

❖ Editors' preface

Early in 2009 this book was only a dream, and a fragile one at that. Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission's centennial year, 2012, was just around the corner. It was time to start planning a celebration. A hundred years of unbroken Mennonite presence and witness in Congo was indeed noteworthy.

Discussion quickly took off in a variety of directions. We could trace the incredible international missionary team that the Lord put together across a century. We could show the evolving history of a growing inter-Mennonite mission venture, which eventually brought together a partnership of six different North American Mennonite conferences in common mission and service in that distant land.

There were statistics by the bucketful: numbers of students graduated, healthy babies born, successful surgeries performed, teachers and pastors trained, and above all, baptized believers who, at the century mark, constitute a Congolese Mennonite community whose three branches include approximately 225,000 members.¹

But as historically important as these numbers are, they fall short of an essential point. We had the growing conviction that the focus of centennial celebrations needed somehow to take the form of a tribute to the life-changing impact of God's grace on countless lives across a century.

¹ Stories in this book come principally from two branches, the Mennonite Church of Congo and the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo. See the appendix, "Mennonite church names."

Thus was born the idea of a project to gather stories—stories by Africans about Africans who had faith-based, life-changing encounters with Jesus and who then became evangelists of their own people, planters of their own churches, and witnesses to God’s grace in their lives.

The hurdles were high. Time was already short for such an undertaking. Were there Congolese who could be trained and equipped on short notice to fan out across an area the size of the state of Illinois, among several different ethnic groups, to seek out and document such stories? Soon enough there would be another problem, of finding African writers who knew the local tribal languages in which the raw material was recorded and who were competent to turn these biographical records into good French stories. To further complicate the picture, we wanted not just a French story collection as a centennial gift to the Congo Mennonite churches but also an English version for distribution here in North America. Could we assemble the necessary translation and editorial team on this end?

And finally, the story-gathering project was taking shape during a major economic slump in the United States. Were there people prepared to join us in our vision and support of a project that would require more than \$120,000?

One by one, each seemingly insurmountable hurdle was cleared, many of them just in time to meet a series of urgent deadlines: the book that you hold in your hands is itself something of a miracle.

As you read, please note the following features of the story collection:

- They are presented in roughly chronological order and scattered across a hundred years. To a prodigious collection of stories gathered by Congolese researchers and writers, in the English edition we have added a number written by longtime missionary Jim Bertsche, because they offer valuable background for North American readers.
- The profiles and stories come from a mix of at least eight ethnic groups. They are about men and women, youth and older folks, people who are literate and semi-literate, North Americans and Congolese, city dwellers and rural village folk, the living and the dead.
- They reflect courage and amazing faith amid enormous cultural pressures. They present an honest account of these

pressures and people's struggles with them. They portray an African interpretation of basic Anabaptist belief in peace, nonviolence, and forgiveness.

- In a society that has been racked by periodic violence, these stories constitute a book of martyrs in the Congo Mennonite family, as well as a compendium of elders who have lived long and fruitful lives in the church.
- For North American readers, these stories constitute a primer in the simple practice of prayer, the life-changing impact of scripture and song, and the art of walking humbly by faith and not by sight.

Readers may be curious about our chosen title, *The Jesus Tribe*. It emerges out of one of the stories recorded here. In a situation of tribal conflict, Pastor Charles Kwamba is asked to choose sides. His reply? "I have become a member of the Jesus tribe." This response was a powerful witness to the peace and unity for which Jesus prayed, a way for Kwamba to say that his identity was no longer primarily with his blood ancestral group but with an intertribal church—the Jesus Tribe. The theme of overcoming tribal barriers out of love for Jesus and commitment to his intertribal family is a major theme throughout the book.

As additional guides we have added maps and an appendix defining some terms and offering history and background on such things as church practices, structures, and names.

We trust that the French collection will help today's Congolese Mennonites gain a new understanding of the shoulders they stand on. We trust that the English collection will help the North American Mennonite community gain a vivid sense of their brothers and sisters in Congo and inspire reflection on an ancient scriptural affirmation: "It is not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord."