

Democratic Republic of Congo

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Overview of the Country

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly Zaire, is a former Belgian colony, located in Central Africa. The DRC shares its borders with nine countries, including: Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Sudan, Central Africa Republic (CAR), Congo-Brazza, Angola, and Zambia. The first inhabitants were the pygmies who now live in the equatorial forest and survive through gathering, hunting, and fishing. They are characterized by a size of less than 1.5 meters tall (about 4 feet, 11 inches). Their existence was known in the days of Aristotle.¹

The hot climate in Africa caused a decrease in rainfall and, as a result, the region south of the Sahara lost its lakes and vegetation and only sand remained. The people who inhabited this region left and a group headed south. Some returned when precipitation returned.² The Sahara was emptied of its inhabitants who retreated towards the survival zones located in the Maghreb, in the Nile valley, and towards the southern forest.³

These pygmies were invaded by the black Paleolithic Bantu tribes; the two tribes mixed and identified.⁴ These Bantu fled the settlements of the Sahara. Some historians believe that the group that headed south bypassed the forest and headed in two directions—one going to the east coast and the other going west. However, Jan Vansina believes that before the 14th century, we can recover three possible centers of origin of state structures which are clearly geographically separated. One was around the lakes of Katanga where the Luba and Songye originate. Another is in the heart of the rainforest from which the Bolia come. The third is in the lower regions of Congo, cradle of the kingdoms of Kongo, Luango, and Tyo.⁵

Among the different people living in the Congo are the Arabized, on the eastern side of the Congo in Bangwana. They are in Kisangani and Maniema; they came from the eastern coast and were at the service of the Arabs. The Bantu do not refer to an ethnic group, but to a linguistic community. They inhabit most of central and southern Africa and speak 400 related languages. Some believe they are from Chad or what is now Nigeria. Others are located in southern Congo and on the Katanga Plateau. After the discovery of metallurgy, they came to relocate the natives (Pygmies and semi-Bantu). The Nilotics inhabit the White Nile. Their languages/dialects resemble and look like Ugandan. They are shepherds.

The Sudanese are present in the northeast of the country. The economic boom in Sudan from the 14th century caused a population explosion.

There are also Rwandese whose existence in the Congo dates back several centuries. Late migratory movements were observed following the population explosion during Belgian colonization and even during the fratricidal wars of the Great Lakes (Rwanda, Burundi, and DRC).⁶

Beginning in the 14th century, what is now the DRC was occupied by people who were organized as a state with clans under the leadership of a king. The Kongo kingdom spread across the western part. It was followed by the Kuba kingdom in the center. The Lunda kingdom in Katanga was a unification of several clans that appeared in the 15th century. The southeastern part of Katanga was under the control of Emperor Luba.⁷

In 1485 explorer Diego Cao reached the Congo River (Zaire). Using interpreters, he told the king of Kongo that his counterpart in Portugal wanted to establish trade relations with him. The reception was friendly and diplomatic relations were established between the two kingdoms.⁸

The explorers Livingstone and Stanley prepared the way for Leopold II who wished to open Central Africa to trade, to exploration of the riches of the Congo Basin, to forge friendships, and to obtain from the chiefs of the tribes the rights of occupation and the establishment of railways. Stanley set up ports from 1879 to 1882. The Berlin Conference led to the recognition of the Congo Free State which was considered a personal colony of Leopold II. In 1908 it became a Belgian colony.¹⁰

Although the conference did not set the boundaries of this colony, the monarch worked to resolve border issues. He signed a memorandum of understanding with France and England (from west to north). In the south, Leopold II signed with Portugal. The Belgian assassination of M'Siri and certain protocols set the southern and eastern limits of the Congolese Free State in 1891.¹¹

