

CONGO MEMORIES

by Rudy Martens

Background

My parents, Cornelius John Martens and Elizabeth Sudermann Martens had emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1924 to escape the horrors of the Russian Revolution. They had been colonists in South Russia, the Molotschna since the time of Empress Catherine the Great. Their forebears had come from the Vistula Region in Prussia in the latter seventeen hundreds and early eighteen hundreds. Before the revolution they had been prosperous farmers contributing substantially to the bounties of the “breadbasket of Europe”. At the time of their emigration they had been reduced to poverty and on their arrival in Canada they possessed a wicker trunk and seven dollars. They came to the rural community of Wallenstein, Ontario where an Old Order Mennonite family took them in and gave them a start in that new land. My parents did not remain long with the Baumans. Some of my father*s relatives had found work in the village of Tavistock so they were drawn to that community. I was born there in 1926. A sizable Amish Mennonite community existed in the surrounding farms. My parents did not affiliate with them because of dress and other differences. They were members of the George Street Mennonite Church in Waterloo which had a branch in New Hamburg, Ontario nine miles away where we attended several times a year. The little group there was made up of Russian immigrants, some affiliated with the General Conference and some with the Mennonite Brethren.

When I was 17 we moved from Tavistock to New Hamburg where my father continued in the shoe and harness repair business. There was a sizable group of young people. I felt much more at home in that group than I had ever felt in Tavistock. The townspeople too were more congenial. Mennonites were better accepted than in the other town. Amish Mennonites also made up a significant element there. Of course Mennonites played an important role from the beginning of the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo, having come from Pennsylvania over 100 years previously.

I participated in the worship and the youth activities, Sunday School, choir, recreation, fellowship. In Kitchener at that time right after the war they were holding

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“Firesides” for the city youth of all denominations. These were held following the Sunday evening services in their own local churches. Speakers challenged the youth to dedicate themselves to the Lord and His kingdom’s work. I had given my heart to Christ a year or so earlier and was attending Waterloo College, a Lutheran School. While in college I was taking catechism classes under Bishop Jacob H. Janzen and was baptized the following Pentecost Sunday. Since the George St. Church did not have Sunday evening services I often went over to Sterling Avenue Mennonite Church where Andrew Shelly was the pastor.

On Sunday evenings after church time a group of the New Hamburg youth attended a Fireside Rally for young people of the Kitchener -Waterloo area. The speaker was a missionary. I felt challenged but told myself that I was going to be a teacher and suggested to the Lord that He speak very definitely to the heart of one of my friends whom I considered to be much better Christians than I and much more fit to be a missionary. I was concerned for the mission outreach of the church but considered myself to be immature in the faith. This happened several times over the next few Sunday evenings. I always found a friend who was the perfect fit for the job. One evening there was a speaker on furlough from Japan. This was soon after the surrender and the country was ripe for the Gospel. I prayed that the Lord would speak very clearly to a certain friend sitting there on the bench with the group. It was as though a light went on inside of me. And the Lord spoke to me, “I don’t want him, I want you.” Wow. What a shock. At that moment the direction of my life changed dramatically. I would still be a teacher but not in Canada nor in a secular school.

During my final year in college I applied to the General Conference Mission Board. They suggested that I enroll in Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Chicago in a B.D. course with emphasis on missions. Dr. S. F. Pannabecker, a former missionary to China, gave valuable counsel. Where to go? They needed workers in many fields. Since I had taken several years of French in high school, a country where that language was used would be a good fit. The mission board was secunding workers to the Congo Inland Mission, a cooperative Mennonite mission society. So I began making inquiries there.

My practical work assignment sent me to the Mennonite Bible Mission located on the west side of Chicago where I worked in a variety of ways under the

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supervision of Rev. John T. Neufeld the pastor. His daughter Elvina was graduating from the University of Illinois Medical School. It was after serving in that congregation for some time that I became acquainted with her. I realized that she was hoping to be a missionary but with preferences for India because she had an uncle and an aunt who had served there. Medical missions was her field. Previous to becoming acquainted with Elvina, I had been corresponding with a young lady from my home congregation but found out that mission work was out of the question for her. In the course of time Elvina and I shared our interest in foreign mission service and our relationship became more serious.

The Congo Inland Mission office was on the campus of the seminary at that time. Rev. C. E. Rediger was then the executive secretary. The decision was made that I would go to the Congo. I really didn't want to go alone. To shorten the story Elvina gave up her interest in going to India and accepted my proposal to be my wife and to go with me to the Congo. We were married in December of 1951.

