

History of the Role Played by the United Methodist Church in the Reconciliation of Conflicts in the Kitenge District, Congo

**by Rev. Mujinga Muamba Kora,
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History

Everything began in 1998 in Kitenge, Congo, headquarters of the ecclesiastic district of Kitenge, where I was assigned as pastor in order to form a second parish. Although this village had had only one parish for more than 20 years, at the suggestion of the District Superintendent, Rev. Kabonga Ilunga, it was proposed that, with my assignment there, we start a second parish, to be named "Mount Carmel."

A month after my arrival, Kabalo fell into the hands of the rebels during the Rwanda/Congo war of aggression. With the dispersal of everyone in Kitenge, I was left alone. Everyone had fled, not knowing what else to do. Being a pastor, I couldn't stand around doing nothing. I got myself assigned as Chaplain for the almost 16,000 soldiers who were regrouped in Kitenge. My work as a chaplain lasted from November 1998 to January 1999.

In January the people gradually began to come back, and we restarted activities with 30 members. During that 3-month period, I had the opportunity to learn the military life. The soldiers, too, in their camp, had need of divine help -- and a good number of them were converted.

Kitenge is a village of at least 24,000 people. Since there were so many, food became more and more scarce and expensive. Many were hungry. we couldn't stand around. Everyone anxiously searched for something to eat. I myself was not spared this misery. One day I decided, like many others, to go look for food more than 45 km. away. We arrived in Ngende at 5 p.m. Since troubles never come singly, that same night, September 22, 1999, we were encircled by the Congolese-Rwandan rebels, who took everything from us (money, clothes, bikes), but I got out of it alive. I came back on foot.

Having gotten out of that, we encountered still more difficulties, this time inflicted by our Simba-May May brothers. We were obliged to flee three times in three years to take refuge from the fighting. There was general insecurity in the whole ecclesiastical district of Kitenge.

Of the nine circuits that made up our district, only three were prepared to work; not the others. The churches were closed because the whole population was scattered either in the forest or in the villages on the other bank of the Lomani River. To visit the faithful, we were exposed to much danger; we wasted money to clear our way, negotiating with both sides (the May May and the government soldiers).

This ministry, in which our lives were always in peril, lasted almost three years. But in everything the hand of God was with us, and there were no major incidents for any of the teams which went out on evangelization tours. Since there were two camps, the center of Kitenge was protected by the government soldiers, and all the interior was inhabited by the May May, led by General Tsinga Tsinga. So the people were between the hammer and the forge, and they didn't

know on which foot to dance. If you supported the military, you were the enemy of the May May. If you supported the May May, you were the enemy of the military.

Even knowing that the church is apolitical and neutral, we couldn't do nothing and let the evil continue. We were obliged to get into it in spite of the possible cost to us. We sought a way to bring the two enemy brothers together around a single negotiation table. Although it was difficult, with God everything was possible. After two years of waiting, God answered our prayers. Because this was not only the concern of the churches, it had become the preoccupation of everyone. Together with the politico-administrative authorities, the military and the Congolese National Police (PNC), we tried to meet together to discuss the ways and means to put an end to police harassment, killings and general insecurity that was at its height.

The Administrator in the person of Mr. Pierre Damier Ndombe, the Commander of the 941st Battalion who was at Kitenge and the Commander of the Congolese National Police all came to my house to ask me if our church could be the locale of the negotiations since we were deeply involved. We did not hesitate to respond to them positively about this meeting. And I was chosen as preacher for this meeting we had waited for so long. The work was well done, all the parties agreed to bury the hatchet. Where the politicians failed, God alone is ready to provide the solution.

To understand these events, here are the reports of the work we accomplished:

Monday, March 24, 2003

Discussion with all the parties implicated in the re-establishment of the peace: the Assistant Administrator of the Territory of Kitenge, the Battalion Commander of the Congolese Armed Forces at Kitenge (Cmd Bn FAC), the Commanders of Battalions 2, 3 and 5 of FAC, Commander of the PNC, FAP, President of the CPP and his committee, the Chef Sous Poste ANR, the Representative of the Chief of the Nyembo Group, the Representative of the Catholic Church, the Representative of the Teachers' Union of Kitenge and the wise men and the Counselors of the Simba May May fighters came to the meeting organized in the locale of the United Methodist Parish of Kitenge. A group of May May fighters came, too, to help us prepare the welcome for their General Chinja Chinja. Unfortunately the General didn't come this Monday. However, we noticed that the May May fighters were more numerous than the FAC soldiers at the reconciliation place as well as in the city of Katenge.

Tuesday, March 25

About 7:05 a.m., Mr. Jackson Kabamba, the Administrator of Kabongo, came to join the meeting. It was only at 2:15 p.m. that General Chanja Chanja arrived at the meeting place. Thirty minutes later, some May May fighters (estimated at 6,000) came to join the reconciliation team. They invaded the court of the parish with the FAC soldiers. So we were all pressed to begin the ceremony of reconciliation which began at 2:15 p.m.

Mr. Pierre Ndombe, the Assistant Administrator, spoke first to introduce the meeting. He began by rendering glory to God for having permitted the holding of the meeting. He praised the meeting between brothers and so asked the Superintendent of the United Methodist Church, Rev,

Mujinga Mwamba Kora, to pray for the meeting and to preach the word of God before the discussion began.

Our intervention was based on the following points:

-- The prayer

-- The message: Luke 15:17-24

Theme: "We were all lost and we need to repent."

After my sermon, Mr. Ndombe took up the theme of this reunion by insisting on the fact that we are all lost as we said in our message. He proceeded to the presentation of the participants, beginning with Brigadier General Chinja Chinja and his suite, the Commander of the FAC Battalion and his suite, the FAP and the PNC and other members. He retraced the history of the war of aggression and the creation of the Forces of Popular Self-defense (FAP) and the movements of the May May. He also evoked the troubles between FAC and the May May and the resulting destabilization of villages and especially the loss of human lives, villages burned and massive displacement of the population.

Today, he said, we do not want to set up a court to find out who is right and who is wrong. But together let us seek the true causes which each time cause troubles so that we can talk together and find solid bases for the survival of our agglomeration which has suffered so much.

The declarations of Brigadier General Chinja Chinja: Me, I am a civilian. What sometimes shocked us was FAC's harassment and the lack of understanding on each side, the false reports about the population by both sides. Today is the first and the last meeting for me. I can't fight the FAC anymore because FAC is our father who beats us all. We owe it respect. In my village, there is no court. I ask everyone to go and pose their problems to the PNC instead. We recognize the State and all its force.

After this meeting, God truly manifested himself. The attitude of the Simbas changed rapidly. They conformed to the declarations of their chiefs. The mischief was terminated. We expect peace to arrive soon.

Long live the United Methodist Church which sheltered the belligerents and which played a catalyst's role through its servant, Rev. Mujinga Mwamba Kora.

Translated by Marianne Cook

This article is part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at [mupwj87 \[at\] mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj87@mupwj.org)