Origin

In 1917 the founding of the Musofu Mission and the opening of a school served as a springboard for the Adventist Church penetration of the Congo. This mission attracted 130 young Congolese men who walked through the forest from Congo to attend the Adventist school. Matthew Chiwanga was one of these men, and he became a minister.¹² In 1918 S. M. Konigmacher entered Congo in search of a site on which to open a station. Chiefs Lumina and Kakombe came to Musofi to request a teacher for the Congo (Mokambo) territory of Sakania. Even though their request was not granted, it was a prelude to the penetration of the Congo. The same year Walter Straw came to Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) to ask the province for documents to authorize an official opening of work in the Congo.¹³

The missionaries were directed beyond the territory of Bukama to an unentered area. On the first trip they stopped at Nsugu-Kazadi in Kamina territory. They returned because of the presence of lions and threats of

military operations that were taking place in this region in connection with World War I. In 1919 S. M. Konigmacher obtained land from Chief Nshikala in Mwilambwe. The land was obtained and the station was set up by Konigmacher, who was joined by the Belgian officials from the territory of Kamina.¹⁴

Although some historians believe that Mokambo was the site where Adventism began, they give no dates, and the only possible evidence is old buildings and stories from the descendants of early believers.

The first missionary to arrive in the Congo came from Musofu and his writings confirm that Lumina and Kakompe's request in 1918 was not approved by the hierarchy. It was necessary for Konigmacher to go to Elisabethville for Songa to be opened in 1919 and organized in 1921.¹⁵

The Pioneers

Upon securing the land for the Songa Mission, and with the arrival of the couple, Christopher and Therese Robinson, and Gilbert Willmore, the Songa Mission began with farming. These missionaries had brought in African translators. James Malinki did a good job of evangelizing the region. In 1921 the first conversion of four young people took place, the fruit of door-to-door evangelism. Another young man came from the Plymouth Brothers Mission where he had been a teacher. He accepted the Adventist message and became the first evangelist monitor. His consecration was planned in Songa, but he died before this event.¹⁶ In 1923, with the passing of Branson, the president of the division came to Elisabethville. A mission was opened and it was attended by former Adventist students from Malawi and Rhodesia.

These young people, in addition to the elite who worked for Hupper Katanga United Mining, were baptized in Elisabethville in the Kamukulu River, at the headquarters of the Katanga Mission, on May 18, 1924.¹⁷ Jérémie Nswana, Daniel Mubanda, Zebedée Naunda, Stephen Kisama, and Benjamin Besa were the original graduates of this school.

In 1924 another station was opened in Kikamba in the territory of Kongolo. The first converts were the students of this school. Among them, Cossam Paipo Kaluhala became the first ordained pastor of the Adventist Church in this area in 1942. Joel Kaluhala, Salmon Lupanda, and the others were the oldest. The first missionary was Ferguson, and was succeeded by Moolman and later Raelieph Robinson who came with his wife and children, Grace and Leonard, who followed in their father's footsteps in this noble calling for several decades. From Kikamba, Raeliegh Robinson, with the evangelist monitors trained at the Katanga Mission Seminary, opened schools as far as the right bank of the Congo River (Kabanzi, Ilunga, and later Bigobo). Jonathan Kiambe, Samson Luhunga, Petro Mukhota, and others were the first students from the Bahemba land.

In 1927 W. Vail, from South Africa, opened Utiolio in the vicinity of present-day Kisangani. The Narcot and Staples families also worked at this site.¹⁸ Bakumu people were the first converts at this station.

In 1930 the Kikamba Station was transferred to Bigobo. The students became the evangelistic monitors. Around 1941 E. Delhove and A. A. Matter came from Rwanda with the evangelists Samuel Karekezi and Eliezer. They opened Rweze in the provinces of North Kivu among the Nande people. The first followers were Ibrahimu Kamabu and Petro Syambite. Samuel Karekezi became the first district pastor.¹⁹ This center made it possible for the gospel to be preached in the vicinity of the village.

In 1942 the Bigobo Station sent out 20 evangelistic monitors. The method of penetration was the training of monitors who were afterwards sent to sites where the notables demanded a school. Sometimes the missionaries chose the site. While three monitors, Luhunga Samson, Belson Tundula, and Nyembo Abed-Nego, had already started in Maniema. Twenty other evangelists were sent to Mulama and Mulozi in the territory of Kabambare. The first converts studied in schools and some left for Bigobo to continue their studies in the primary and middle school.

