionary, Herman Buller, from the management of the CMCo in 1978. This second return of the Mennonite

1 “Communauté” in these names signifies the unity of Protestant churches in Congo: each denomination is a “community” of the Church of Christ in Congo.

missionaries to their country of origin raised more administrative as well as financial difficulties. Certain indigenous administrations who have directed the church from 1978 to today have failed to understand the true meaning of autonomy. During this period of indigenous church leadership, AIMM, despite its determination to reduce subsidies—adopted in October 1980—was still engaged in helping the community financially as much as was necessary.

Today, however, the CMCo and the CEM are going concerns and from now on are obliged to take charge of themselves, albeit in global partnership with the larger Mennonite family. This raises the question of how we should approach the next century.

This is no time to rest. Our second century will not be at all like today. We live already in the prelude to these changes. Great technological advances are shaping the North, but few are operating in the South of the planet. This hemisphere in which the Mennonite work has been planted lags behind. Nevertheless we live on the same planet. The problems of the South will be felt in the North as well. What will be our response to the accelerated degradation of the environment and the scandalous impoverishment of the countries most touched by economic and food crises? We face many unknowns. We are in a new world that requires a different perception and understanding of modernity.

In the past, our missionaries began the work of evangelization and church life with health and education. And since 1960 the autonomous Mennonite church has continued this work and by the grace of God has participated in the life of the Congolese population with the limited means bequeathed by the missionaries in these domains.

Technology has always been important to the church's mission. If I am not mistaken, the Mennonites were the first to install, in 1951, a shortwave radio network connecting their stations. This greatly improved communications and efficiency. Before this new communication technology, people walked or rode bicycles over great distances in order to have contact. The technology also played an important role in evangelization.

Today the Mennonite churches that were formed from CIM/ AIMM have no media through which they can announce the good news. The majority of our congregations even lack sound systems, although we know that music contributes to evangelization, attracts attention and crowds, and brings peace and joy. The Mennonite pri-

mary and secondary schools are not equipped with libraries and computers. The central offices of the church are not linked to the Internet.

The church has not done much to modernize the medical service of the church with its web of dispensaries, health centers, and general referral hospitals. The health of the population is the backbone of all development and an incontrovertible factor in evangelization centered on development and modernization. It is imperative that in the next century we give it first place. The offer of quality healthcare (continuous, integrated, universal, effective, and efficient) in these Mennonite structures requires modern biomedical equipment: sonograms, scanners, well-equipped operating rooms, surgical and maternity equipment, and so forth. This network must contribute to the struggle against the modern worldwide plagues, which particularly affect Congo: HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.

The mechanization of agriculture and the modernization of animal husbandry are proven priorities. Our leaders must be broadly trained. The church must educate pastors not only in theology but also in scientific domains such as the environment, social sciences, land law, and medicine and health. Our hope, too, is that our private Mennonite schools can be modernized. Because of a lack of effective training in faith and Christian ethics at the primary and secondary levels, our children are vulnerable to the influences of other religions and occultism they encounter in Congolese university environments.

Today we are part of a great worldwide Mennonite family. Love and respect should animate our relations, along with the desire for the edification of the church, so that it continues in the service of people and efforts to aid the poor. Look at how our partner Catholic agencies work with their churches in the South. The unilateral mission, that is to say, the one that separates North from South, is over. All the churches must evangelize together.

Congolese Mennonite Anabaptism must be understood according to our culture. There are many valuable aspects of Congolese culture conveyed in its music, proverbs, tales, philosophy, the place it gives to blood sacrifices, the concept of what is taboo and what is holy, the idea of humans set apart by God, its sense of hierarchy, and its innate religious spirit, as well as the value Africans give to nonviolence, unity, peace, and reconciliation. All of that can be developed to solidify Congolese Mennonites' faith in Jesus Christ. They

will discover a type of church that loves the Lord with all its heart, mind, strength, and soul. They will discover a holy, united church in which the gifts of each one will be exercised for the good of the whole body of Christ.

Today is already the future. We must act now! What Mennonite Church in Congo will we leave to posterity? What is our role today? Let's act together, at the same time, to give a new breath of evangelization and mission to the Mennonite work in Congo. As we say, referring to our staple dish, "It takes at least two fingers to hold the *fufu*!"

Our ardent desire for the second century stays focused on evangelization and mission by new methods, and on support for the well-being and economic development of our people. In this way the church will be a positive influence, an inspiration, a proponent of new ways, a conscience in society.

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