

Andrew Symes' Congo Diary 2014

Part One

At GAFCON in Nairobi last October, the Archbishop of the Anglican Province of Congo, Henri Isingoma, and his Provincial Secretary Anthonio Kibwela were perusing the many stalls displaying the work of various ministries around the world. Anglican Mainstream was one of these. Six months later I received an invitation from Ven. Anthonio Kibwela, a regular reader of the AM website, to come to the Congo and give some teaching on Christian marriage to clergy and youth leaders, and in particular to explain the new ideas about sex and marriage that have taken hold in the West and now infiltrating into Africa. Another purpose of my visit would be to forge stronger links between Anglican churches in DR Congo and the English church, links which are not as strong as they used to be: many missionaries working in Congo have retired and not been replaced, others have left as a result of the terrible conflicts there, and communications with local churches are often difficult.

Preparation involved fundraising, the time consuming administration of obtaining a visa, thinking about teaching outlines, and of course brushing up on my French: the gift of a modern version French Bible from a friend helped a lot in this. I read a couple of recent travel accounts by intrepid journalists, which were useful for politics and history, although their descriptions were mostly of the Eastern forest region and not the areas I would be in. Thankfully, just a few days before my departure, at the ACNA conference in Pennsylvania I met an American couple who had just returned from Congo and Tanzania where they had been involved with a team who travel to that region regularly, giving encouragement, bible teaching and prayer/healing ministry. This couple were able to fill me in with more details about the state of the church, and pass on my situation to their own team of intercessors familiar with the needs of the region.

Day One

I was still recovering from jetlag, having flown in from USA only 42 hours previously, when I boarded the bus from Oxford to Heathrow at 2am on 2nd July. My flight to Brussels was at 6am, and I managed to get across from one terminal to another in good time to board the flight to Kinshasa and the chance of a few more snatches of sleep.

Anthonio had asked me to wear my clerical shirt on arrival and I did so, having donned it in the aeroplane toilet, superman-style, as we began our descent. I was met at the entrance to the airport building by an off-duty immigration official who stood with me in the short queue for non-Congolese nationals; she shepherded me through passport control, baggage claim and customs so I was able to avoid any potential hassles. Anthonio and the Bishop's chauffeur met me outside and took me the half hour ride to town, where they left me at a guest house run by Roman Catholic nuns. They had prepared a meal for me. It was now 8.30 pm. I slept well.

Day 2

I was collected from the guest house at 8am and taken along what was to become a familiar ride of about 2 miles to the small complex which houses the Provincial Offices, St Peter's Parish Church, and Anthonio's personal accommodation. After morning prayer I spent a short time with the Archbishop. He is not an old man but looks careworn with the responsibility of such a vast area with so many needs and so few resources (see next article for information on the historical context of the country and the church). Rt Revd Henri Isingoma was very pleased that I had come, and in fact sat in on the workshops for short period on both days.

Meanwhile young people from the parishes around Kinshasa were starting to arrive for the first workshop. There were about 25 in all, who had various responsibilities and ministries of youth leadership from a dozen or so congregations. Most spoke good French but a few did not so Anthonio had organised a Nigerian resident to interpret for me when my French failed – we proceeded with a mixture of French, English and Lingala. Beginning with Genesis 1:26-28 we looked at God's plan for marriage and sex according to the Bible, what has gone wrong not just in that area but the whole of life, what Christ has done to bring forgiveness and transformation, and the importance of faithful marriage and celibate singleness in our Christian witness.

There was plenty of laughter, opportunities for small group discussion and feedback about local application, singing, questions and answers. It was clear that this is an evangelical church: I did not find a sacramental understanding of faith as with many Anglicans in South Africa for example. The Gospel of the cross of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit was not new to these folk but of course they felt they needed help to live it and get it across as we all do. Although the Catholic Church is still very strong in DR Congo, there is a vibrant presence of innumerable new Pentecostal churches who have influenced Anglicans across the continent in their worship, experience of God and evangelism. However the teaching of many Pentecostal churches is often not consistently biblical; they are prone to leadership cults, prosperity crazes and church splits. African Anglicanism seems to provide a good balance between the extremes of 'sacerdotalists' and 'anabaptists' (as Cranmer envisaged: this is the true *via media*, not some kind of middle ground between truth and error as some people think!)

The homosexuality question came from the participants. I had been wondering how to introduce it but it was asked anyway. One of the comments thrown at them as they share Jesus with friends and invite them to church, is that the Anglican church is "for gays". Interestingly although some of the young people said that this was irritating and gave them problems answering, none of them had experienced violence or bullying as a result of being associated with a "church for gays" – rather the impression they gave was that people wondered how it could be a real church.

