



33 ❖ I'm a member of the Jesus tribe

The missionaries at Ndjoko Punda soon discovered that the quiet student named Kuamba had unusual musical gifts. One day one of the missionary ladies invited him to join her in the station chapel, where she lifted the lid on the pump organ and laid some sheets of paper before him with straight lines and funny marks meandering over them. She explained that each mark on the sheets indicated a particular key on the organ. Anyone who learned to read the marks could eventually play the organ. Was Kuamba interested? He immediately accepted.

She gave him a few lessons and then permission to go to the chapel at free times to practice. Kuamba took it from there on his own. In time he became the organist for worship services and director of a student choir.

But the trait that most impressed church leaders was his ability to sit with fearful village people, listen quietly, and gently lead them, through scripture, counseling, and prayer, to peace and faith in Jesus. Kuamba was proposed as a pastoral candidate at an annual assembly of Mennonite Church of Congo and was approved for ordination.

For some years he and his wife lived on the station where he taught part time in the local Bible school and served as one of the station pastors. Then one day he was called to the church office. The missionaries and church leaders waiting had a proposal for him.

photo—Charles Kuamba teaching Congolese geography

They were ready to start a new mission at Tshikapa. Archie Graber, the missionary builder¹ was staking out a particular site. But it was even more important to find African pastors who could move into that complex setting and begin planting churches. Of particular interest was a thriving commercial area on the east bank of the Kasai where two major tribes came together, the Lulua and the Baluba. Both spoke essentially the same language, and both, according to tribal legend, stemmed from the same ancestral grandmother. But the Lulua were recognized as the historical occupants of the area. The Baluba had migrated from the southeast, attracted by opportunities for schooling, vocational training, and jobs.

On the surface the two tribes appeared to acknowledge each other as cousins and to live in peace. The Lulua were inclined to be agrarian, content to live in their villages tending their fields and flocks, while the Baluba were eagerly pursuing all options for advancement by education and job training under the Belgians.

Pastor Kuamba was Lulua. But the church leaders asked him to consider planting a church in Tshikapa, on the east bank of the Kasai, where *all* tribes would be welcome, including Baluba migrants. In his quiet, careful manner, he asked for time to discuss the proposal with his wife and, above all, to pray about it.

In his response he first observed that he knew the area well since he had friends and relatives there. “We all know that the challenges there are great, but we also know that the need is even greater. We’ve been praying for years that the Lord would open a door for us. That door is now open. We must act. If you, my brothers, feel God has given me gifts that I can use there, we are willing to go.”

From day one Pastor Kuamba made it clear that he had come to start neither a Lulua church nor a Baluba church nor any other ethnic church. His new church would be open to anyone who wanted a place to pray, a place to learn about Jesus, and a place of fellowship and support. People began to seek him out not just on Sundays but through the week as well. He always had time for them. They left feeling not only that the pastor had listened carefully but also that he cared. With the help of the mission a neat, permanent chapel was soon built to accommodate his growing mixed congregation.

All the while there was political turmoil in the Belgian Congo. While the colonial era was drawing to a close in black Africa, the Bel-

1 See “Let’s see if Archie is available” (chapter 13).

gians seemed unaware of it. Overtaken by events, the date of June 30, 1960, was hurriedly set as the time when Congo would also be granted its political independence, although there had been little preparation for it. Within weeks the black police force mutinied against their white officers, blood stained some streets in Leopoldville, and most of the white population fled across the closest borders. This triggered repercussions across the entire country.

In Tshikapa one result was that long-simmering animosity between the Lulua and Baluba people exploded into bloody conflict. The Lulua considered themselves to be in their own homeland and viewed the Baluba as squatters. Village folks attacked each other up and down a 300-kilometer stretch of the Kasai River. Meanwhile, Pastor Kuamba continued to shepherd his congregation.

One day a delegation of his fellow Lulua clansmen came to him in his home. Their spokesman said: "Pastor, we've been listening very carefully these past weeks as you preach and pray on Sunday mornings. You know that our fellow Lulua, your people, are engaged in bitter conflict with the alien Baluba among us. Though our future and your future are at stake, never once have we heard you preach a sermon that showed how bad our enemies are. Never once have we heard you ask God to give us victory in the conflict that is raging among us. Today we have one question for you that we want answered. Who are you? What are you? Which tribe do you really belong to?"

Pastor Kuamba paused a moment and then answered as follows: "You ask me amid this hatred which tribe I belong to? I want you to know that your pastor belongs to neither one. Years ago as a young man I gave my life to Jesus and when I did that, I joined *his tribe!*"

Jim Bertsche