

West Central African Conference.

AT Leopoldville, formerly known as Kinshasa, the capital of the Belgian Congo, there was held between 13th and 24th July, 1946, a notable missionary conference, at which it was my good fortune to represent the Baptist Missionary Society, one of the pioneers of the Congo Mission.

During my missionary career I have attended three such Conferences organised by the Congo Protestant Council—the first, in 1921, then the Jubilee Conference in 1928, and lastly the Mott Conference in 1934. But this West Central African Conference was more ambitious and significant than all previous meetings for the following reasons: it was the first important post-war missionary conference in any field, it was the first Congo conference to which Africans had come as regular delegates, and lastly, it was attended by a large number of Board Secretaries and others from the sending countries. Thus there came together representatives of the older and younger churches, with a solid missionary buffer between them, a buffer which had to take a few knocks from either side. But this triad could more aptly be likened to a triangle with its three members linked in a common purpose, though subtending rather different angles. If any one point of view seemed too acute it was balanced by a correspondingly obtuse angle elsewhere, so that between us we managed to get a right angle and some sort of symmetry in the shape of things to come.

From the linguistic aspect we tried to reduce the African Tower of Babel to a solid pyramid whose four sides were English, American, French, and Portuguese. The hidden base was the submerged Bantu—not one of whose eight hundred languages and dialects could have a place in the sun, except on Sunday at the Public Services. At the summit of the pyramid were perched, in all their Olympian glory, our interpreters, versatile folk of both sexes, (of whom Miss Lily Jenks was “awarded the palm”) who could turn the pyramid with a twist of the tongue, or sometimes by a “tour de force”, so that the audience was presented with its own familiar aspect.

It was a thrill to me to get to Leopoldville in as many hours as it had taken days on my first voyage. One hop, from Brussels to Algiers, a skip over the Sahara by night to Lagos, and a jump over the jungle to Leopoldville in 24 hours. Instead of a

push push for the ladies, a handcart for the baggage, and flat feet for the men, where motors were unknown even in 1920, now natives hail taxis and drive their own cars. Instead of hiding one's head under a hideous helmet one did not even trouble to wear a hat except to keep one's hair tidy. Folk have now learnt what they really need to fear—and protect themselves internally from malaria by drugs more potent than quinine, and from enteric and yellow fever by inoculations, without which one cannot board a train or steamer.

The Congo did well for the war, and quite well out of it. It was a highway for "vipers" and the lesser breeds,—men who passed up and down planning that the common enemy might have death.

But we, the successors of those who launched the "Peace" and the "Goodwill" on the Congo waters, came together to plan "That they might have life", for that was the theme of our Conference. It was, therefore, appropriate that the abandoned American hutted war hospital should have been purchased and adapted by the Congo Protestant Council for the purpose of housing us, and it proved most suitable and convenient. Be-flagged and decorated, it presented a colourful spectacle as delegates and guests arrived on the first Saturday afternoon for the Opening Ceremony.

Alongside the red-backed dais, adorned with objects of primitive African art and culture, was installed the most modern broadcasting apparatus, which put us "on the air", and relayed the proceedings to every corner of the erstwhile "Dark Continent". Radio had replaced the reverberating drums. Savages, transformed into modern soldiers, complete with bands, were evidence of Belgian civilising and emancipating work. The white-robed choir of the Kimpese Union Training Institute were symbols of the educational and cultural work of Missions. But the most striking fact of all, for those who could see it, was the solid foundation built in living stones of the Church of Christ in Congo. These stalwart sons of the Church came together—some sent by their own congregations, others at their own expense, one actually by air from 2,000 miles away. Formerly men were banded together in secret societies for mutual profit and anti-social action, and there are still those killers called "the leopard men" of the Congo. Here we were members of one family, one faith, one Lord, one baptism, met together that they all might share in the abundant life.

Our Leaders were well chosen—the Rev. Norman Goodall, as President, and three Vice-Principals—Pastor Schloesing, from Paris, Dr. John Tucker, from Canada and Angola, and Dr. Stanley Smith, of the Ruanda Bible and Medical Mission of the C.M.S.

They, and others of us, including the Rev. Wakelin Coxill, the retiring Congo Protestant Council Secretary, welcomed the guests—residents, officials, soldiers, members of the consular corps, and the Governor-General, M. Pierre Ryckmans.

