



50 ❖ No place to hang on up there

It was a meeting of the administrative council of the Mennonite Church of Congo at the Nyanga mission post in the early 1970s. The council consisted primarily of African delegates, with just a few missionaries present, reflecting the new “fusion” agreement in which the mission had formally turned over administrative authority to the Congolese church.

During the previous day the Missionary Aviation Fellowship plane and pilot based at Nyanga had been in the air, bringing in delegates from isolated rural strips for the meeting. Despite carefully laid plans, however, two delegates remained to be picked up.

Chairman David Ngongo¹ noted their absence. A short flight was planned to pick them up as soon as the morning dry season fog lifted. He called the opening session to order, saying that they would get on with preliminary business items.

As was his custom, he invited the assembled delegates to join him in an opening prayer. First invoking God’s presence, guidance, and wisdom for all that lay ahead of them, he then focused on the impending flight. In the beautiful, direct simplicity of African prayer, he said: “And now, *Tata Nzambi* (Father God), we ask for your protection and help for the one flight that remains. You know how it is when we get up high in the air in that little *nyunyu* (bird). There just

photo—David Ngongo (left) in discussion with Sosthène Mayambi
1 See “David Ngongo: From houseboy to great leader” (chapter 35).

isn't any place to hang on to. Will you please just keep your hands under its wings. Thank you, *Tata Nzambi*. Amen.”

A missionary delegate at the end of the table had a moment of secret amusement as he wondered how Pastor Ngongo might have phrased his prayer, had he had the benefit of a course in high school physics and some concept of how aerodynamics work in the flight of a plane.

Barely into the first agenda item, the council members heard the pilot at the nearby hangar going through his pre-flight warm-up routine. They heard the roar of full power being applied for takeoff. Then, after a long moment, there was sudden silence. Members of the council exchanged puzzled looks while outside an MCC volunteer jumped on his Honda motorbike and raced out to the airstrip to see what had happened.

He found the plane on the ground at the far end of the strip, less than 100 feet from the surrounding scrub brush. Just as the pilot had lifted off, he suddenly lost all power. Thanks to the timing and the extra length of the Nyanga strip, he was able to dead-stick the plane safely back to earth and brake to a halt before he arrived at the end of the strip.

The plane was quickly pushed back to the hangar, where the pilot inspected the fuel system. He was puzzled because a new motor had been installed in the plane less than a month before. He soon discovered that a little cog in the fuel pump had lost a chip, which totally blocked fuel flow.

Had that blockage occurred at any point during the flights of the previous day or the flight planned that morning, the plane would have crashed in the Congo scrub brush, its occupants dead or injured.

That afternoon the report came to the council in session. In an instant reflex, Pastor Ngongo called a halt to council proceedings and again called on the members to join him in prayer. Once again it was a short, clear prayer. “*Tata Nzambi*, we praise you, we thank you for answering our prayer we prayed this morning. Thank you, thank you for keeping your hands under the wings of that little *nyunyu*.”

This time at the end of the table a chastened missionary voiced a quiet, fervent amen.

Jim Bertsche