The Belgian government asked of missionaries who would be involved in subsidized schools to be certified in their home countries. So after graduation from seminary I enrolled in education courses in Bluffton College and received the required credentials.

CONGO I

Elvina and I set sail for Belgium in July 1952. She would take French language and tropical medicine courses and I the French and colonial courses. After a year in Belgium we flew to the Congo. We were to take up the work at Charlesville or Djoko Punda where I was to direct and teach in the teachers' training school and Elvina to start a hospital. My school was called *École d'Apprentissage Pédagogique*, training teachers in the lower grades of primary school. The students came to us after six years of primary school and it was a two year course. The instruction was done in French but the religion course was given in Tshiluba. I also participated in the total life of the mission: teaching some courses in the evangelists school, being part of the church council, preaching some, going out into the villages with groups for services of evangelism, performing marriages, serving communion, leading the choir, etc.

The early years were spent in learning the Tshiluba language, getting to know the teacher training work, the people and the church in the area. The decisions

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as to policy and strategy were made by the home board in consultation with missionary officers on the field. Africans were already showing signs of leadership abilities. Many were indispensable for the ongoing work of the mission. There were assistant pastors in all of the churches, evangelists in all of the outposts and directors and teachers in the grade schools. Missionaries still supervised the evangelists, preached occasionally on Sunday morning, helped screen the baptismal candidates, helped baptize, helped serve the Lord's Supper and in general had the last word in many issues. Religious and other matters were dealt with in decisions made by the church council. The worship services were for the most part carried on in a distinctively African style although most of the hymns were translated from the English and with American tunes. Our evangelistic missionaries doubled as overseers of the outstation primary schools. In those years the teachers were paid by missionaries since it was deemed that Africans were unable to faithfully handle large sums of money. It was a burdensome task that no missionary was fond of doing. The keeping of financial accounts was taught in the higher schools.

For our second term we were asked to work at Mukedi mission which was in another province and a different language area. The people were of the Apende tribe and spoke the Gipende language, not entirely new with some similarities to Tshiluba but took some study and practice to be able to understand and use. Things were getting tense at Mukedi. We could sense the undercurrents of political unrest. As the time for independence was getting closer in 1959, people were apprehensive of what to do. We tried to calm them and tell them to participate in the upcoming elections. I don't remember the candidates but there was a party which was trying to boycott the elections. We told the people that in a democratic country people must exercise their right to vote. This was not welcome to the boycotting party. One morning we found a note attached to a mission storehouse door threatening to burn down our station if the missionaries did not refrain from giving political advice to the people. The party reasoned that if no one voted they would automatically get in by default.

With the mounting unrest throughout the whole country our mission leaders called for a delegation of mission board members and executives to come to the Congo to see the situation for themselves and to give direction for the unstable times which certainly loomed ahead.

In the summer of 1959 the annual missionary conference with some leading Congolese present, made some sweeping suggestions for implementation in the 1960 conference. They saw that ready or not, the local people would need to participate more fully on all levels, giving leadership and control. They sensed that the days of missionary leadership were numbered. So at that Kalonda conference an integrating

meeting was set for February of 1960 to be held at Charlesville or Djoko Punda urging a delegation from the board in America to be present to guide in the decision making. The consultation came about in spite of lurking dangers. Elvina and I had lived and worked at Charlesville and had become familiar with the language. Now working in another language area I was asked to be present because Congolese would be coming who did not understand each other*s language. All areas of our mission were to be represented. For details of the proceedings I recommend James Bertsche*s book. *A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace*. Board members from America were present. Many important decisions were taken at that meeting. Two events stand out for me.

The first event was when the question arose as to the name of this to be integrated church. The Congolese church was already a member of the Congo Protestant Council which was urging all members to take the name of Church of Christ in the Congo. Missionaries had not been stressing Mennonite doctrine and distinctives in particular, out of hope for unity in the new church. We were hoping not to perpetuate denominationalism. Their desire was that the church there would blend in and participate fully in the general Protestant community and to present a united stance toward the Roman Catholic Church which was much larger and more powerful, which the Belgians had subsidized and favored for many years in all aspects of their mission program both religious and secular. The educational and medical work of the Protestant missions were subsidized by the colonial government but not the strictly religious aspects like Bible schools, evangelism, and church planting. These were still supported by the Board in America.

Our churches were to be Protestant with some minor differences such as mode of baptism, church polity. We had heard reports that some other groups were choosing denominational names such as Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, etc. Now denominational loyalties were raising their heads. To Congolese roots are very important, what is your lineage? The tribe, the clan all had their oral histories recounted many times at village campfires, passed on from one generation to another. Now the delegation raised the question, “What do you want your church to be called?” Bertsche explains it well on page 34. “We are children of the Mennonite churches in America, of the Mennonite mission board of the missionaries most of whom have been Mennonites. So we follow in the footsteps of our spiritual parents

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and we want to take the Mennonite name.”

