



## 44 ❖ Léon Kibende plants a church in Kikwit

The great majority of early Mennonite missions were planted in rural areas. The few established in urban centers were at the periphery. The most important factor was that the Protestant Council of Congo more or less divided the territory and designated a region in which each denomination could extend its evangelism. People lived mostly in rural areas.

Léon Kibende was one of the Mennonite Christians who pushed the envelope of Mennonite territory.

Kibende was born near Mukedi in 1915, went through the primary and Bible school there, and decided to turn to medicine. He went to Sona Bata in the Bas-Congo Province to study nursing. Returning home, he soon found employment as a nurse. At that time, having a good job that paid regularly was a matter for rejoicing. It also qualified him to commit to a Christian marriage appropriate to his social rank. He married Madeleine Ndungo, and they had eight children. He always said his marriage was proof of his Christian morality and his commitment to serve God in righteousness.

Although he was happy with this stable family and professional life, he had a vision of other possibilities. He decided to leave Mukedi and move to the city. Arriving in Kikwit, he realized that the Mennonite missionaries did not have a single representative there. Each Sunday he went to worship with the Baptists. But he saw that

photo—Léon Kibende

eventually large numbers of his fellow Mennonites would establish themselves in cities. They could not depend indefinitely on the Baptists and other Protestant groups. They would need to preserve their identity in the face of other influences. Gradually he developed a plan to give birth to a Mennonite congregation in which he could freely practice the doctrine of nonviolence in which he had been raised.

He started by opening a prayer cell on his own property, with members of his family. Soon others who had left Mukedi joined them. Faced with growing numbers, Kibende spent his own money to have benches made for the little church, giving his companions a lesson in self-reliance.

From 1960 to 1964 there were not many Mennonite Christians in Kikwit. But in the course of 1965, after the Mulele rebellion had hit many villages in the Kwilu region, there was a large rural exodus to the city. The numbers of the little Mennonite community swelled accordingly. It became necessary to acquire land to build a large church.

Once again preaching by example, Léon Kibende bought property for the church with his own money. Today that land houses ten or so schools and the administrative seat of the church for North Bandundu Province.

Thanks to that initiative, the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission came through with funds to help build the church. This first step was the beginning of the significant inroads the Mennonite Church of Congo was able to make in that crossroads city. Léon Kibende's delightful example helped birth other congregations in that city as well as in others, including Kinshasa.

After a laudable life of work both in his profession and in the church, Léon Kibende died in 1971 following a short illness. The Bandundu Province church community holds him in reverent memory.

Vincent Ndandula