



4 ❖ Please send us that lady with the book

Joseph Nsongamadi and Naomi, his wife, graduated from the two-year Bible school at a moment in the early 1920s when the mission's witness was expanding. Ndjoko Punda had been established in 1912 upon the arrival of the first pioneer trio of missionaries. A second mission post had been located shortly thereafter at Kalamba, some 300 kilometers to the south along the Kasai River. In 1921 a third post was opened among the eastern Pende people adjacent to the village of Nyanga. There was immediate concern to make contact with the western Pende across the Loange River.

Although no American missionaries were available at the time to start a major new post, several missionary men planned an exploratory trek across the river. Before leaving, they asked Nsongamadi and Naomi if they would be willing to go with them and, if a good place for a future mission post was found, stay behind as the first missionaries until additional recruits arrived from America.

Nsongamadi and Naomi could have found many legitimate excuses to stay at Ndjoko Punda. They longed to see their own tribal people come to know Jesus as they had; they found teaching on the station exciting; they did not know the language of the Pende people; they would be the only “Jesus people” there; they would be foreigners and strangers far from home. But after prayer, they accepted this as a call from God.

photo—Naomi with her husband, Joseph Nsongamadi

After trekking for days on foot and crossing a wide river in dug-out canoes, they walked still farther until they arrived at a large village called Mukedi. The chief was in charge not only of that village but also of several others in the area. The missionaries sought a hearing with him and explained the purpose of their visit. They said they intended later to place white-skinned missionaries next to his village, but in the meantime, for one year, they were proposing to leave Nsongamadi and Naomi with them.

The chief was not impressed. “Why leave them with us? What will they do here? They are of another tribe. They don’t even speak our language. A school? We’re not interested. There will be no children from my village available.” Grudgingly, however, the chief finally agreed to give them temporary shelter and some food until Nsongamadi could build their own simple shelter out at the edge of the village and Naomi could plant her own gardens. It was amid such uncertainty that the missionary men left them on their own.

A year later, in 1923, a small contingent of American missionaries arrived at Mukedi. They found Nsongamadi and Naomi at their post. Had there been any converts during the year? No, not one, but they had faithfully told the people about Jesus. Did they have a school? Not exactly, but the chief had finally offered to give them a little orphan girl to teach, if they would quit bothering him!

They had faithfully sown seed on what had appeared to be totally sterile ground. The gospel later took root at Mukedi, and in time a large mission post and church were established.

Nsongamadi and Naomi returned with joy to Ndjoko Punda among their own people and quickly merged into the life of the growing Christian community there. He once again became a teacher on the station and a church leader, while she soon demonstrated a great gift for visiting and helping women who were by then coming to the station for medical help or to give birth.

Whenever Naomi made her rounds among the women, she carried her Tshiluba Bible in the crook of her arm. Thumbed and worn, it was a book with which she by then was familiar, one to which she had often turned during that long, difficult year at Mukedi. Mixing readings with her own glowing accounts of the difference Jesus had made in her life, her prayers were warm outpourings of simple conversation with her *Tata Nzambi*, Father God, and always left her sisters at the medical facility with a sense of being cared for and loved.

Then tragedy struck. Nsongamadi had been complaining about pain in his feet as he walked. In time the lesions on his feet were declared to be cancerous. Gradually Naomi's time came to be devoted to the care of her husband on the hospital grounds where he stayed. John and Jeanne Zook, a physician and nurse team, were in charge of the station hospital at that time and became well acquainted with the couple. With limited medication and equipment available to them, they did their best to at least keep the wounds clean and to alleviate pain for this faithful servant of the Lord.

By the time Nsongamadi breathed his last, the Zooks had been transferred to work in a large city hospital in the urban center of Kananga. They soon realized that little was being done for the spiritual comfort and help of the patients. Remembering Naomi back at Djoko, they sent word inviting her to join them in the city. They would see to her board and room and personal expenses. There was endless need and opportunity for her in the halls of the government hospital.

She quickly accepted the invitation and soon became a familiar figure. Even when she was in failing health, Naomi spent her last days in a ministry she loved and at which she excelled, responding to continual requests from up and down the halls: "Please send us that lady with the book."

Jim Bertsche