

Africa





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Mennonite Brethren Missions in Africa

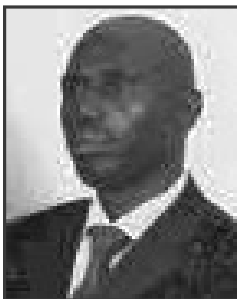
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Democratic Republic of Congo

Obedience to the Great Commission as mentioned in Matthew 28:16-20, confirmed in Acts 1:8 and accepted by the Mennonite Brethren (MB), had favorable effects in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter, Congo).

In this context, we describe the MB missionary work in Congo, offering a critical review in order to draw the necessary lessons for carrying out God's work in our generation.

The Beginning of the Church

The MB missionary work in Congo was a personal faith initiative at a time when mission work was a task for church organizations, and often performed by a team. This was so because Africa was unexplored, its populations unknown, and there were unpredictable missionary difficulties dangerous to solitary operators.

Nevertheless, the Spirit of God in his sovereignty demonstrated his power to conduct an independent missionary work through a pastor and nurse from Minnesota (USA) named Aaron and Ernestina Janzen. Indeed, after serving at Kalamba and Ndjoko-Punda stations in the Western Kasai region on behalf of the Congo Inland Mission (CIM) for eight years, the Janzens assumed in 1920 the heavy responsibility of starting a church planting movement for their own conference, the MB Church of North America.

Their first mission station was erected in Kikandji (Bandundu province), but given the isolation and poverty of the soil, Kafumba was preferred for its openness to trade and traffic, and for its forest and rich soil. The strategy was to plant a church that would rely on self-financing with local resources mainly from agriculture and housing.

During their first eight years of missionary work, the Janzens were materially and financially supported by local resources and personal gifts from friends and acquaintances he met during their furlough at home. It was only in 1943 that the North American MB Conference agreed to fully take over the missionary work initiated by the Janzens in Congo. By this time Aaron had seen his two children and his Ernestina die on the field. He remarried Martha Hiebert in 1943.



Ernestina & Aaron Janzen¹

Thereafter other missionaries were mobilized to join the Janzens in Kafumba and to effectively bring the gospel through its various aspects: preaching, literature, medical services, education, etc. The missionary team work revitalized and expanded the vision: schools were built for the training of future trainers, where reading and writing classes were given for men, women and children from the surrounding villages.

Development of the Mission

Around Kafumba

After the full support of the Kafumba Mission Station as the focal point of the missionary expansion as stated by the MB Board of Foreign Missions, other mission stations emerged. In December 1945, a mission station was planted in Matende among Bambunda tribe, fifty kilometers from Kafumba. Then Kipungu station came about in 1947. In 1952, MB Mission acquired the mission station of Lusemvu, planted in the 1930s by an independent missionary.

In the Region South of Kafumba

Nearly 450 kilometers to the south is located the Kajiji Mission, established by a missionary society called Unevangelized Tribes Mission (UTM). This missionary society, led by Alma Doering, planted several mission stations in the Kwango region. But because of the global economic crisis after the Second World War, this society had no more resources to continue its mission vision. They decided to transfer some of their mission stations to the MBs and others to a Swiss mission agency. Kajiji, Panzi and Kibenga stations were among the ones that the MB Mission incorporated into its mission field in 1952.

Thus the missionary work in Congo by the MB Church was deeply rooted in Bandundu province. The expansion was always a joint effort. National leaders such as Timothy Djimbo, Nzashu Lumaya, Nduku Andre, Tumbula Mbele, Matsitsa Charles, Kadi Beatrice, and Funda Esther were faithful and fruitful co-workers with the missionaries. In the seventies some members moved to the capital Kinshasa and began planting local churches.

Administratively, the Community of MB Churches in Congo (CEFMC in French) was then organized into three ecclesiastical regions: Kwilu (Northern Region), Kwango (Southern Region) and Kinshasa (West Region). Unanimously, the leaders from three ecclesiastical regions adopted bylaws prescribing the rotation between the regions in the management of the leading bodies of the MB Community to prevent the monopolization or the exclusion of any one region.