During our discussion, these predominantly urbanised African young people were more than able to appreciate the difference between relating in a Christian

way with same sex attracted people who may or may not be in gay relationships, and understanding and rejecting the 'enlightenment' philosophies of the West which have given rise to the redefinition of gender, marriage, family and sexual ethics. It was actually a really interesting challenge to try to explain, partly in French, why some Anglicans have completely accepted these new ideas and integrated them into a re-envisioned account of Christianity, and others have stood firm with "the faith once delivered", and how this has led to the tensions and splits of GAFCON, ACNA and those cracks that C of E functionaries are desperately trying to paper over. The Congolese young people also understood how the Western sexual revolution was making inroads into urban African life. They themselves made a parallel with the need to resist with a clear understanding and practice of the Bible's teaching new heresies from Europe and America just as they continue to resist old heresies, such as temptations to mix traditional African spiritual occultism with faith.

But more immediate problems face them with regard to sex and marriage: the stalking scourge of AIDS, (for girls) the threat of sexual violence, and (for the guys) how to find the money to pay the family of the bride. I wasn't able to help with this latter problem!

We finished before 4, and Anthonio was able to take me for a brief tour of the city. The traffic, and the 'dodgem' skills required to negotiate it – well, don't go there. The highlight was catching a glimpse of the pool of the mighty Congo River with Brazzaville capital of the "other" Congo state sitting opposite on the hill about two or three miles across the water. Evening meal spent watching football, back to the guest house and bed. A good day.

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Day three

By now I was beginning to get used to life in a former French speaking colony. Standard breakfast of coffee, baguette, a portion of La Vache qui Rit cheese, and Nutella. Then off to morning prayer in French, followed by, this time, a workshop on marriage for clergy, evangelists, lay ministers and their wives from the Diocese of Kinshasa – more than 50 in all. I began with the same biblical foundations as the previous day. We didn't have time to talk about the 'gay' issue as we needed to deal with the many real practical and pastoral issues of marriage that came up in the buzz groups (where I separated the men and the women). I was really impressed with the willingness of these people on the frontline of ministry to be honest about problems in their own marriages and about their struggles in the pastoral care of others. They seemed particularly encouraged by the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 4:17f on the need for transformation of character in relating to others, the balance of submission and service in Ephesians 5:21f, and the five "love languages" developed by Gary Chapman and of course used by the HTB Marriage Course. The day ended with a moving time of prayer for one another and for church members.

Then it was out again for the late afternoon tour of a different part of the city. Kinshasa is about the same size as London population wise. The centre is faded colonial buildings and new high rises; a bit further out and the streets are lined with small shopfront businesses, some of which are now owned by a new influx of Nigerians some of whom have given new impetus to the Anglican churches. Everywhere the constant press of colourfully dressed people, queues of minibus taxis and blaring Congolese music with its distinctive rhythms, the sharp 'plinkety plink' of the single coil electric guitar and the melody-harmony call-and-response of the singing. Further out again are shabby industrial estates and then the sprawling shanty towns.

A bit of history: the Belgian colony of Congo, which King Leopold established as his personal fiefdom in the 1880's with brutality that was worse than most during the colonial era, extended from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Tanganyika, a distance of over 1300 miles. The rewards for bravely taming the impenetrable jungle were immense – huge reserves of minerals lay untapped underground. Roads and rail networks were built, and new towns looking like copies of Europe were set up. But as in many African countries, the minerals and cash crops were shipped out raw, benefitting mostly the multinationals and their shareholders like most of us who have pensions. By the time of independence in the late 1950's, a system had developed where well educated Congolese had been well trained to run things along colonial lines, ie for their own benefit. Basic services for the general population especially in rural areas were never developed. After some years of relative calm, a period of instability ensued in the 1960's (harrowingly described in VS Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, resulting in Mobutu Sese Seko taking control and beginning his awful mismanagement of the country that has been termed a "kleptocracy" or rule by thieves. Being fiercely anti-

communist he was seen as a useful ally by the West who wanted to preserve access to cheap minerals and make a bulwark against the encroachment of Soviet influence in Angola.

1994 saw the horrific genocide of Tutsi by Hutus in Rwanda. When it came to an end many of the Hutu militias fled east into the jungles of the Congo, and this triggered a war in which many African nations were involved, and which is only just coming to an end now. It is estimated that as many as 5 million have died during this twenty year period. A terrible history in which no-one – African or Western – can escape blame. But my impression of the country, though confined to the Western and Southern cities, is one of a country with a desire to put the past behind, and to move forward with hope to a society where the majority can be uplifted and have a chance to thrive.

