



21 ❖ Elie Kahanga, bachelor pastor

One of Congo's early Mennonite pastors brought a consistent message of the need for Christian unity. Perhaps it was because he was atypical in so many ways: member of a minority tribe, crippled, originating from another denomination, and—most unusual of all in this society—single all his life.

Elie Kahanga was born in 1907 not far from the Baptist mission in Vanga. A member of the Mbala tribe, he left his natal village when he was sixteen to live at the mission. The mission stations attracted many people, because they were the key to changing the lives of those who joined them. Elie studied four years and became a teacher-evangelist. The Baptist missionaries took note of his competence, trusted him, and used him as an interpreter and guide for the white people who arrived in the region for the first time.

At the end of 1929, he was asked to serve as a guide for a family that was traveling from Vanga to Kamayala, site of a Mennonite mission. Elie Kahanga chose to stay with them, and so began a pilgrimage that would take him definitively away from his birthplace.

At Kamayala, Elie didn't hesitate to use his talents as a devout teacher-evangelist. He spent several years teaching reading and writing the gospel to young people at the Kamayala station. His success in evangelization led to his ordination as a pastor, a role in which he served until his death.

Rev. Elie Kahanga with his bicycle

In 1958, Congo Inland Mission decided to install pastors permanently in outlying areas, in order to better teach people and convert them. However, many pastors were reluctant to leave the mission station. Pastor Elie Kahanga was the first to submit and go to live in a substation, where he served the rest of his life. With the support of missionaries, he solicited subsidies from the state and built a permanent school building with five classrooms.

Even today in Congo it is almost unheard of for a man to pass his entire life unmarried, but this man of God did so. The story is that Pastor Elie was engaged to marry a woman who fell passionately in love with another man. Severely disappointed, Elie decided to live alone, fearing that any woman might prove as unfaithful as she. This was a serious, risky decision, but he remained true to it. The testimonies about his life indicate that he nevertheless led an exemplary life. Few people today could match him.

Another difficult event could have further discouraged him but seemed to have no adverse effect. On one of his evangelistic tours by bicycle, he was pedaling along, singing in Chokwe, “I am shaken by sadness at the death of Christ,” when he lost control and crashed in the ditch. He ended up with a twisted ankle that handicapped him for the rest of his life. He categorized all of his difficulties as Satan’s temptations to turn him away from the way of salvation.

His life conveyed several important lessons. In his messages to Christians, Pastor Elie Kahanga never ceased to say that the road to eternal life is long and full of obstacles. But in order to get there we must, in fraternity, hospitality, and sociability, witness to our solidarity around the cross of Jesus Christ.

Also, like the Apostle Paul, who lived as a Greek among the Greeks, Pastor Kahanga showed that in Jesus Christ there are no tribal barriers. Coming from Mbala origins, he lived among the Lunda and Chokwe without any complexes. Nor could anyone imagine that he had come from another denomination. Suffering criticism and scorn because he was without wife and children, he managed to rise above it and loyally execute his calling.

Pastor Kahanga tried to get his church to engage in agriculture and animal husbandry for the sake of economic development, but that idea wasn’t well understood at the time. Nevertheless, when he passed away in the 1990s, he left everything that belonged to him to the church.

Vincent Ndandula