Mission Strategies

As noted, the MB missionary work in Congo was done holistically from its inception with Aaron and Ernestina Janzen. The gospel was preached taking into account all the needs of the people to be evangelized. The strategies included:

- Evangelism and church planting in the villages;
- Medical services through the erection of clinics and hospitals;
- Primary, secondary and vocational education;
- Production of Christian literature;
- Evangelism through radio;
- Community development projects;
- Training of leaders in biblical and theological institutions.

Important Periods of the Mennonite Brethren Mission Work

- 1920: Beginning of the mission work by Aaron/Ernestina Janzen.
- 1943: Recognition and adoption of the Janzens' missionary work in Congo by the MB Conference of the North America.
- 1960: Independence of the Congo and departure of missionaries; lack of prepared indigenous leaders to handle missionary work.
- 1965: Political stability and return of missionaries: focus on the major towns and cities.
- 1966-1989: Fusion of the North American mission and the Congo MB Church into a single entity; missionary expansion.
- 1990-2002: Instability in DR Congo; internationalization of the Mennonite Brethren mission; appointment of Congolese such as Pakisa Tshimika and Nzash Lumeya as regional representatives for MB Mission in Africa.

The MB Church in Congo in the Globalization Era (2000-Present)

The DR Congo, after recurrent crises since the 1990s, is looking for prospects in areas such as democracy, social and economic development. The church has to take advantage of this opportunity in order to extend its influence to other horizons. Thus, the vision and the work of the MB Church in Congo (CEFMC) is organized according to regional structures, mission vision and certain perspectives:

Structures

Structures are managed from the top level (Executive Board) down to the local churches. This respects decision-making by the General Assembly, including the rotation of regional leaders as mentioned above. This creates administrative stability

for the Church. Currently there are fourteen ecclesiastical regions, 700 local churches, and about 500 trained pastors.

Mission Expansion

Currently, there are new church planting efforts beyond the traditional regions of the CEFMC in the Bandundu Province and Kinshasa. Now, new church planting activity includes the province of Bas-Congo (in the West), the Eastern part of the country (Bukavu region), Brazzaville (Republic of Congo), with a view to South Katanga, Rwanda and Burundi.

Moreover, missionary work among unreached peoples such as Batwa (Pygmies) and Teke is slowly emerging with their own church planting initiatives. Furthermore, the missionary work in South Africa is taking root, as well as prayer groups that are emerging among the MB Congolese diaspora in Europe. At the same time, schools, clinics and hospitals, business and microcredit activities, and agricultural initiatives are achieved to support the ministry of the local churches.

Perspectives for the Future

1. Going back to the biblical and Anabaptist vision of a community-centered church, peace, reconciliation and mission values;
1. Focusing on disciple-making through Bible studies and mentoring;
1. Strengthening church management structures through formal and informal training;
1. Continuing to work holistically through social development activities while preaching the gospel;
1. Working to promote a new kind of a transformational leadership through multi-sector grants, in both theological and non-theological studies;
1. Continuing to resource pastors and other leaders in rural areas through innovative and appropriate methods;
1. Nourishing partnerships with the International Community of MBs, with Mennonite World Conference, as well as with other mission agencies from the Anabaptist tradition;
1. Taking our missionary responsibilities to be the light and the salt of our society, by bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth.
1. Raising compassion ministries towards vulnerable groups such as women, children, refugees, war-displaced, widows, orphans, retired pastors, etc.
1. Providing the urban churches with modern facilities that can accommodate the professional classes of our society;

1. Using mass media and new technologies to reach youth and the unreached groups with the gospel in this twenty-first century.

Angola

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church of Angola (IEIMA) was founded in 1983 as the result of native Angolans returning to their home country from Kinshasa, Congo (DRC). In 1981 a team from the local MB church of Makungu was formed among Angolans returning to their home country. The team was headed by Rev. Makani Mpovi Sebastiao Sikonda. According to Rev. Makani Mpovi, his motivation for returning to Angola was to carry out the responsibility that missionary Arnold Prieb entrusted him with to plant the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church in Angola.

When the team reached the city of Maquela-do-Zombo in the province of Uige, they made contact with many people and from there they became members of the Church of Christ in Angola (ICA). This is understandable because the background of the four local churches within the Congolese MB conference (CEFMC) in Kinshasa had a strong relationship with the ICA.

Two years later, after observing and getting to know the situation of the country at that time, the team moved from Uige and were allowed to enter the capital city, Luanda. Rev. Makani Mpovi by this time was a pastor of the ICA, though with full intention to start the Mennonite Brethren Church. His brother-in-law, Sanda Samuel, translated the Congolese MB constitution into Portuguese and, receiving approval from the Justice Ministry, Samuel offered his yard in the district of Rocha Pinto to start MB church planting in 1983.

At that time they strengthened the local church started at Rocha Pinto and efforts were made to plant new local churches in the capital of Luanda. Cazenga, Hoje-a-Henda, and Mabor were those new local churches planted in the years 1983 to 1984. Lay leaders were appointed as pastors due to the lack of trained ministers.

This was a period of dynamic beginnings, consolidation, and further expansion. In 1984 a delegation from MB Mission (North America) came to encourage the new believers and churches. Similar to the model of Acts 8:14, since Angolans had accepted the word of God there was a necessity to witness about what they heard and to welcome this new conference into the global MB family. The North American representatives were pleased with what they saw on their visit to their sister church and soon decided to send gifts to support the work of God in Angola, as it was a young conference which truly lacked material provisions.

A great conflict arose in 1986 when the conference leader, who had received the gifts from MB Mission, was confronted by another leader for making no effort to

include others to decide what should be done and how the work should continue. Other allegations revolved around lack of accountability and abuse of authority. With both leaders intent on maintaining discipline and respect before their colleagues, communication broke down.

In this way IEIMA fell into a pit of ongoing leadership conflicts. Attempts at mediation and reconciliation have been made by Angolans, Congolese, Brazilians and North Americans. Alternating periods of conflict and peace have been at the center of Angola's story...seemingly more of the former than the latter. This culture of conflict has also been a constant challenge for the MB Church in Angola.

At the same time, the church continues to grow, at least in number. In 1989, a new point of entry was initiated farther east in Malange province. Led by Rev. Jose Ngola Muenga, who had received his ministry call and formation under the tutelage of missionaries John and Sophie Esau, a new church and region of church planting began in the Quinguengue district, Malange. Also due to alternating periods of conflict in both the DR Congo and Angola, many village dwellers have emigrated back and forth across the Congo-Angolan border. This has led to many Congolese MBs being displaced to Angola. Bringing with them a missionary spirit and a desire for worship, fellowship, and discipleship, they have planted dozens of churches along the northern provinces of Angola, especially in the border regions of Malange and Lunda Norte provinces. Smaller clusters of churches have developed in the Uige, Lunda Sul, and Cabinda provinces. Outreach has begun in Cunene and Huila provinces.

In recent years IEIMA has enjoyed a time of peace. Partnerships with MB Mission, with the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB), and certain national conferences such as CEFMC (DR Congo), COBIM (Brazil), AIMP (Portugal) and BTG (Germany) have developed and IEIMA has enjoyed a season of consolidation. Capacity-building missionaries from the CEFMC (Masolo/Isaiko Mununga) and from COBIM (Silas/Djane Costa e Silva) have served in Angola. An indication of embracing and being embraced by the global family of MBs occurred in 2014 when for the first time ICOMB held its annual gathering in Angola.

Numerous ministries are in different phases of development for the further maturing of this young conference. IEIMA is organized into six regional sub-conferences. National-level ministries include church planting, community development, women's ministry, a Bible institute in Luanda, and global mission. IEIMA, or member regions or partners, have established both primary and secondary schools.

In 2014, just thirty years after such simple beginnings, IEIMA, in spite of numerous challenges past and present, has experienced special grace to grow in

number and maturity. Presently IEIMA counts ninety-three churches, eighty-four pastors (including some women), and 12,136 members.

Rev. Lutiniko Landu Miguel Pedro, founder of the now inter-Mennonite Bible Institute in Luanda, reflects on IEIMA's vision for the future:

According to its mission vision IEIMA should reach all 18 provinces within Angola with the gospel as well as reach Portuguese-speaking countries across Africa. What shall we do to help IEIMA to be effective in her mission within Angola and to reach into other countries? We need new churches to transform some older churches, to train leaders, and we need efforts to overcome poverty... This is why training among MBs in Angola is very important for a future with hope, namely, to preach the gospel of peace and reconciliation for the salvation of many who do not yet know about God's saving grace in Jesus Christ.²

Burkina Faso

The MB work in this West African country is an example of inter-agency cooperation. Mennonite Central Committee began the relief and development work of water projects in the early seventies. They were encouraged by contacts with the Christian and Missionary Alliance to send Mennonite missionaries to evangelize and plant churches in the southwest part of Burkina Faso. A mission with which MBs have cooperated over the decades, Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM) sent two missionary couples as a response to this call in 1978. Since then, a number of missionary-linguists have been sent, each to a different language group to work at Bible translation and eventually evangelism and church planting. Through these efforts the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Burkina Faso (EEMBF) has emerged.

Phillip and Carol Bergen, MB missionary Bible translators, came under AIMM in 1990 to work with the Nanerige people group in the region of N'Dorola, together with AIMM pioneer missionaries Dan and Kathy Peterson. In 1993 MB Mission decided to fully engage with AIMM, thus facilitating the Bergens to be sent out under a joint appointment of MB Mission and AIMM. This also led to a stronger involvement by North American MB churches in this pioneer ministry. Upon a very receptive response by the Nanerige to the portions of Scripture that had been translated and communicated by the Bergens and national workers such as Maliki Ouattara, the need for other workers became obvious. Thus MB Mission sent another missionary couple, Blaine and Michelle Warner, to assist in evangelism, discipleship and planting the new church.³ The national Mennonite church, EEMBF, also sent pastor couple Madou and Mariam Traore to give pastoral leadership in establishing

new churches. Thus far, three groups of newly-baptized believers and seekers are gathering weekly in N'Dorola, Silorola and Kalifara.

Most of the conversions, baptisms, and new gatherings have begun in the last few years. The first baptism of nine new believers was conducted November 16, 2008. It appears that after many years of sowing, watering and cultivating, the harvest among the 80,000 unreached Nanerige is beginning.⁴

Malawi

Malawi is a small land-locked country in southeastern Africa, bordering Tanzania (north), Mozambique (east and south), and Zambia (west). It has a population of fifteen million, of which eighty percent are classified as Christian. Of these up to half are evangelical Protestant. One might ask how Mennonite Brethren in general and MB Mission in particular have become involved in mission work in a country that seems to have such a strong Christian presence.

The MB Mission ministry of Disciple Making International (DMI) has sent short-term evangelistic teams to numerous countries, both with and without any MB church. DMI always seeks an apostolic national partner to provide leadership and mobilization of the national church. For a number of campaigns in southern and eastern Africa last decade, DMI partnered with Bonface Machewere of Malawi. In his own city of Blantyre, Bonface and his wife Zelita received a vision to bring spiritual rebirth to the unevangelized of Malawi, spiritual renewal to the many nominal Christians, and holistic community transformation to the impoverished people of Malawi. Their ministry approach would include: evangelism and church planting, discipleship, community development, leadership development, and sending out mission workers.

In late 2006 the Macheweres gathered thirty people into their home and the Restoration Bible Church was begun. Since then, they have invited DMI to come to Malawi to conduct city-wide campaigns in partnership with all denominations in order to sow the gospel widely for a greater harvest. As follow-up is conducted for those interested in truly following Christ, it often becomes evident that either the volume of seekers is too great for existing churches to handle, or there are regions where no healthy church is gathering. In this way the Restoration Bible Church (RBC) has planted at least another seven churches since 2006.

Given our journey of serving and learning together, given our high level of mutual trust, and given our similar vision and philosophy of ministry, when the invitation came from RBC to come alongside and build up this fledgling yet vibrant family of churches, it was not difficult for MB Mission and ICOMB to accept this Macedonian call.

Today the RBC is spread out from Blantyre in the south to the capital of Mzuzu in the north. There is a related group meeting in Zambia as well as connections to Mozambique in at least one church. They also face the same challenges of so many African brothers and sisters, namely, difficult access to education, difficult access to formal employment, the growth of Islam, and the scourge of HIV-AIDS. Here is a small conference with a big vision to bring a gospel of both individual and community transformation to Malawi and neighboring countries.

