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55 & Uniting the Mennonite communities

The late Simon Mukanza brought unusual administrative skill to the work of the church. His legacy is felt today in the lives of individuals, all three Mennonite communities, and the entire Protestant community in Congo.

Simon Mukanza was born in Kandala, site of a Mennonite mission station in Bandundu Province, in 1942. He went to primary school there and secondary school at the Nyanga station, followed by theological studies at what is now the Christian University of Kinshasa. He was baptized in 1954 and married Monique Mihala in 1962. All of their six children went to university. Three are now in the United States.

Simon taught school for a time and then went the US to further his theological studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. He obtained a master's degree in Christian education in 1977, the first member of the Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCo) to do so. This degree opened many horizons to him.

After that formation, Rev. Mukanza was assigned by CMCo legal representative Moise Kabangy¹ to work as the prefect of studies at the Gatundo Institute at Mukedi, which he did for two years. He was then elected deputy legal representative of the denomination in January 1980. During this time Simon Mukanza was also denominational

photo—Simon Mukanza with his wife Monique Mihala

¹ See “I’ve been invited to a banquet on Thursday” (chapter 51).

coordinator for evangelism and church life. Under his direction, the Christian education department (literature, seminary, Bible camps) flourished. He finished his term as deputy legal representative in July 1985, when he declined to be renamed to the post.

In addition to these responsibilities, he was designated administrator of Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF), which provided air transport for Protestants in the country. With energy and competence he revolutionized all its activities, greatly facilitating transportation between stations such as Mukedi, Nyanga, Kalonda, Vanga, and Kajiji. He had the ability to organize and set up the entire administrative structure of MAF and consolidate its administrative relations with the Congolese state. Because of the confidence he inspired in MAF's partners and his own valuing of work well done, he stayed in that position until his death in 1997.

His energy and ability were noted and approved by all three Mennonite denominations in Congo—Mennonite, Evangelical Mennonite, and Mennonite Brethren. He therefore became a moving force behind the establishment of a new structure of collaboration called the National Inter-Mennonite Committee. Representatives of the three communities had participated in the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Filadelfia, Paraguay, in July 1987. There they made a group declaration expressing their desire to create an organization in the Congo that could serve as a channel for promoting the Mennonite Anabaptist vision of church and society and for coordinating assemblies and mutual assistance to bring Congolese Mennonites closer together.

Simon Mukanza was the first executive secretary of the new committee, which was officially brought into existence in December 1987, and he set about organizing its administrative structure with the consent of the legal representatives of the three denominations. This committee coordinates programmatic activities such as inter-Mennonite consultations, peace education, education about the Anabaptist vision, and research and documentation on African Mennonite church identity.

Despite his multiple occupations, Rev. Simon Mukanza also served as a pastor and led many souls to Jesus Christ. He helped organize a Mennonite congregation associated with the National Pedagogical Institute in Kinshasa, and he shepherded it from 1986 until his death. Rev. Mukanza and his assistant, Rev. Kwamba, did

not spare any efforts to visit people and assure good training for the faithful. This work produced much fruit and led many to consolidate their faith in the Lord. They were also inspired by the evangelism of the young brother Philippe Mimbu, a beloved spiritual son of the late Rev. Mukanza who was also full of zeal and charisma for the work of the Lord. He was a youth well prepared for continuing this work.

Many other young leaders in the church felt the first stirrings of their callings in the youth Bible camps Simon Mukanza initiated in 1982 in the Nyanga district. In general, Simon Mukanza was incontestably a responsible leader, full of initiatives and the ability to bring peace within the CMCo. He was a man of great vision.

Jackson Beleji