



58 ❖ A great pastor who turned the other cheek

The son of a messenger of a great chief, Onésime Mpoyi Tshiakatumba was born in Tshibata in 1918. He would go on to serve God as an evangelist, elder, and ordained pastor of the Evangelical Mennonite Church in South Kasai, his province of origin. He evangelized many people into Anabaptism and founded local churches, of which the most important, Kasekeyi, is the pride of the denomination today. He also demonstrated the way of peace through his life.

Onésime Mpoyi had an unhappy childhood. After his biological father's death, Onésime Mpoyi's mother had been inherited as a wife by his father's younger brother. The degrading and inhumane treatment that she received from her second husband left a strong imprint on Onésime Mpoyi's life.

His moves from one place to another illustrate the kind of journey, pressures, and incentives that were common to many in the region. He began primary school with the Presbyterians in his home territory but, like many others, migrated during his studies and ended up in Ndjoko Punda among the Mennonites and far from his native village. There he joined the Mennonite Church of Congo (CMCo). After completing a year in the Bible school in 1939, Onésime Mpoyi left Ndjoko Punda for Tshikapa, then in 1940 he became an evangelist at the Mennonite mission station at Mutena. Ten years later, for purely economic reasons he left Tshikapa Center for Muene Kalu.

photo—Onésime Mpoyi Tshiakatumba

There he was completely occupied by his work in the fields, and he brought in Edouard Munsensa to carry on the work at Muene Kalu. At that point Onésime only had two small children of his own, a boy and a girl.

Edouard Munsensa began his work in a church building constructed by the villagers with Mpoyi's encouragement. However, he was under Onésime Mpoyi's care, though the church provided for his needs because he was both teacher and evangelist. Since Onésime Mpoyi was a landowner, his contribution consisted of giving permission to Edouard to farm some land. The church at Muene Kalu was dependent on the Kalonda mission station.

In 1959, because of the coming war between the Baluba and Lulua tribes, Onésime Mpoyi left Muene Kalu for Tshikapa Center. There he joined the Mennonite church at Kalonda. Four years later, in 1964, because of continuing tribal tensions Onésime Mpoyi said goodbye to Tshikapa and to his friends at Kalonda and returned to his province of origin—more precisely, to his native Bakwa Muala. As soon as he arrived, Onésime Mpoyi was the target of invitations from officials of the Presbyterian church in the seat of his native territory.

He accepted their invitation and was designated evangelist and ordained church elder in 1966. At this point, having discovered that the Mennonite church existed already at Mbuji Mayi, Elder Onésime, whose gentleness, sense of service, and fervor witnessed to his call to God's service, resolved to join it. He went to see his Presbyterian leaders, from whom he sought and obtained, with difficulty, permission to leave.

Onésime Mpoyi quickly went to meet Mathieu Kazadi,¹ president of the new Mennonite group that would become the Evangelical Mennonite Church (CEM), and his staff, to whom he explained his desire to serve the Lord with them. They agreed to his request and directly named him elder of the Bitanda congregation, which needed to be organized. In 1972, following his remarkable evangelistic work, Elder Onésime was consecrated pastor by Mathieu Kazadi. His service to God as a pastor resulted in the conversions of several dozen souls and helped in the construction of the first worship building for the congregation.

1 See "Mathieu Kazadi and the new Evangelical Mennonite Church" (chapter 40).

Onésime Mpoyi was transferred in 1973 from Bitanda to Kabwe, about fifteen kilometers from Bitanda toward Mbuji Mayi. There Pastor Onésime again accomplished a great deal. He exhorted the faithful and evangelized local people, and several souls were won for Christ. The congregation, which was dormant before his arrival, became strong and viable.

Following bumps in the road created by leadership conflict within the CEM beginning in 1975, and given the difficulties of taking responsibility for his family—now ten children—the pastor decided after two years to leave Kabwe for Kabuela. This 115-kilometer move was not in order to serve the Lord but because of a desire to improve his situation. Rosalie Kapinga, his wife, had visited the area, and she encouraged him to make this move because the region was good for agriculture. Though he settled at Kabuela with his family, Onésime Mpoyi was obliged to commute between this location of the Kanyok people, which was becoming a city, and Kabwe, because Kabwe remained the congregation to which the church had sent him. He had not been sent to Kabuela by the church.

Finally, having made the decision to stay at Kabuela, Onésime Mpoyi was obliged by CEM authorities to find someone who could replace him at Kabwe. He decided on Elder Nsenga, one of those whom he had evangelized and consecrated. At Kabuela, Pastor Onésime succeeded in gathering a group of men and women with whom he established an evangelical circle. As pastor, he taught them Anabaptist doctrine.

Five years later, a bad wind began to blow in the new Kabuela congregation. Elder Shambuyi Buzanga, the pastor's assistant, who was of Presbyterian origin, saw and understood that almost all the members were of like origin. After manipulating them, he proposed a vote between himself and Pastor Onésime in order to determine who would lead the church. Faced with this confusion, behind which lay the unexpressed desire to replace Anabaptism with Buzanga's Presbyterianism, Onésime Mpoyi, who was naturally a calm and humble man, decided on a different path. Instead of allowing a vote with his rival, motivated by bad intentions, Onésime Mpoyi chose to relinquish the congregation he had founded to his detractor. "Instead of disputing between ourselves and going to a vote, as you desire, since the harvest is vast I will leave the congregation to you. It's up to you

to calmly nourish the Lord's sheep. As for me, I will go where the Lord will lead me."

Still feeling called, with the mission to announce the good news of Christ according to Anabaptist understandings, he went to see the chief of a community about three kilometers from his residence, in order to request the use of some land. During this period of negotiations Onésime Mpoyi already began to evangelize in this area. He succeeded in winning for Christ the chief himself as well as the chief's wife, to whom Onésime Mpoyi gave the responsibility of deaconess for the new assembly. In this work, which he carried out together with his children, he evangelized a number of others who, along with Pastor Onésime's children, gathered on the veranda of the chief's house.

Several days later, the chief responded to the request for land and granted to Pastor Onésime a plot of three hundred meters by one hundred meters. Onésime Mpoyi and his children, focusing on their mission, cleared the land for construction, while still living at their home three kilometers away. His sons worked to build their own homes and the house of the Lord. In 1981, with the help of his sons and some church members, Pastor Onésime built the first church building out of palm branches. With the construction of this shelter functioning as a meeting place for Kasekeyi, this acquired space began little by little to be transformed and to attract people.

In the course of this same year, Pastor Onésime, still assisted by his children, planned and began construction of the new church building to replace the initial shelter with something more permanent. Everyone began by making adobe bricks. This initiative exclusively from his family ended with the construction of the brick church building with a straw roof. His son Fortunat, a mason's apprentice, worked on the walls, while Pastor Onésime and the younger brothers made the roof.

Concerned with the image of a church well built on its foundation, and in order to properly develop the land he had received, Pastor Onésime and his sons, who were by this time all married and responsible, decided to live on the land received, on which some immigrants had already squatted. The building on the land, the evangelical actions undertaken, and the construction of the new church building in adobe brick and straw, larger than the initial shelter, at-

tracted a lot of attention and reflected the viability of the congregation.

From this time, the Kasekeyi congregation became visible. Onésime Mpoyi was the shepherd. Dozens of souls were won to Christ. The church was organized and well administered by its founder. He gave it a particular form by organizing the community into work groups.

CEM leaders did not visit this congregation during its first fourteen years, but Onésime Mpoyi was not discouraged and did not neglect to send regular reports of its activities. However, several years after the church was established, it was once again attacked by Shambuwi Buzanga and followers of Pastor Zacharie Nkumbi. These latter fiercely took him to court, intending by any means possible to take away the congregation in order to replace Onésime Mpoyi with someone from their group. Buzanga for his part was seeking to take over this congregation as well for the Presbyterians. Alone, with courage, Onésime resisted them all. This time, no one succeeded in taking away what he himself had sought and founded.

Rev. Onésime Mpoyi began tirelessly to evangelize the surrounding villages. In 1988 he established the Malombolombo congregation. He gave leadership of this group to Mr. Kantole wa Kantole, a Presbyterian whom he consecrated as a Mennonite pastor. Soon afterward, with the help of one of Kasekeyi's members, Pastor Onésime succeeded in evangelizing Kamayi Matoke, an agricultural hamlet seven kilometers from Kasekeyi, and established a congregation of the same name there. After its establishment, he worked there himself at first, and then later sent missionaries for short periods. Finally he gave management of this congregation to the Bondoyi missionary district, which placed Elder Mukuna Luvungula of the CEM Bufuki congregation there as shepherd.

Around 1990 Onésime Mpoyi, along with members of his first congregation, initiated and completed Kasekeyi, an agricultural project. They established fields for the congregation and also worked in others' fields, which earned them money. With the proceeds from this work the congregation purchased a goat. Profits from the goat's offspring enabled the congregation to begin constructing a church building with a tin roof. They were also able to mourn and bury the dead of the congregation with the proceeds of this project. Today the congregation boasts over 300 worshippers—men, women, and youth.

During his entire life and career, Pastor Onésime Mpoyi Tshiakatumba was highly esteemed by many, both Christians and non-Christians. Mathieu Kabanga, a member of his congregation, testifies, “Pastor Mpoyi has never done anything that did not give joy to my heart, whether in his ministry or in his social and family life. His greatest merit is that he showed all his children the way of the Lord, and they are up to today influential members of CEM.”

