



1 ❖ A Mennonite evangelist tied to a corpse

In January 1912 a pioneering trio of missionaries rode a boat up the Kasai River in central Congo as far as they could go.¹ Arriving at Wissman Falls, they disembarked, pitched tents, and began the arduous labor of establishing the first mission post of Congo Inland Mission. Drawing on the name of the local area, they called the post Ndjoko Punda.

The only Protestant missionaries for miles in any direction, Lawrence and Rose Boehning Haigh and Alvin Stevenson were starting from scratch. Everything needed to be done at once: arranging for help from the nearby villages, tackling the local Tshiluba language, learning to barter for food, and building the first temporary shelters and a small place of worship out of thatch and sticks.

The missionaries knew they would succeed in planting the church of Christ in the area only if they could win and train Africans to become the messengers of the good news to their own people. An early strategy was to open simple schools to which they invited anyone interested in learning how to read and write in their own language. The first students were mostly boys in their early teens

photo—David Lupera, one of the early primary school students described in this story

¹ This story is preserved as it was told to Jim Bertsche by Pastor David. Unfortunately, the names of the evangelist and his wife have been lost in the transmission of the story.

and young men in their twenties. Some soon tired of the strange activities and drifted back to village life, but others were captivated by the marvel of learning how to read and write. And then they began to hear a strange new story about someone called Yesu, the very son of the creating God who had come to give his life through his own sacrificial death on a cross for them.

It took about three years before the missionaries felt some African believers were ready to be baptized. They then opened a simple Bible school for these students, with concentrated study of scriptures in Tshiluba provided by the large Presbyterian mission that was their neighbor to the east.

The Mennonite missionaries would take the Bible school students with them into the surrounding villages, where they held open-air meetings. In this way the students learned how to preach and to hold conversations with individuals who wanted to hear more.

In the late 1920s the missionaries began to challenge the Bible school students to become resident evangelists in outlying villages. By this time the schools were attracting a few village girls who, as they came to know Jesus as their Savior, also came to know the young men and became their wives.

By the early 1930s a number of couples resided in villages around the station, but there was a growing sense of urgency to place at least one couple among a large tribe to the west, known as the Bashilele or Lele. A proud ironworking tribe, the Lele were excellent hunters and had consistently resisted all the missionaries' efforts to get a hearing for the gospel. Meanwhile, a devoted young couple had finished the station Bible school and declared their desire to be "Jesus people" in a village. Impressed by their warmth and devotion, the missionaries asked them to be the first couple to be placed among the Lele people. "With the Lord's help, we are willing," they said.

A village was chosen, and a missionary and the young couple sought out the local chief. "Why would we want a mission teacher?" the chief asked. "What does he know that we need to know? Could we hunt better if he lived here? Could we smelt iron better than our forefathers if he talked about Yesu among us?"

Finally the village leaders gave grudging agreement, on condition that the couple would establish their home at the very edge of the village. No help would be given them to build their first thatch-

and-stick shelter or to put out their first fields. Nor would the villagers send any children to the school the couple talked about starting.

Slowly the couple settled in. They tied a piece of scrap iron to a tree and beat it each morning to call children to school. But the chief was as good as his word: they received no help, and no children came to school. Although they often sat with the chief and his elders, explaining what they hoped to do, they were met with stony indifference. On Sunday the couple always came to the open area in the middle of the village, called people to gather, sang songs, and then told them stories about Yesu.

One day the village chief summoned the evangelist and posed a series of questions. The conversation went something like this:

“You keep telling us about someone named Yesu.”

“That’s true.”

“You tell us that he raised people from the dead while he was on earth.”

“He did.”

“You say that he himself died and then three days later rose from his grave.”

“He did.”

“Well, we want to try this Yesu business out here in our village today. Do you see that corpse over there? That man died this past night. Today at sundown, we will bury him as is our custom. But since your Yesu can raise dead people back to life, we want to see that happen before our eyes today. We’re going to tie you to that corpse. Then you can ask your Yesu to bring him back to life. If he does, we will rejoice and we’ll believe in your Yesu. But if not, we’ll put you in the grave along with him.”

They tied the evangelist on top of the dead body. The chief and his elders then sat under nearby palm trees, watching. Occasionally someone would call out to the evangelist, asking whether there was any sign of life in the dead man under him.

Time passed and sundown approached. Just then a boy came running, all out of breath. The Belgian administrator for the area was in the next village and was coming their way! This prompted an explosion of activity. Someone hurried to the corpse and cut the evangelist free. Soon there was the sound of a vehicle approaching along the nearby road. In the confusion the evangelist slipped away and joined his anxious wife in their little hut at the edge of the village.

Back in the village the colonial official greeted the chief and his elders. “And how are things here? I hear that you now have a mission teacher. How is he?”

“Oh yes. As a matter of fact we were just with him here a moment ago.”

“I do not have time now, but next visit I’ll stay longer,” the official promised.

As he left, the chief and his elders exchanged sly glances and smiles. They were confident that by morning the evangelist and his wife would be gone.

Back in their little shelter the teacher-evangelist and his wife reviewed the experiences of the day. “What now?” they wondered. “If we gather up our few belongings into two bundles and start walking, by daylight we can be nearly halfway back to the mission station. But if we do that, what will we tell the missionaries? What will we tell our fellow Christians? We were sent here to tell these people about Yesu and not a single person has accepted him. And we don’t have a single student for our school.”

After a long silence they prayed together and decided that no matter what lay ahead for them, they had to stay.

Next morning, as the sun came up, the astonished chief and his people heard the familiar sound of the teacher hitting his piece of iron with a stone, summoning the children to school.

In the village a group of boys heard the distant sound of stone on iron. One of them told the others: “We thought that after what our fathers did to the teacher yesterday, they would run away in the night. But there he is, inviting us like always. If they are still here in our village after the way we treated them, they must have something important to tell us, and I’m going to find out what it is.” Following his lead, several other boys joined him.

In time, that boy—David Lupera—became the first ordained minister from the Lele tribe.

Jim Bertsche