



A Treasured Bond

I am sitting on a plane going to the Democratic Republic of Congo for the first time. The Covenant Church of Congo (CEUM) is our largest sister church, larger even than we are here. The ministry thrives despite seemingly intractable social conditions, including overwhelming poverty and excruciating civil strife. Indeed, for the past several years, Congo has been identified by the United Nations as one of the two or three poorest countries in the world.

There are other groups just as committed to Congo as the Evangelical Covenant Church, but there are also too many who are taking a pass because of the unsettledness. I was talking with a very reputable organization that I greatly respect about joining us in a children's initiative. They looked at it closely but in the end said Congo does not yet meet their baseline standards for a country they could work in. They asked if we instead would consider a neighboring country with greater stability. I said no. Some loyalties cannot be explained by strategy and benchmarks. We are not in Congo because of any value proposition. We are in Congo because Congo is in us.

As I ponder why there is this deep-seated bond, I ruminate about three things.

First, I wonder if there isn't some heavenly orchestration dating back to our very birth as a movement. We were founded in 1885. That is the exact same year that King Leopold II of Belgium audaciously declared Congo to be his personal possession, ushering in a brutal and repressive colonial period of plunder, exploitation, rape, and brutality where the massive loss of life totaled 20 percent of the population until an international outcry stemmed the madness. Systemic trauma echoes still. Could it be at the exact time the repression of Congo began God birthed a counteractive movement called the Evangelical Covenant Church? I do not dismiss the possibility. Our working definition of justice is this: joining God in making things right in this broken world.

While circumstances remain challenging, from our humble initial efforts in 1937, the CEUM leadership, led today by Mossai Sanguma, now oversees 1,550 churches, five hospitals, 93 clinics, an educational system serving 65,000 students, and micro-enterprise projects bringing measures of economic development to families and villages.

Second, I wonder if it is the voice of our own who gave their lives in Congo that keeps beckoning us. Paul Carlson was a medical missionary who was slain during an uprising in the 1960s. Although I never knew him, his widow, Lois, was a member of Clairemont Covenant Church in San Diego when I was the pastor there. I have been inspired by her stories of his dedication. I will visit his grave in Congo. But he is not the only one to give his life. Six others from our missionary community are buried there, including two children. A legacy means that all God wants to accomplish in one's life is not accomplished within one's life span. One thing these deceased still accomplish is linking our hearts to Congo. Remember, Jesus says where our treasure is, there is our heart also. Because we treasure the sacrifice made, our heart remains entwined there.

Finally, I wonder if the poverty of our own soul does not draw us to the riches of our Congolese brothers and sisters. There is pain and grief, yes, but couched always in hope and sustained by peace. Byron Miller is the director of Paul Carlson Partnership, a Covenant organization that specifically focuses on medical and development initiatives in Congo. His observation is that there are three kinds of riches in life—spiritual, relational, and economic. He observes that our brothers and sisters in the CEUM are rich beyond measure in two out of three, compared to the spiritual and relational paucity that exists in our overly materialistic West. When faith in the risen Christ is stripped of material pretense it inevitably leads to greater measures of authenticity. It inspires us by confirming how substantive, rugged, and durable faith is to sustain us through all the vagaries of life.

While there may be many reasons for why we have developed a strong bond with Congo in the past, here is the fundamental reason for sustaining it now: interdependence is the biblical pattern that leads to the flourishing and encouragement of all. One of the great gifts that God gives is others for the journey. God has given us Congo and vice-versa—two churches serving together in the mission of God as partners and friends. ■

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