Other Countries

Beginning in 1976, MB Mission entered into a partnership with AIMM to work in teaching and training among the African Independent Churches of Botswana. Over nearly three decades MB Mission supplied workers to help develop leadership among these fast growing churches. During this time the HIV-AIDS epidemic became rampant in Botswana, and so workers also engaged in preventative education. When Brian and Teresa Born completed their many years of service in 2004, no more workers were found and so involvement in Botswana was discontinued. No efforts were made to establish MB churches.⁵

In the “DR CONGO” section above, reference has been made to missionaries sent by the CEFMC conference into Brazzaville (Republic of Congo), South Africa. Indeed, today there are small MB churches in these countries.

An MB Church has also emerged rather spontaneously in Namibia, the southern neighbor to Angola. CEFMC member Jules Massakidi while working in the region began a prayer cell among Angolan workers in northern Namibia in 1999. Another Angolan, Pedro Moussongela Marcelino, assumed leadership of the group in 2000 and began planting churches and schools in the Oshakati region. Fraternal visits have been made and assistance given by both Angolans and DMI teams from North America. At present the MB Church is a legally registered church in Namibia, with fourteen churches, ca. 300 members,⁶ a primary school and an orphanage. Although fraternal relations continue between the Angolan MB conference and the MB Church in Namibia, as of yet there are no formal partnerships with either MB Mission or ICOMB.

A network of house churches is emerging among Arabic-speaking peoples across North Africa. These have been planted through radio, television and other mass media ministries conducted by MB Mission-supported Egyptian missionaries together with many Arabic-speaking national workers.⁷

Finally, in partnership with other agencies, and through short-term missions, MB workers have served in numerous other countries from Zimbabwe to Djibouti, and from Mozambique to Senegal.⁸

Missional Reflections

While there is much diversity to the preceding stories of the development of MB missions and churches in Africa, there are also some common themes, and some common challenges. The following comments are not meant to exhaust the depths of such themes and challenges, but rather to identify issues for further reflection and discussion. For now, we will focus on five such issues.

The spontaneous expansion of the church. It is noteworthy that in most of the countries cited above, and indeed within the largest conference, namely the CEFMC of the DR Congo, the growth of the gospel and the resulting church has not been strategically planned. True, elements of prayerful and strategic planning are evident: the selection of well-suited fields like Kafumba; the holistic approach including evangelism, education, medicine and literature; and the complex and highly technical tasks of acquiring language skills for Scripture translation and proclamation among groups like the Nanerige. Yet the stories are filled with orchestrations of the Holy Spirit that no human could have imagined. Consider the unexpected acquisition of mission stations at Lusemvu, Kajiji, Panzi and Kibenga. Consider the unplanned flight to Kinshasa for protection, education and employment by younger MB church members which over time has resulted in more than sixty churches in that city. Consider the tragic wars in Angola which led multitudes to the DR Congo, where many were evangelized and discipled by MB believers, only to return to their homeland with a mandate to take the transforming gospel of Christ with them, thus resulting over a relatively short period of time in the planting of over 100 churches. Who could have planned this? Consider the informal family and friendship networking that has resulted in cells of believers in countries where there were no intentions of entering, such as Namibia, South Africa and Zambia, not to mention Muslim majority countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

The spiritual fertility of Africa. Today Africa is the continent where Christianity grows the fastest. It is fertile soil for the gospel. Where in many locations in Europe and North America, it may take years for a church to be planted and rooted, it is not uncommon among our African MB evangelists to plant a church in a matter of weeks. The blessing of this amazing receptivity also contains sobering challenges that we present as questions: With such ease of planting (expansion), will the needed rooting (consolidation) receive adequate attention? Will we encourage the making of decisions or disciples? Will young churches find a strong and stable identity in the evangelical Anabaptist family into which they have been born, or will they wander about as orphans and somehow become captivated by marginal movements of which there are plenty? Will African believers in our churches experience only a change of appearance and habits, or will they become transformed at the core and remain both faithful and fruitful?