So they decided upon the name, Evangelical Mennonite Church. They knew little about Mennonite doctrine, history and church life. In view of the name choice much more needed to be done to bring them more firmly into the Anabaptist fold. But I was personally pleased, being biased in that direction. They had chosen to follow Christ, joining in our distinctive way of joining faith and life since the time of the Reformation, a long history of seeking to be biblically faithful to our Lord. Now these distinctive are taking root in African soil. These efforts had to wait for the new political realities to work themselves out in the not too distant future. After the coming of independence more emphasis was placed on Mennonite doctrine, Christ-like living, evangelism and peacemaking.

The second incident that stands out from the Charlesville integration consultation arose from the Board*s desire to help the African church to organize its life and its ongoing relationship with the Board. How shall it be done? They did not want to give direction in a paternalistic way, imposing things from America. The delegation said that they were suggesting a “skeleton” of what the relationship might look like with the local people to fill in the details, fleshing it out so to speak. The missionary who translated this idea, literally used the "bones" for skeleton because there is no Tshiluba word for skeleton. The reaction of the Congolese was astonishing to the delegation and to many missionaries present. “We don*t want bones, you have come to give us bare bones.” And they indignantly marched out of the meeting. There was consternation at this outcome of the meeting. What had happened? I don*t know whether anyone else caught it. But I did. To an American to offer somebody bones is an insult. You might throw bones to a dog but not to a friend. Bones are something you throw away. Meat is what is wanted. On the spur of the moment the translator chose the wrong concept. The idea of a framework of a house or some other familiar African idea would have been better. I might have done the same thing, I caught it, but I didn*t feel confident to point out the problem at the time. I spoke about it personally to some of our mission leaders yet that evening. In the morning the misunderstanding was cleared up and the consultation could continue. An integrating annual conference was to be convened in July of 1960 in which these plans would be ratified and implemented but the events of that summer precluded any further action at that time. They were implemented several years later. Now, forty some years later the church is totally run by Congolese without any foreign participation.

INDEPENDENCE AND EVACUATION

We had just moved from Mukedi mission to Nyanga mission ten days

before independence day where I was to teach in the secondary school and Elvina was to head up the medical work. I remember going to the village where there was drumming, dancing and celebration. Things seemed to be unfolding as expected. By radio we were keeping in touch with other missions for news of developments in the rest of the country. The following Sunday at nine in the morning our leaders sent the word for us to evacuate that afternoon at three since uprisings were happening in several places. Of importance was passports, food, gasoline for the vehicles and some clothing. Many things had to be tended to in that six hour span. Elvina had to turn over keys and responsibilities at the medical department. I had to quickly pack things for the family .We had three young children at the time. The youngest was eleven months old. So at three that afternoon we boarded our vehicles heading down that dusty road away from our homes and our work for the country of Angola to the south of us. People were in vans, food and gasoline in accompanying trucks. We soon realized that we still had with us the keys to several of the buildings. There was no time to go back. Along the way the Lord provided a trusted worker whom we could give the keys to see that they got into the right hands. He was headed toward Nyanga on his bicycle. Thank God.

Another important concern was, would it be too dark for us to cross the ferry over the Loange River? Would we have to wait spending valuable time at the river? There would be no crossing after dark. Thank God we made it just before dark. The ferrymen took us across. So we were able to continue our way to Kandala mission. We arrived there and met our group from Mukedi. The missionaries from Kandala also joined the caravan of vehicles toward the Angolan frontier. None of us had visas for Angola, it being a Portuguese colony. Would they let us in? We had some tense moments at the border but then they allowed us to pass, and then we were out of the Congo, what a relief. We continued our travels to the city of Malanje where there was a Methodist mission which took us in for a few days. We had hoped that we might be able to wait there to see what would happen in Congo and whether there might be a possibility for us to go back if conditions improved. But the Portuguese authorities were anxious to have us move on. They were sensing some strains there too. Passage was arranged for us to return to our home countries. Since I was a Canadian citizen at that time, we traveled by train to Loanda, the capital. Then we flew to Accra, Ghana and from there to England. From England we took the liner

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Empress of France to Canada. United States citizens took a different route through Paris to New York. Our family continued on to New Hamburg, Ontario where my parents were living.