During the colonial era the Catholic Church enjoyed hegemony in most areas, but in some regions West of the Lakes, permission was granted to some Protestant denominations to open up the area for the Gospel. A Ugandan Anglican and his team were the first to come across the border in the 1890's, plant churches and establish the first Diocese in the Congo. Anglicanism developed quickly, partly because of the common Swahili language in the East, but also because of the persistence and courage of early missionaries from England, Uganda and locally. To this day CMS has its strongest links with Dioceses in the Eastern strip. Kinshasa and other areas in the West do not know Swahili or English so Anglican churches have only recently been established there.

Day Four

This was Saturday; no teaching but a chance to talk to individuals and learn a bit more about the country. In the morning I spent two hours with Hendré Lusey, the Regional Coordinator for the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical HIV/AIDS initiatives. Originally from a village 350 miles east of the capital with no electricity or running water, he excelled academically and studied Public Health in Liverpool in the mid 1990's. While fellow African students there stayed on to live and work in England, Lusey returned to his home region to run a church based primary health care project, funded by the Reformed Basel Mission and the German charity Bread for the World. Having come from a context of poverty, he has seen God's hand on his life, providing for him and enabling him to serve the sort of communities which nurtured him.

Hendré had been briefed by Anthonio that he should come prepared to talk about sex. And that's what I quizzed him on. Traditional cultural practices were supposed to protect girls, he said. Virginity was highly valued, and sexual activity was strictly regulated. This had largely collapsed, due to the seismic jolts to society caused by colonialisation, the boom and bust of the Mobutu years, war, and urbanisation during the last 130 years. The particular concern now is grinding poverty causing young girls to be vulnerable to rape and prostitution. Men target young girls for sex as it is cheaper and safer; girls can earn a bit of money and in some cases are even encouraged by parents. In such a situation the church is vital as having the ethical framework and the community reach to

regulate sexual behaviour. Faith gives self respect and enables people to take control of their emotions and their environment, giving hope and direction in a chaotic situation.

The particular horror of women being deliberately targeted for rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war to humiliate, utterly crush and dominate a people was highlighted at the recent London conference hosted by William Hague and famously graced by Angelina Jolie. Hendré was there with Archbishop Isingoma, who has publicly spoken out against mistreatment of women by men. The Anglican Church has been one of the leading local grassroots organisations highlighting the issue and providing counselling and rehabilitation for victims in the north East of the country where the war has raged fiercest and continues still in places.

We then approached the subject of homosexuality. What is the situation in Congo, given a recent flurry of attacks by Western gay activists and politicians on African “homophobia”? Traditionally, says Lusey, there were always a small number of same sex attracted people in every community. Families would have been involved, with sensitive counselling. Now we are living in a globalised world, and “we know about homosexuality – it is there”. He continues: “In Kinshasa there is pederasty [older men with young boys], and some gay couples no doubt live together openly in Westernised areas. There is now a centre, a sort of hostel for LGBT people, funded by some European NGO. People see this as a new way of getting money from whites. We will respect people, but it is an insult to say that unless we actively promote this as a good thing, aid will be cut. Besides, we have more pressing issues, like food and basic security”.

Are gay people specific targets for violence? I ask. His reply is that while there might be cases of people beaten up for being gay, they are much more likely to suffer violence for having nice shoes, looking at someone in the wrong way, being from a different tribe, or otherwise being in the wrong place at the wrong time. While no doubt much more research is needed on the detail of this, it seems clear that to focus on “homophobic” violence in countries where there is a basic lack of security everywhere would be foolish, as would insisting that the Christian church changes its ethical framework when it is the church that is often one of the foundations of a more tolerant and secure society.

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Day Five

Sunday morning I was again taken to St Peters, this time for the "English Service" (Church of Nigeria Rite) which began at 8 with a formal procession, hymns and the opening liturgy of Morning Prayer. The intercessions and the preaching were heavily Pentecostal in style, with the volume turned up to maximum on the microphone, and the band ramping it up in the background. The service was supposed to end at 10 to make way for the Lingala service, but of course by 10 the preacher had only just got going. At the start the congregation was meagre but by 10 the room was packed with maybe 250, who then streamed forward for the anointing with oil. By 11 the Nigerians, with a majority of young men with their own small businesses in Kinshasa, had drifted away, hearts stirred by the worship and preaching; the Congolese stayed and were joined by others for the next service.