The ongoing struggle against poverty and its consequences. At the macro-level, there are encouraging signs in Africa. The economies of Nigeria, South Africa and Angola show a robustness thus far unknown in Africa. Yet if the wealth is somehow destined to “trickle down,” it hasn’t happened yet for the majority. The Human Development Index of the United Nations is a widely-accepted measurement of the quality of life, including distance from poverty. Of 187 countries measured, the countries referred to above are ranked as follows: Angola = 149, Malawi = 174, Burkina Faso = 181, and DR Congo = 186. All are in the lowest quarter of the index. On the side of hope, there is a growing understanding among churches, including those relating to the global MB family, that poverty is not merely an economic issue, but a state of mind. Investment in education at all levels and of all types is an essential part of the “renewing of the mind” in the battle against poverty. Equipping not only with marketable skills, but with a creative and can-do mentality (Asset-Based Community Development) is happening *for* and increasingly *from* Africans. This too is the good news of the gospel.

Peace churches in the midst of conflict cultures. Common to all countries where MBs are working are young if not unstable democracies, and histories of both social and political conflict. Angola experienced a 27-year civil war. DR Congo has also suffered unspeakable atrocities on a fairly regular basis, and as I write the capital of Kinshasa is once again subject to violent political demonstrations. Add to the political conflicts those involving uprisings of the *haves* against the *have-nots*, tribal conflicts, and religious conflicts especially between Muslims and Christians...much of Africa experiences a culture of conflict on a daily basis. Mennonite Brethren together with all Mennonites believe in a holistic gospel of peace: peace with God...with neighbor... within...and with the creation. Is it coincidence that the largest continental grouping in the Mennonite World Conference has also been placed in the world’s arguably most conflicted continent?⁹ I think not. However, nominal Christianity will not bring change to a conflicted Africa—consider “Christian” Rwanda of 1994. One challenge is to keep peace with God central and essential when we proclaim a gospel of peace. Another challenge is consider peace with neighbor also essential as part of our peace church identity, including the call by our Lord to not merely *live* in peace, but to *make* peace.

African missionaries. It is most encouraging to witness the emerging African missionary movement. Indeed, it is also present among MB churches. Note those sent from the CEFMC to Congo-Brazzaville, to Angola, to South Africa, and to the Congolese diaspora in Europe. Note the Angolan conference’s attempts to come alongside the Namibian churches. Note the Restoration Bible Church of Malawi

planting a cell in Zambia, and preparing for outreach to Mozambique and Tanzania. Vision, courage and rising workers are not in short supply. Perhaps the greater challenges will be in matters of adequate training for mission service, adequate sending structures, and viable means of supporting these missionaries that are contextual for Africa. These are not insignificant challenges, yet neither are they insurmountable. The same sovereign God who has orchestrated the spontaneous expansion of his church in Africa, is also able to orchestrate, both spontaneously and strategically, a missionary force from this same church.

Notes

- ¹ Photo from Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. Used by Permission.
- ² Lutiniko Landu Miguel Pedro, “The Mennonite Brethren Church in Angola,” in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 182.
- ³ Harold Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission: Observations and Reflections, 1966-2006* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010), 88.
- ⁴ Ray Harms-Wiebe, “Expanding Horizons,” in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Kitchener and Winnipeg: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 352-354.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-88.
- ⁶ Mennonite World Conference World Directory (2012): 6, accessed January 28, 2015, https://www.mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/website_files/mwc_world_directory_w_links_minus_cover.pdf.
- ⁷ Due to the sensitive nature of this ministry to Muslims, extensive information cannot be given in print.
- ⁸ Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission*, 95-98.
- ⁹ MWC World Directory, 35.

Recommended Reading

- Bergen, Phillip A. *Ye faabe: A day in the life of a Nanerige family*. Shafter: Bergen Books, 2013.
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Study Questions

1. Give examples where partnerships among mission agencies or national conferences have played a key role in the establishment of the church. What are some key ingredients for partnerships to function in a fruitful manner?
2. The training of church and mission leaders is a key challenge for the future in Africa. Given other challenges such as limited funds available and limited access to recommended training institutions, what are some alternative options for the development of leadership for African churches and missions?