



35 ❖ David Ngongo: From houseboy to great leader

We do not know Ngongo's exact birth date, and what he knew about his age he must have learned from his adoptive parents. In those days, in many cases the age of children was set in reference to periods of circumcision, which was performed in group ceremonies at adolescence. In any case, he was probably born around the turn of the century.

Ngongo, who later became David, benefitted from the proximity of his village to the Nyanga station, where he met American missionaries and was hired as a houseboy, or domestic servant. In that era it was considered a privilege for a black person to be near the whites. Many blacks changed their status, passing from indigenous ways to modern, "evolved" ways, because they worked for white people. The young man advanced from gardener to cook.

In that time, getting even two or three years of elementary studies was not easy and allowed one to rise to the social rank of a dignitary. The young Ngongo did not stop there. He spent several years in biblical training, this time at Ndjoko Punda.

After that, David Ngongo joined the leadership and was assigned as a teacher-evangelist in charge of the Pitshi and Ngulungu villages. His work and great service to the church were recognized, and he

was raised to the rank of pastor. Today the transition from gardener or cook to pastor would not be easy.

When the country gained its independence in 1960, many things happened simultaneously on political and religious fronts. It was not a peaceful year either for foreigners or for the Congolese. The jubilant Congolese insisted on controlling everything, and foreigners had to leave the country. The missionaries were not spared. They departed suddenly, leaving all their property behind. Feeling unprepared,¹ the Congolese assumed leadership of the church. All of this happened in the context of the trouble that erupted in Kasai between the Baluba and the Lulua. How were the new leaders to deal with the tribal pressures, which affected the political life of the country as well as the life of the church? How could they preserve the unity of the church in this moment when emotions and tribal passions seemed to overtake spirituality?

God raised up from this chaos men capable of carrying on the work that the white Mennonites had begun. Pastor David Ngongo was one of those through whom God showed the power of his hand. He emerged as a peaceful shepherd. In the face of the killings that resulted from the tribal wars between the Baluba and their Lulua brothers, he preached church unity every day. Supported by the Holy Scriptures, he preserved the essential foundation of Mennonite doctrine: nonviolence and hope in Jesus Christ, Savior of the world. Many Christians responded to his call.

1 In the early years there were two parallel structures—the mission and missionaries alongside the church and its leaders. Both groups had officers and annual meetings. In the late 1950s serious dialogue began between mission and church leaders envisioning “integration,” which would do away with parallel structures and create a single entity. These discussions accelerated as change swept across colonial Africa.

Following extensive conversations at the eight mission stations, a mission board delegation met with Congolese leaders from all the stations in Ndjoko Punda in February 1960. At this historic meeting all agreed that mission stations would eventually be turned over entirely to Congolese staff. But the Congolese leaders asked that certain major responsibilities remain with the missionaries for the present, while Congolese apprenticed in all areas of work. National independence and the accompanying turmoil followed just four months later.

For more on the Ndjoko Punda meeting see Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace* (Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, 1998), 43–44.—Ed.

At the end of this period of tribulation the missionaries would return and find a church still alive, thanks to the efforts of this man and others with little formal training but whom the Lord enlightened for the edification of his work. This work would be amplified in other areas such as teaching, medical training, and the development of the deaconate.

Pastor David's courage and sense of responsibility earned him the leadership of the denomination over more than a decade, 1960–71. During his term at the head of the community, he overcame conflicts between generations and integrated the young class of elites into the administration of the community.

But this man of God had experienced difficult times in his family life. His first wife, Rebecca, bore twelve children and passed away after the last, difficult birth. His second wife, Marie-Jeanne, died childless, also before her husband. Like Job, Pastor David Ngongo witnessed the deaths of several of his adult children before him. But all this loss did not affect in any way his attachment to his God and his church. He died at an advanced age in Tshikapa Dibumba in 2005, happy to have served God.²

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² See “Do what you know you should do” (chapter 49) and “No place to hang on up there” (chapter 50).