

9 ❁ Do Jesus people live in this village?

The fragile, pioneering work of the first Mennonite missionaries in Congo was guided by two critical decisions.

First, these early missionaries said that they would settle for nothing other than a single, intertribal Mennonite church. After all, in Christ walls of separation crumble and diverse people become brothers and sisters as they discover one another around the cross.

This decision reflected incredible faith, because the Belgian authorities, in authorizing various Protestant groups to work in the country, had allocated an area the size of Illinois to the Mennonites. This was the home territory of four major tribes, with another half-dozen or so overlapping ethnic groups around the edges, each with its own language, history, customs, and traditions.

Even more daunting was the bitter, bloody history between two of the major tribal groups, the Chokwe and the Pende. This conflict had its roots in an earlier era of Portuguese slave trade along the western coast of Central Africa. The Portuguese gave muskets and gunpowder to the Chokwe tribe and paid them for every person they captured and marched to the coast. The Pende tribe was a favorite target. Though this large-scale slave trade had stopped by the time the colonizing Belgians arrived, deep animosity remained between the two groups.

A second early decision was that Africans would become the primary, long-range evangelists of their own people. The missionaries realized that it was patently impossible for white-skinned folk from

North America alone to plant the intertribal Mennonite church of which they dreamed.

Thus a pattern of work quickly emerged. The missionaries worked toward the goal of evangelizing a first generation of believers and training them to become the primary witnesses to God's grace among their fellow villagers. Armed with three or four years of primary education plus study in a two-year Bible school, these African teacher-evangelists were placed in a widening radius around the early mission posts, where they settled in to open simple bush schools and to tell people about a man named Yesu.

The early going required grit and commitment in abundance. Typically the young African couples were not welcomed by village chiefs and their elders. What could the newcomers teach their boys that the villagers themselves could not teach them? Would the boys be better able to track antelope through the rolling grassland or set better snares for fish along the river's edge if they sat in the school and learned letters and numbers? Would they be better equipped to fashion fetishes to protect themselves from the dangerous spirits that prowled the darkness around their villages after sundown? Sometimes the newcomers came under the menace of witchcraft and even threats of death. But they persevered, couple after couple, and slowly over time the Lord honored their courageous faith. What celebration there was when they were able to baptize the first believers!

All of this was before the time of roads or any sort of mechanized transportation. Even bicycles were still rare. But travel by foot was nonetheless often necessary for villagers. This travel at times took people out of the area of their own ethnic group through that of adjoining tribes. Such travel was dangerous and not undertaken lightly. Strangers and "foreigners" making their way along the winding footpaths through the rolling savannah were easy targets. It was common for people to be robbed or even taken as slaves. There were persistent stories of people simply disappearing.

It was during this time that stories began circulating in African rural territory. Villagers were beginning to hear about "Jesus people" scattered here and there, even among the ethnic groups they feared and hated. The word was that they were people of kindness, generosity, and love— people to whom you could even entrust your life.

So when a traveler was approaching a village far from home at sundown, his first question was: “Do Jesus people live in this village?” If the answer was no, the traveler would often pass by, choosing to spend the night rolled up in his blanket under a bush somewhere. He was prepared to risk the dangers of a night among wild animals rather than stay in a village among people he feared.

But if “Jesus people” resided in that village, the traveler would ask to be directed to them, knowing that they would shelter and feed him regardless of his ethnic group or beliefs. He would be safe and the next morning would be sent on his way with a blessing.

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