Ngoy Edouard, Walubangi Pene-Fundi, and Jonathan Kilunda were among those who graduated from Mikebwe in Maniema province and were admitted into Bigobo Middle School. Philippe Kijana, from Mulozi Primary School, studied at Bigobo Middle School and later continued his training at the Lulengele Mission.

In 1947 three missionaries, J. R. Campbell, the Congo Union President; Elie Delhove, and Karl Ambs arrived in Luluabourg, Kananga city, West Kasai province, looking for land. In 1949 B. P. Wendell opened the Lulengele Mission, including a workshop and a school. The first to be baptized were two men, Jack Mwanza and David Mukamba, along with two women, on May 4, 1951, by Karl Ambs, the new Congo Union president.²⁰ A center to train evangelists from across the union was organized and the first students included: Mwamba Samost, Edouard Mbayo, and Honore Ditwa.

In 1951 Lowa's exiles who were imprisoned with Simon Kimbangu, received the Adventist message in prison. The leader of Kimbanguism went from Lowa, Kindu, to Elisabethville, where he died on October 12, 1951.²¹ When these prisoners were released, they took the gospel to Bas-Congo (Lower Congo), in Kwanza, where the first church was erected. The first converts were: Ndinga Mbote, Levy Ntangu Ndukuta, Honore Ditwa Banzulu, and others. Ndukuta's son was sent to prepare the ground, and the Congo Union then sent Koopmans to meet with them.

The Masisi Station in North Kivu was born after the Congolese refugees settled in Rwanda. Three came in contact with the Adventist mission. On their return to the country, they began to worship and Rwankeri Mission provided them with monitors and evangelists. Schools were opened in the Kanyatsi region. Churches were organized and the first mission station director was Jonas Mbyirukira.²² He became the first African president in this area when the station became a field. He also was the first African to serve as president of Zaire Union.

The events surrounding the country's independence and the wars that followed meant that some missionaries had to leave and Congolese had to take over their positions. After the wars, some churches courageously resumed, while others suffered greatly. In some places, splits had arisen and a reform movement was born.

The natives took charge of the work, some without even having gone through any preparation. From 1961 to 1963 the natives were sent for training at Solusi, Zimbabwe, and Malamulo Mission in Malawi; they included Paul Mwema, Serai Mbangukira, N. Ruhaya, Silas Monga, Amos Mwishabongo, André Kaunda, Simon Muhune, and Mubhuga Baluku.²³

At each station, a dispensary was established and this attracted many patients, some of whom also believed the Adventist message.²⁴ Schools and clinics boosted the church as missionaries were united with African presidents of the caliber of Jonas Mbyrukira and Paul Mwema.

The Kasai project began in 1970, and there were 10,000 baptisms in Kasai.²⁵ Several pastors of other religious denominations decided to become Adventists. The most significant was Kubi Mamba, a legal representative of the Emmanuel Mission.²⁶

The Lukanga School served as a location for mentoring pastors until the opening of the Adventist University of Central Africa (AUCA) in Gisenyi, Rwanda, in 1984. The Wilkens and Global Mission projects assisted in construction and penetration of new territories. Several missions were reorganized, thanks to the development of the work. As of 2003, DRC had three union missions, in Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, and Goma.

Spread and Development of the Message

Kasai experienced many baptisms, and North Kivu also experienced great development. Songa Hospital and Lukanga University and other medical centers were factors in the development of the Church. Initially, Songa Hospital and Leprosarium were almost philanthropic centers. People from the whole Baluba region and the surrounding area flocked to the mission and the Church had many baptisms. When the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) developed its schools and its system of sponsoring students by Italian sponsors, many of the young people studied and their parents were converted. In the case of Kilonda Jonas, the student eventually became the school principal in Songa and remains a church worker today. In Lubumbashi, where there was only one school, additional schools were developed. In North Kivu the Pygmy Project was sponsored, and Mokili Adodianga finished primary and secondary schools and eventually obtained his license in rural development. This is an Adventist project that worked effectively.²⁷