Strongly characterized by a permanent concern to seek peace and reconciliation, Pastor Onésime was a great counselor for members of the church, people outside the church, and his biological family. François Mbuyi, one of his collaborators, underlines, “Throughout his life, Pastor Mpoyi never had a problem with anyone. He’s been without reproach all along. He was very humble and respected everyone, old and young. He had a deep sense of forgiveness, even when he had been cruelly offended.” To illustrate all of this, François testifies, “Mpoyi’s wife died a death that may have been caused by someone well known, as people believed. But instead of taking this man to court or avenging himself, as he could have done, he forgave the wrong and asked his sons to do the same, because he considered that God alone has the power to avenge for themselves and for their mother. This is a powerful testimony, for Rosalie Mbuyi’s executioner lives peaceably in Kabuela.” François concludes, “Because of this act, many have believed that Pastor Tshiakatumba was truly a man of God and that he will rise again on the last day when the trumpet will sound.”

Having become weak because of age, in 1999 Onésime Mpoyi wrote a letter to the CEM General Council, in which he requested that Pierre Ndibu Shambuyi replace him in his congregation. Pierre was one of those who had made up and directed the group that had chased him from Kasekeyi. Onésime Mpoyi welcomed Pierre kindly and handed over to him all the administration of the congregation, without taking into account Pierre’s earlier efforts to overthrow him. Though Pierre did not do an exceptional job with the congregation, Onésime Mpoyi made every effort to create a peaceful life for him and give him ongoing moral support.

Besides what he accomplished in his cherished Kasekeyi, Onésime Mpoyi served God as the community development director for the missionary district of Bondoyi, which was led by Pastor Cé-

lestin Kabengela.² His initiatives, counsel, and actions brought many advantages to the district and to his congregation. Pierre Ndibu affirms, “It was in 1994, after CEM’s Provincial Council meeting and the Bondoyi district meeting during which he was elected community development director, that I began to appreciate the qualities of this servant of God. What struck me strongly was the value of his sermons, the precious nature of his counsel, and the depth of his arguments during the different levels of meetings. He was very wise, and there was nothing to reproach him.”

Along the same lines, Pastor Mpoyi was elected superintendent of the ecumenical group, Church of Christ in Congo, for the Kanda Kanda sector. As such, he led a large spiritual and social life. Mathieu Kabanga spoke to this subject: “In his social life, Tshiakatumba lived well with others. Many came to him to learn biblical truths. This was the case for pastors from the Malemba church, the Communion church, Unity and Fraternity, the Neo-Apostolic church, and others. It was because of his renown in pastoral ministry and his reputation that he attracted such esteem.”

Constantly linking words and actions as a practicing believer, Pastor Onésime was passionate about loving his neighbor. A generous man, his habit was to share food, agricultural produce, and goods of various kinds with others: members of the church, young and old; those who lived in his town of Kabuela; and strangers who showed up at the church or at his home. “Pastor Mpoyi Tshiakatumba was a formidably generous man. He shared bed and food with mentally challenged individuals from his village. That affected us greatly, we his children, and moved us to do likewise,” states his son Gustave Tshivuila.

Michel Mbuyi, secretary of the Kasekeyi congregation, reports, “A sick, mentally challenged man named Papa Kalala was brought to our congregation by villagers who were convinced of the hospitality and generosity of Pastor Mpoyi. Mpoyi welcomed him and saw that he was ill. Thereafter Pastor Mpoyi stayed at his bedside in the church building, from the time he was brought in until the day he gave up his soul. He prepared the body and buried this man, after having clothed him with his own clothing, fed him at his own expense, and provided some small health care for about two weeks.” Continuing, Michel Mbuyi states, “Pastor Mpoyi astonished many

² See “Saved from suicide by a vision” (chapter 70).

in this village, ourselves included, when he welcomed, lodged, and fed in this church building, for almost two months, more than twenty Hutu refugees from Rwanda who had wandered into East Kasai Province following the genocide that their country had experienced in 1994. Despite the fact that he himself was old and weak, Pastor Onésime fed and gave produce such as sweet potatoes from his meager means to these unfortunate people, nine families.”

To seal yet more his life of attachment and service to God, Rev. Onésime Mpoyi did not cease to tell his contemporaries and those who had been converted by the message he shared: “Stay attached to Jesus Christ who is Lord and Savior, and avoid quarrels within the church. Consider yourselves as brothers and sisters.”

Pastor Onésime Mpoyi Tshiakatumba passed away on December 2, 2007.

Jean Félix Chimbalanga³

³ Jean Félix Chimbalanga is Onésime Mpoyi’s son.