The latter's speech to us was in the nature of a "swan song" for we bade him farewell two days later as he left the Congo, after a most distinguished career, in which he had shown himself the true friend and champion of the African. "In these troubles," he said to us, "which civilisation brings into native society, we must try and establish a new harmony; and there we need you. Human law can bring peace and justice and order, but it is insufficient to bring in the reign of love." He went on to foreshadow the measures for which Protestant Missions in the Congo have been pleading in the name of liberty and justice for many decades. "Concerning the Protestant faith the Government has decided to give to the native Protestant community of Congo greater opportunities of education and development in harmony with their conscience." A resounding ovation greeted this statement for it meant the beginning of the end of a policy which has exclusively favoured the R.C. Church in the realm of education, and this tended to create an under-privileged and discontented Protestant community. Relationships between the Belgian authorities and the Conference made up largely of Anglo-Saxons all out of sympathy with the predominant Roman Catholic religion of Belgium might not have been easy, let alone cordial. That they were so, however, is due firstly to the reputation which the majority of Protestant Missions have rightly earned, and also to the presence among us of some distinguished Belgians. There were Lieut. Colonel H. L. Becquet, the able and devoted leader of the Salvation Army in the Congo, with his sister and members of his staff. There was also M. Faidherbe, a business man spending some time as a voluntary worker with the Belgian Protestant Mission in Urundi, and Colonel Van Goethem, the chief Protestant padre of the Metropolitan Army, who had flown out with me on a mission to establish Protestant chaplaincies for the Colonial troops and link them up with other Protestant Missions. Baptists of all brands were much in evidence. Our own Society had its full ten per cent. quota. Our American and Canadian cousins were there, and Scandinavian groups were all represented, while many other Missions which were Baptist in all but name sent delegates. We were foremost in our support of the Church of Christ in Congo, and notable was the contribution of the Danish Baptist leader—Hans P. Jensen in appealing for unity. He had been brought up in the strictest tradition to consider even a professional Pastor as an agent of the devil, but had come to realise the revelation of the unity of the Body of Christ.

He complained that Protestants tend to get even more Lutheran than Luther and urged us not to magnify "convictions" above love.

The clash of colour was perhaps more evident as proceedings developed than the denominational differences. Besides our African colleagues, who were experiencing their first taste of liberty, equality and fraternity and anxious to get many things "off their chests," there were coloured representatives from other parts of Africa and over the Atlantic. These latter can be excused if tempted to oversentimentalise the colour question and to resent even the affectionate title of "boy" if its use survives into adult life. One friend even found this definitely derogatory to the sanctity of personality. Another, in an attempt to claim that the Missions must forthwith establish a Congo university held up the President's ebony and ivory gavel and exclaimed "This represents the African knocking on the door of education which is never opened." The silence which followed could be felt. We missionaries who had in older days been castigated by Government and commercial interests for even presuming to educate the natives were now being told, in effect, that we were "the niggers in the wood pile." That gesture, however, gave me a sermon which was repeated, by request, on more than one occasion. It was entitled "The Hammer"—black head and white handle, either alone would be useless; it took some shaping and knocking to bring them together into a very useful tool, which must be carefully used or the head would fly off the handle. Whose hand was to hold the hammer?—the Carpenter of Nazareth—etc.

That "flying off the handle" gave us some concern. We have had a foretaste of Separatist Movements which have caused widespread suffering to thousands owing to strict Government action. We realise that they are in the main compensatory phenomena for actual or imagined frustrations and recommended a Commission for their study, to avoid a repetition of the state of affairs which has developed in South Africa. There are many hundreds of such bodies. It was agreed that some Old Testament characters must be held up as a warning how not to behave rather than as pious patriarchs and patterns for holy living.

Dr. Reinault Jones of the Institute of Race Relationships encouraged us to believe that the emancipating of the common folk in the Union was being demanded by industry, and that public opinion favoured increased wages. The mechanisation of industry was side-tracking the colour bar, for natives are essential to its maintenance.

But our main theme developed round the life of the individual and the Church. We boldly stated at the outset of our findings that the basis of the Christian life is personal voluntary

commitment to Jesus Christ. Christ came that men might have life—the Church exists to proclaim it.

Thinking of the Church as the family, and the family in the Church, we considered ways of relating one to the other. Family pews, family Sundays, family worship, family duties, women's place in the family and Church, etc.

The plans for education were rethought in the light of Government proposals and the Church and local communities urged to provide their village and regional schools, leaving the Missions, with Government aids, to provide middle schools. Literacy was to be tackled with a twenty-year programme, inaugurated by the forthcoming visit of Dr. Laubach. Higher education should be in united institutions and Missions were still to retain their place in the medical education of the various classes of subordinate medical workers. We were against the idea of a graduate medical school as being out of relation to the real needs of the rural population, which could better be served by the medical assistant class than by a fully fledged doctor who might only be trained with a very great effort and expenditure.

Our former C.P.C. Secretary, Dr. Emory Ross, and Mrs. Ross, were leading spirits in the presentation of new expansionist urges while men like our Congo Secretary, Mr. Reynolds, kept us well down to fundamentals.

The veteran lady missionary, Dr. Mabie, touched us all on a tender place when she spoke out of vast experience and deep insight of missionary relationships—the little foxes which spoil the vines—those missionaries who do not grade up to the highest, those who made a hobby of work, and work a hobby, those who were always right, of lazy missionaries who were either pious or ill, and of the inefficient player with gadgets, etc. It was a timely warning lest any of us should be cast-aways. So by talking, feeding and living together we tried to see ourselves as others see us. We stood back in detachment from our work and got a perspective. At the end of the Conference the Africans asked "And when are we going to start doing all these things?" The answer to that will depend upon many factors, not the least the appreciation of the older Churches of the tremendous opportunity now presenting itself to them on the Congo field. Our own Society is in very great need of Congo recruits, ministers and educationalists especially. Though the difficulties may be very great and the issues confused in other of our fields, there are nothing but open doors in the Congo and a beckoning voice: "Come over and help us."

CLEMENT C. CHESTERMAN.