The Institutions

Adventist church schools, clinics, and development organizations have played an important role in the growth of the Church. As when the missionaries first came, they said to the natives and the notables “we have come to teach your children to read and write. We are going to build places of healthcare to treat you and teach you to be in good health.”²⁸ The first schools were built and later became the first churches. These institutions helped to provide solutions in places where conflicts had broken out. Before independence, at each station site there

was a dispensary. When the union organized the development agency, there was an increase in health centers and schools to serve much of Katanga province. This organization, supported by Reach Italia, brought many souls to the faith. Once a year the schools organized a Week of Prayer which concluded with baptisms. The integration of faith with teaching resulted in several students being baptized. There were 2,244 students in primary and secondary schools in the DRC by the end of 2018.

Having suffered for a long time due to lack of qualified staff, the Adventist Church in Congo has been able to open five universities which train staff and orient young professionals towards the Adventist faith. These universities include Lukanga, Phillip Lemon in Lubumbashi, Adventist University of Congo in Kinshasa, Adventist University of Goma in Goma, and the Adventist University of Kananga.

The Church Administrative Units

The arrival of missionaries in the Congo took place in 1918 as the result of an action taken by the Union of South Africa in 1910.²⁹ With the creation of the Musofu Station in Northern Rhodesia by the mission field of Southern Rhodesia, entry into the Congo was possible. It was from the Southern Rhodesia Field that the decision to enter the Congo became effective. In fact, after S. M. Konigmacher entered the Congo, Walther Straw and Gilbert Wilmine, officials of the Southern Rhodesia Field, arrived in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi). They received the letters of authorization and boarded the train to the terminal in Bukama. The Belgian administrator gave them a warm welcome. He granted them porters, and the two missionaries stopped in the village of Nsungu-Kazadi, after which they returned to Elisabethville.³⁰

The following year Samuel Konigmacher arrived in Mwilambwe where the chief Nshikala, father to Pastor Nyembo Paul Mwema, granted them free of charge the current land of the Songa Mission. It was measured the same year and organized as the first administrative unit of the Church in Congo. In 1922, the Songa Mission was supervised by the Southern Rhodesia Field, and a union project was installed in Songa in 1923 with E. C. Bogger as the first supervisor. During his visit, division president W. H. Branson visited the work in the Congo and another station was opened in Elisabethville, named the Katanga Mission. Lebutte was his first supervisor. E. C. Bogger and W. H. Branson visited Kongolo to consider the possibility of opening a site in Albertville (now Kalemie). As a result of this visit, Kikamba was opened in 1924. These administrative units were under the management of the Congo Union from their creation.

In 1927 a new station was opened in Kirundu. W. R. Vail was its pioneer director and the site was Utiolio. It was further north in the Upper Congo province. In 1930 the Kikamba Station underwent a headquarters shift, and everything was moved to a new site called Bigobo. Eleven years later, E. Delhove and A. A. Matter opened the Rwese Station.³¹ In 1949 the stations of Lulengele, Talla, and Nebassa were opened. These nine stations were run by missionaries, except for that of Masisi, which opened in 1956 and was directed by an African, Jonas Mbyirukira.

In 1954 the leadership began to group the stations into mission fields. The first field was called South Congo. It was based in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi) and brought together the stations of Katanga, Songa, Bigobo, and Lulengele. Bas-Congo Station was attached to the Congo Union. In 1954 the Congo Union was merged with Rwanda and Burundi and the South Congo Field had stations.

In 1959 the headquarters of the South Congo Field relocated to Kamina.³² In 1960 the Masisi Station became the East Congo Field, and its headquarters was transferred to Goma. Other entities were created around the churches, and some reorganizations took place to respond to the need to bring administration closer to the members.

In 1969 a project was initiated in Jadotville (now Likasi). The Congo Union Mission sent a South Congo Field vice president. That project resulted in a split of the mother field into two fields, the North Shaba and South Shaba in 1974. One was located in Kamina and the other in Lubumbashi. The Kasai Project was initiated in 1973 and gave birth to the Central Kasai Field in 1990, with Simon Muhune as the president. This field was later split into two, which became the Eastern Kasai Field and the Western Kasai Fields in 1993 and 1998.

