



13 ❖ Let's see if Archie is available

In 1930 there were four Mennonite mission posts in place in Congo—Ndjoko Punda, Kalamba, Nyanga, and Mukedi. But to the south between Djoko and Kalamba there was a rapidly growing government center named Tshikapa. At the confluence of two rivers, it was the locus of three powerful forces: the Belgian colonial government, a large Catholic mission, and the administrative headquarters of the Forminière diamond mining operation. Across the years Mennonite Christians had found their way to Tshikapa, looking for employment or training. Mennonite missionary Archie Graber made it his personal goal to establish a fifth mission post there.

Born into a rural Mennonite home near Stryker, Ohio, in 1901, Archie's early education was limited to eight years in a one-room school. A man of restless energy, he moved through an array of jobs, as an apprentice carpenter, a metalworker at Fisher Body in Detroit, a deckhand on a Great Lakes ore freighter, and (briefly) a ranch hand. At age twenty-four he drove a university professor to the West Coast. Over the long miles they got well acquainted. Learning that Archie had dropped out of school after the eighth grade, and sensing his potential, the professor strongly encouraged him to enroll in high school the following fall. He did so and took all the art classes he could. After recommitting his life to the Lord at a Bible conference at Winona Lake, Indiana, he enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

photo—Archie Graber (right) greeting friends

There Archie became aware of the nudging of God's Spirit toward mission service. In the process he also met Evelyn Oyer from Bloomington, Illinois, and discovered that she shared his sense of call. They were married in 1929, applied to Congo Inland Mission, and arrived in Congo in the spring of 1930. They were assigned to Ndjoko Punda, the pioneer post of the mission started just eighteen years earlier.

Archie quickly came to be known for (1) his passion for evangelism, linked with his love for the Africans around him, (2) his disregard for his personal safety in situations of potential danger, (3) his building skills, and (4) the artistic flair that he brought to everything he touched. For instance, at Ndjoko Punda he found a chapel that was no longer large enough for Sunday worship services. He remodeled and enlarged the building with a new exterior wall featuring lovely arched openings on the sides, and he added a bell tower over the entryway. Set among its palm trees, this place of worship was often photographed. He also made a communion table of mahogany buffed to a sheen with an ivory-inset Tshiluba scripture passage around the front edge: "This do in remembrance of me."

Archie had a place in mind for the new mission in Tshikapa. On trips to Tshikapa over the years he sought out a Baluba chief named Kalonda who had traditional rights over a gentle slope of land overlooking the Kasai River, the government offices, the airfield, and the Catholic mission in the distance. He explained to the chief the long-standing hope of the Mennonite mission to one day establish a presence on his land. He said that if that happened, the new mission post would be named Kalonda in the chief's honor. The chief signaled his agreement—indeed, his eagerness—to grant this permission.

In early 1945 the Grabers returned to the States for a furlough, but they were living under a cloud. Evelyn, who was musically gifted, had plunged into the life of the African church, translating hymns into Tshiluba and frequently singing with Congolese students during worship services. But she was not well. Despite all medical intervention, she died in 1946. Archie couldn't think of returning to Congo without her. There followed a time of deep sorrow and a pause in his missionary life.

Meanwhile in Congo, missionaries were making repeated requests for permission to occupy ground at Tshikapa and were being rebuffed on all fronts. It was only after the conclusion of World

War II that the barricades were finally breached. Following the Allied victory, a political upheaval in Belgium threw the ruling Catholic party out of power. The new regime immediately leveled the playing field for Christian missions in Congo, offering generous subsidies for Protestant and Catholic missions alike for medical and educational work that met their standards. Although legally the door was now open, entrenched Belgian personnel in Congo still resisted. It was at that point that an appeal was made in Leopoldville, the capital, via the intervention of the Protestant Council of Congo office of the city.

Though still grieving when he heard this news, Archie packed his bags and returned to Ndjoko Punda, where he immediately went to work directing the construction of a large school building to house a new teacher-training program, which the mission was able to offer because of new government help. As he worked he kept in touch with the missionary field chairman via shortwave radio, repeatedly asking, "Have the papers come yet?"

When they finally arrived, Archie threw a few housekeeping items into his pickup and headed south for Tshikapa. He went straight to Chief Kalonda's village and shared the good news. With long bamboo poles topped with white rags they made their way back and forth across the land, the chief jabbing the poles into the soil here and there, marking the territory. Meanwhile Archie's mind was racing. The chapel will be over there, a clinic to this side, a primary school yonder, missionary residences down there overlooking the river, and a Bible school for the entire mission off to the left. In time, all his dreams came true.

The Africans remember Archie best as a preacher. His grasp of the Tshiluba language was never perfect. The intricate agreement patterns between nouns, verbs, and adjectives, so typical of Bantu languages, sometimes escaped him. But once he was on the platform and launched into his message, he was a powerful communicator. He spent little time behind the pulpit but instead roamed the platform. Sometimes he would illustrate his message by sketching scenes with colored chalk on a small blackboard. His love for the people before him registered clearly with them. Many Africans across the years responded to his passionate appeals to place their faith and trust in Jesus. It was for a good reason that in his first term at Ndjoko Punda the Africans named him Muambi Lutonga, the young preacher.

Among the single missionary women on the mission team was Irma Beitler from Berne, Indiana, a competent nurse with a quick smile and upbeat personality. During lonely evenings on the compound in the second phase of his missionary career, Archie found himself wondering if she might consider a proposal of marriage. Shyly communicating his secret hopes, he was delighted to discover that he was not rebuffed. They were married in the spring of 1951. Irma was his constant companion through the tumultuous years that were to follow.

The next jobs Archie took on were two projects related to education. A growing team had to make arrangements to educate missionary children. The mission secured a parcel of land in Leopoldville and raised funds to build a hostel. The committee asked whether Archie was available. Challenged by the opportunity, he accepted. In time a lovely two-story building rose among the tropical trees and flowering shrubs of the plot, a home away from home for dozens of missionary kids through their primary and high school years.

Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (as Congo Inland Mission is now called) decided to participate with other missions in establishing a pastor training program in the capital. This enormous building project included office space, classrooms, dorms for students, a chapel, storage, and more. One of the missions offered a builder, and the project began. But progress was slow, work teams were inefficient, and materials were not always at hand when needed. The original deadline for moving in would not be met. In the midst of mounting dissatisfaction, someone asked if that Mennonite builder was available. Archie didn't need a second invitation. Organizing work teams and setting daily goals for them to finish, he named his own date for completion. Suddenly buildings started to rise, and participating missions began to plan the arrival of their students. Celebration abounded.

But nothing would test Archie's visionary leadership like the call that came in late 1960 to come to the aid of refugees fleeing the post-independence tribal wars.¹

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¹ Archie's story is continued in Part III. See "Feeding the refugees of South Kasai" (chapter 39).