Interim in America

Things did not calm down in the Congo for some time. The Comins Mennonite Church in Comins, Michigan had recently experienced a split. The Central District Conference, to which the Comins Church belonged, asked us to take the pastoral leadership to try to heal the trauma. So we agreed and worked there for five years. Then in 1965 I was called to the Eicher Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Wayland, Iowa which had also experienced a split. There we served another five years. Both congregations were very congenial and we enjoyed serving there. But Congo still had a very large place on our minds and hearts. The need for missionaries was great, especially in the areas of medicine and theological training where Elvina and I had some abilities. In 1970 we felt the Lord calling us to return to the Congo. My health had improved and conditions were favorable to return.

CONGO II

This time the Bible Institute at Kalonda Tshikapa, training school for mid-level pastors and church leaders, needed a director-teacher. Elvina was to be involved in their small maternity hospital and dispensary. Our children were in grades six to eleven enrolled in the American School of Kinshasa, boarding at our mission-run hostel. The course in the Bible Institute took two years, later increased to three, preparing the graduates to become pastors. Many are still serving faithfully and are the majority of village and mission leaders.

When we went back the country was no longer a colony of Belgium. Belgians were still present but the Congolese were in control. Missionaries were still welcome, they were still needed to help the church to mature in its faith and life. All the churches now had indigenous pastors, evangelists and teachers. Its administration and organization were in Congolese hands. Missionaries were asked to participate in all areas and were asked to be on committees but always under the oversight of local people. In the Bible Institute the shift was gradually from missionary personnel to Congolese.

In the early seventies there were Congolese nurses but no doctors. As time went on more and more doctors were trained in the university medical schools. Some Mennonite doctors were graduated. Nurses* training schools were started or expanded under the aegis of the church. A cooperative nurses training school with

the neighboring Presbyterian one graduated students with equivalent expertise to North American nurses. Congolese nurses were in charge of outlying dispensaries and even hospitals, some were trained to do minor surgery. Elvina was asked by the church to oversee this large work necessitating many flights on the Missionary Aviation Fellowship (MAF) plane piloted by several expatriate Mennonites. MAF served other churches as well employing Congolese mechanics and maintenance persons.

Since the decision by the Congolese leaders in 1961 to adopt the Mennonite name not much had been done although several young men and families had been sent to study in our Mennonite schools in America including some at the seminary. But it seemed to me that the effort to teach our distinctive Mennonite doctrines and practices got a fresh impetus in the seventies. I distinctly recall a very effective visit by Marlin Miller from the seminary (AMBS) with his teaching on early Anabaptist history. Missionaries emphasized the New Testament basis for the teachings of the Mennonite Church. J.C. Wenger's pamphlets on "Who are the Mennonites?" and others were translated into our languages. Our peace stance was included. Mennonite Central Committee also contributed significantly in this. PAX men doing their alternative service and the Teachers Abroad Program teachers in secondary schools did valuable service. An agricultural program to train village farmers in raising small livestock and in fostering crops was largely manned by PAX men. Some of these young people later came back to participate in the larger Mennonite mission program. As a whole, with some exceptions, these young people made a definite positive contribution to Congo church life.

Coming back in the seventies changes were evident. In the schools the daily gathering of the students and teachers at the national flag to sing the national anthem, salute the flag and shout the slogans praising their president caught one's attention. Our Bible Institute students also had their flag raising and singing of the national anthem but did not participate in the slogans. As time went on these became less. But it gave the students the notion that this is now our country and no longer a Belgian colony. The infrastructure of the land deteriorated. Roads became more impassible. Industries declined due to poor roads. In spite of this the church proliferated and flourished. Church membership multiplied. People were taking their faith wherever they traveled or settled seeking better living conditions. In the latter half of the

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seventies the Bible Institute installed a Congolese director with missionaries in his staff.

Theological Education by Extension

A Theological Education by Extension program was initiated mainly for the benefit of workers and lay people who wanted a grounding in Bible, prayer and related subjects. I helped start this program. It was very popular. It brought knowledge to the people in their villages through programmed texts which we printed in the native languages instead of in French. In outlying areas the students would continue in their daily vocations and still study at home, meeting once a week locally to be encouraged in what they had just learned. Sorry to say that the church has not continued on with the program partly for reasons of lack of funds.

The Bible Institute is still operative. It continues to train the majority of village pastors and their wives. The spouses are trained in work with women and children plus sewing, cooking, and nutrition. Some wives who had the equivalent qualifications as the men take the courses with the men. There is also an advanced theological studies program in which I was never involved, to participate in the pastoral studies.