In 1975 the East Congo Field began a project in Kisangani which ended up becoming a field; this gave birth to another field in 2011, near Ituri, which regrouped the old stations of Talla and Nebassa. In 1987 a field project was opened in Bukavu for stations in the province of South Kivu. Pastor Unen and Bernard Mande laid a solid foundation for this field. Great campaigns were organized by the union and the young mission in this territory and sites were purchased to give value to this mission.

Towards the end of Paul Mwema's administration of the Zaire Union Mission, various projects took place: the Wilkens Project, the Global Mission initiative, and others. All these projects facilitated the expansion of the Church. The Zaire Union was split in two. This project began in 1994, and in 1996 the West Congo Union was based in Kinshasa. It governs the West Congo Association, the two Kasai Fields, the Tshikapa Project, and the Mbandaka Field; whereas the East Congo Union kept the North Katanga and South Katanga Fields, the Songa Mission Station, and the East Congo and the North Kivu Fields, with its headquarters in Lubumbashi.

After the war for liberation of the Congo, the East Congo Union Mission could no longer access churches in the occupied territories. This fact, along with the Abidjan-based division, resulted in the creation of an entity in 1999 in Goma to deal with churches in territories controlled by the rebels who opposed the government led by President Laurent D. Kabila. These are the fields of East Congo, North Kivu, South Kivu, and the East. The East Congo Union office remained in Lubumbashi, taking responsibility for the rest of the fields. In 2010, under the leadership of Noah Musema Kasereka, the North-East Congo Union Mission was attached to the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Important Statistics

Originally, membership was not a criterion in the organization of administrative units. The first Congo Union had only 46 members.³³ In those days the natives were not easily converted, so Adventist missionaries used institutions to attract the people.

The astonishing thing was that during the wars following independence (1960-1963), baptisms increased:³⁴ There was also the creation of certain projects which facilitated this. More than 10,000 baptisms took place as a result of the Kasai Project which brought a need for organization of new administrative entities.

The Impact of Political Development on Adventist Work

In colonial times, nobles and settlers welcomed missionaries. Sometimes they gave them land free of charge. The political movement of the independence period affected the life of the Church. After Independence, there was a period of unrest. People left the missions during the times of war. Simon Muhune and Cosam Kaluhala saved Bigobo Mission. This mission was to be burned like the other missions which skirted the sections where these rebels passed. During the same period, Lubumbashi was a theater of war between the United Nations and the Katangese gendarmes. When the 600 tons of food and clothing sent by the Adventist Dorcas Societies in Denmark and Canada arrived at the national railway company station, the Adventist Church achieved recognition by the government of Moses Tshombe, the president of Katanga. This food helped the Balubas who had taken refuge in the city. At the request of the Congo Union Mission authorities, a ceasefire was signed between the two sides.

For years the Congolese Adventist students had problems taking state exams because they were administered on Sabbath. In 1997 a commission was created to meet and plead with authorities of the Laurent Désiré Kabila government; since those days, the state exams take place only from Monday to Thursday.

Historically, the Adventist Church has never had any conflict with the government. Some chiefs have been baptized, some members have held positions in government, and some have been members of Parliament for a long time.

Adventism's Place in the Country

The Adventist Church has been recognized as the People of the Book in many places. The recommended diet and day of worship always appealed to others. The missionaries left a favorable impression on the population by building hospitals and leprosariums. Songa Hospital and many other clinics have provided free treatments, some to this day. The country's health system demands payment before providing care, regardless of the severity of the case; but Adventist clinics give treatment first and payment is made afterwards.

The Adventist Church has made significant contribution to education in the country, thanks to Adventist University of Lukanga.

The DRC is a large country with difficulties in the areas of communication and transportation. Some sections of the country have yet to be penetrated, despite the Church's presence in Congo for a hundred years.

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