

60 ❁ I'll spend the night in front of the door

Esther Mbombo wa Tshipongo was a strong and generous woman, whose dedication to the church sometimes made her an object of criticism and conflict. Someone who knew her says, “Her only response was to suppress her tears and devote herself to reconciliation, even if she wasn’t at fault.”

Many people remember Esther Mbombo, who passed away in 2006 at the age of seventy, because she was an influential figure in both the Evangelical Mennonite Church (CEM) and the ecumenical group Church of Christ in Congo (ECC).

She was brought up in a Presbyterian family in East Kasai and married Pierre Tshiamala. Shortly after their marriage they moved to Bujumbura, Burundi, where the first five of their nine children were born. They left Bujumbura in 1962 and moved back to Mbuji Mayi in the newly independent Congo.

In Mbuji Mayi Esther continued to attend a Presbyterian church until 1967, when the couple bought their own property. It happened to be near the first congregation, Sangilayi, of what is now the CEM.

Esther was intrigued by two things about the CEM. First, she had enrolled her children in the CEM secondary school, and she liked the daily worship services at the school. Second, she valued the Bible teachings of Pastor Mathieu Kazadi at the Sangilayi congregation, which she attended sometimes because her former church was far from her new home. She decided to become a member of Sangilayi

and to be baptized according to Anabaptist practice. Esther was baptized, along with those of her children who had attained the age of reason, and she became an active member of the congregation.

Esther immediately joined the choir and amazed people not only with her singing prowess but also with the generosity of her service. She was a woman whose personal circumstances were difficult, but she took on responsibility for welcoming new people in church, often by presenting them with a chicken that she provided. The church authorities quickly gave her responsibility for congregational protocol. For several years Esther Mbombo attended to welcoming and seating people, cleaning the church, and taking care of children during services.

Several years later Esther Mbombo wa Tshipongo founded and directed a woman's chorale. This choir still exists five years after her death. When she was still young, she became president of the women of Sangilayi and then of all the CEM women of East Kasai. A woman of unshakable faith, she did her utmost to devote herself to the cause of women who came to her in time of trouble. In happy or sad developments, she was often the first to respond. She always made it a point to be present at gatherings, whether they were in town or far from town.

She was a fervent evangelist and advocate for Anabaptism. She brought a number of women to the church, including some former Presbyterians who recognized their affinity with Anabaptist teachings, thanks to Esther Mbombo's teaching. She sustained and encouraged the faith of her peers, telling them, "I exhort you, my children, you who have studied more than I, to dedicate yourselves to the service of the Lord, because it could happen, one never knows, that I could leave this place or leave this world."

All of this activity came at the price of some friction in her own household—with her husband, Pierre, his family members, and with other women. Because of the time she dedicated to the Lord's service, her frequent absences and late arrivals at home, some called her stupid or unfaithful. But Esther never conceded. She always said, "God is everything to me."

On one occasion she came home late at night after a mission. Some of her group decided to accompany her, in order to protect her from harassment by her husband. One of these women reports that Pierre had locked the door for the night and refused to talk to his

wife or open the door for her. Esther kindly sent away her defenders, telling them, “If Pierre won’t open up for me, I’ll spend the night in front of the door.”

Whatever worries, criticism, false accusations, and insults her husband, his family, and others subjected her to, Esther stayed firm and persuasive. Her faith radiated throughout the neighborhood, in the church, and in her household. To justify her comings and goings, she would retort to Pierre’s relatives, “I do everything that is needed for the family. I feed you, I educate your children. Beyond everything that I do for the family, I have the duty to work for the Lord as well.” She eventually led her husband to the church.

Esther was an indefatigable mobilizer of women. Her competence in leading women led to her elevation to the rank of vice president of the women of CEM. These new duties once again brought her the approval of the woman and confirmed her as a good Christian. She set herself to evangelizing and exhorting the women of East Kasai, reminding them that she would not be with them forever.

Esther Mbombo was preoccupied by the quest for peace in the heart of the CEM, as it was torn apart by leadership conflicts between Pastor Zacharie Nkumbi and Pastor André Ntumba. She tried in 1993 to reconcile the two. Although she was roughed up by partisans of the former when they invaded the church, Esther didn’t hesitate to forgive her torturers during the reconciliation meetings organized by CEM in 1998 and 2006. She was a partisan of nonviolence and never gave evil for evil, whether in her official duties or her married life.

The authorities of the East Kasai Church of Christ in Congo (ECC) asked her to join and lead the Thousand Voices, an ecumenical chorale that brings together women from all Protestant groups. Her influence was so great that she is still remembered in all large church gatherings.

But Esther’s greatest contribution to the ECC was a lesson of justice and truth, which unfortunately caused her biological brothers and sisters to reject her. One of her brothers was in a leadership conflict with the then-president of the East Kasai ECC which also involved the Presbyterian church. Because of this, her brothers demanded that she leave the Thousand Voices chorale. But she refused, saying, “If we really are Christians, we can never divide ourselves based on tribal differences.”

Esther passed away in 2006. Benjamin Mubenga, president of CEM,¹ recalls how much she is still missed. Noticing that no food had been provided for participants in a recent denominational meeting, he declared, “This lack of food makes me think of Mbombo wa Tshipongo, who never spared the effort to mobilize women to provide food in such a situation.”

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1 See “Benjamin Mubenga’s quest for peace and development” (chapter 73).