Numerically the church grew by leaps and bounds. Mennonites are present now not only in our traditionally mission areas but in many distant cities including the capital city of Kinshasa where there are approximately twenty churches. They have carried the Good New of Christ into many areas of the Congo, including an emphasis on the peace teachings of the New Testament.

Growth of the Medical Work

When we first came to Kalonda the medical work consisted of a dispensary and a maternity hospital with about 15 beds and about 100 births a month. The idea was that up to that time the large proportion of patient care would be given at the state hospital about seven kilometers away which our missionary doctors had been running. It became evident in the latter sixties that the state officials did not appreciate the service that we were giving and the many people that were helped back to health, and they began to charge exorbitant rent for the use of the facilities. So the church decided to pull out of that arrangement and put their efforts into developing health and hospital care at the mission. Eventually a hospital with operating room and wards were built there. The dispensary was enlarged. Elvina was instrumental in the advances although in time other missionary and Congolese doctors joined the staff there and at other missions where there were hospitals. Our church cooperated with the neighboring Presbyterian mission to run an upper level

nurse*s training school. We also worked with them in other areas such as publishing, Bible translation, hymn production and fraternal visits. A part of our church uses the same language as they do.

Headquarters of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of the Congo

Our Tshikapa - Kalonda mission began in the early fifties. There were approximately fifty thousand population in the surrounding area so it also became a center for our mission activity. It was decided to build our church headquarters there where the administrators and staff live. The city too had offices for buying and selling of diamonds.

A Medical Incident

Before independence very few Muslims were found in the Congo. The Belgian government was not favorable to them. But since independence more and more people have been converted to Islam, with a small mosque in the city of Tshikapa. Our hospital served everyone who came for help. On one occasion a Muslim man was brought to the hospital with very complicated strangled intestines, both the large and the small intestines were involved. Our Congolese doctor began treating the patient but found it too difficult so Elvina was called in. The prognosis was grim. It was impossible to finish the procedure due to the condition of the patient. One end of the intestine was brought out and temporarily closed with an intestinal forceps. The patient died and his relatives took the body home immediately. In their rush the attending nurse did not have a chance to remove the forceps. When the relatives found the forceps they came to the conclusion that our doctors had killed their co-religionist with it. They reported their findings to the local police who then conducted an investigation. They had the evidence, the forceps. Elvina was called to appear before the investigating official who grilled her very aggressively. I went along as moral support for her. She explained the situation, that this was the accented procedure. She was finally cleared. But we felt that possibly the case was brought before the authorities because of a lack of trust on the part of Muslims toward our medical staff.

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The Body on the Air Strip

Another event that comes to mind is when I was fined for driving our pick-up truck on the Tshikapa air strip. It happened like this: One of our grade school teachers had died in an outlying village. I was asked to go fetch his body so that the M.A.F plane could take him back to his home village for proper burial. One of the officers at our Tshikapa headquarters was to arrange with the pilot to pick him up at the airport where all sorts of planes came in and out. I was told to have the body at the airport at a specific time when our plane would come in. He did land and almost immediately started taxiing making as though he were planning to take off into the air again. What to do ? I drove onto the airfield and followed the speeding plane honking the horn. Finally the pilot saw us chasing after him and stopped. I explained my bizarre behavior. He hadn't gotten the word. After some discussion the pilot agreed to take the body and I drove off the field. I was fined the equivalent of sixty dollars by the airport authorities. So even if radio communication was a very useful tool in keeping messages flowing, mix-ups did occur.

Phenomenal Church Growth

In terms of membership, the Congo Mennonite Church is now only second in numbers to North America. There has been tremendous growth over the last less than one hundred years. The church still has a long way to go spiritually. It has been very difficult to disciple so many so quickly with the limited resources that it possesses. Developing a Christ-like faith and life in every believer is a very important challenge. Animism, a religion of the worship of spirits, good and bad, including the spirits of the ancestors has been a world view from which most have come and still somewhat influences many immature Christians. The challenge for Congolese Christians is to make the shift to understanding and living in Christ and His Spirit, to be conquerors over the lesser spirits

Christ-like leaders and members have emerged over the years. Peace with God resulting in a peace with others is a concept that the Congo Mennonite Church is finding ways to put into practice.

Economically our Congolese sister and brothers are having a difficult time. Daily survival is a struggle. But these difficulties have not dampened their faith and their determination to infectiously spread the Good News of Jesus Christ both near at hand and to more distant places. They have an enthusiasm which puts us to shame. Our prayer is for them to expand and become a link in winning the whole of Africa for Christ and His Kingdom.

Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace*, Fairway Press, 1998.

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