

53 ❖ From Catholic altar boy to Mennonite leader

Robert Ngoya was born in 1938 in a “hybrid” family—that is, his father was Lunda and his mother was Sonde. His origins as well as his convictions would serve the cause of peace.

Robert was a Catholic altar boy and sacristan during primary school. It was there that he felt his first nudgings to become a pastor, when he began to identify with the story of Moses who went to liberate the Israelites in Egypt.

In fourth grade he switched to the Mennonite mission school at Kahemba and continued in Mennonite schools. He was still in his secondary school studies when he was called to go to the aid of the children of Shamwana, in Feshi Territory of Bandundu Province, who had no teachers at all, either primary or secondary. This was the beginning of his career as an educator, and it marked the first of a number of important contributions he would make in the field of Christian education.

Robert Ngoya exhibited many moral and spiritual qualities. Because the local church at Shamwana saw leadership potential in him, he was recommended for what is now Christian University of Kinshasa to pursue theological studies. From 1973 to 1977 he completed his theological formation and received a degree. This active young man worked as a pastor in his spare moments. With several friends he founded the Sanga Mamba congregation in Kinshasa, which has in

turn engendered the congregations Manenga, The Dove, and Selembao.

Coming back to his Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCo) congregation of Shamwana, he functioned as prefect of studies for four years. A dedicated worker, he left behind a semi-permanent school building with three rooms as well as a house for teachers.

In 1981 the administrative council of the CMCo named him assistant director of Christian education, to serve alongside Leona Schrag. This was a significant appointment and not a random one. In his work Rev. Ngoya had shown much interest in religious education. Thus, his selection was dictated by the concerns of the March 1981 national synod of the ecumenical group Church of Christ in Congo. This group vowed to raise the moral standards of the Protestant schools, in light of the failure of the government's attempt to nationalize the schools. Two years later, in 1983, he became director of Christian education, a function he exercised until 1989.

Certain modifications in the constitution of the CMCo gave each ecclesiastical province the possibility of having a vice president. Rev. Ngoya was elected vice president of the CMCo in Bandundu Province. But in 1995 the church felt the need to bring administration closer to the people so it could be more effective. As a result, here and there new church provinces were born within the old boundaries. Kahemba became the seat of the new church province of South Bandundu. This new province was fraught with tribal rivalries among Lunda, Chokwe, Sonde, and Suku. At first this province had been called Kwango, but Rev. Ngoya refused this name, because he said it created a kind of tribal demarcation that was not at all spiritual. The name was connected to the location of a certain cluster of tribes.

Robert Ngoya, a peacemaker, succeeded in administering this entity for nine years. The majority of the other provinces sank under poor leadership and poverty because they were without reliable financial resources. But Ngoya was able to create in his province an institute for Bible teaching to meet the growing demand for pastors in the region. In addition, he introduced the church members to self-reliance through agricultural development.

During his two terms as the representative of South Bandundu, Robert Ngoya had the opportunity to take part in Mennonite World Conference assemblies in India, Guatemala, and Zimbabwe. At the end of his service, however, Pastor Ngoya, like many others, was

abandoned to his sad fate. The denomination does not look after its former leaders. Thanks to good relations with the director of a school in Bandundu, he was given a post as head of the office charged with teacher education.

Besides his considerable contributions to Christian education, certain aspects of his character elicit admiration among the believers for Pastor Ngoya, who is now in his seventies. Married to Odette and a good father to their eight children, he knows how to reconcile his comportment and deeds in the light of God's word. He is sociable and likes to live in utmost simplicity. He is hostile to tribal divisions and knows how to adapt to all environments. He knows how to humble himself and how to forgive as well as ask for forgiveness. He is a conciliator who dislikes violence. In short, he is an exemplary man of God.

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