After an early lunch Anthonio and I were taken to the airport for the flight to Lubumbashi. Quite a long haul, as the plane touches down en route at Mbuji-Mayi, a mining town in the middle of a vast area of rolling green hills, wooded valleys and flat sandy expanses. Lubumbashi is about 1200 miles south east of the capital, near the Zambian border; that fact, plus its mines and its distance from the war zones have made it relatively prosperous but with a rapidly increasing population with serious poverty in the new shanty areas. My accommodation was again in a guest house not far from the Anglican Diocesan Centre, this time more comfortable than in Kinshasa, in a complex that had been a centre for Brethren missionaries but is now used as a stopping off point for many mission organisations.

Day Six

As before, a group of youth leaders had assembled, coming from various parishes in and around the city of Lubumbashi. After worship together we embarked on a slightly different programme for the workshop. The Bishop, to whom I had paid respects with Anthonio early in the morning, had requested something on "spiritual growth", so we spent the three and a half sessions in an overview of Ephesians. During the breaks it was great to hear some of their testimonies of faith, their ministry among young people in the townships and villages in the region, and their hopes for the future.

After we had finished the programme mid-afternoon, I was taken on a tour of some of the development projects closest to the Diocesan Centre. In one room in the compound disabled girls were being taught to make dresses and other items using hand operated sewing machines – they desperately need more. This and other projects for girls and young women is run by Ursule Tshama, a young mother passionate about helping to improve the lives of the disadvantaged in the name of Christ. Then, after perhaps a twenty minute ride away we turned off the

tar road and entered a much poorer area with dirt tracks and mud brick houses. Here we visited St Boniface Parish, where Bertin Subi is the minister and also the Diocesan Director of Development. Members of the congregation help in a project to assist orphans whose parents have died, usually of AIDS. The orphans have been taken in by relatives who often do not have the resources to care for them, so the project makes sure that the children have food, clothing, school uniforms and money for school books etc. The orphans come to the church some afternoons for various activities and I met a group of ten when I was there, ranging in ages from 2 to 11, and a man and two women who were looking after them.

Day 7

It was just after morning prayer when Anthonio phoned to confirm our flights back to Kinshasa for the following day, only to be told that flights on Wednesdays and Thursdays had been cancelled due to work extending the runway! What they didn't tell us at the time was that they had rebooked us for the Friday flight but that meant I would miss my flight out of Congo on the Thursday evening. Anyway I had to put it out of my mind as a group of clergy and lay ministers arrived for the workshop on marriage. Unlike in Kinshasa, this time it was a group of just men. Another very encouraging time, with interesting interaction as before. There was a lot of laughter and also serious discussion as we took one of the suggestions about reasons for problems in marriage – “the wife does not submit” – and used it as a basis for discussion on the responsibility of the husband in Ephesians 5:24f. What might “husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church” look like in practical terms, especially in a nation where the church can set an example in a context of endemic sexual violence?

This time it was one of the older clergy who raised the questions “can you explain why in Europe now, men can marry men and women can marry women? Are there really church leaders who agree with this? What Bible are they reading?” I used this as an opportunity to attempt to explain Western individualism and secular humanism, beginning with Descartes' first principle of human existence “I think therefore I am” being in contrast with the African first principle “I am because we are”, to which the Christian would add “by the grace of God”. These godly pastors, often poorly educated but with a keen intelligence, understood very well these “worldview issues”; that as Christian we need to take a step back from culture, ask why people believe what they do, and bring these beliefs before the searching gaze of the true light of the world. At the same time we deal pastorally with individuals, as our struggle is not against people so much as against false ideas and spiritual powers behind them.

From mid afternoon we were able to rush around and sort out our flights – although it wasn't all fully confirmed until Thursday.

Day 8 and 9

I was able to get some rest in the guest house, write most of these reports, and respond to some important emails. But also on both days we went out in the afternoon to visit various branches of the Kimbilio street children project. This was started by an Anglican missionary and still has strong links to the Diocese of Katanga, but is now a small NGO supported by a number of organisations and is interdenominational. The main work consists of homes where boys and girls sometimes as young as five or six, who have ended up on the street for various reasons, are taken in, fed and clothed, and then either reunited with their families after negotiation and possibly support, or living in a more permanent hostel. The stories of some of these children is heartrending: glue addiction, petty crime and being beaten up for the boys, rape or prostitution for the girls. There seems to be a network of local full time workers and volunteers, as well as a couple of European volunteers who I met – these two young women as well as looking after the children give classes in French, English and Maths to the local volunteers as well. There is regular prayer and worship surrounding it all.

Day 10

Antonio and I did get a flight back to Kinshasa, and I was able to spend a longer time with the Archbishop before heading back out to the airport for the late evening flight. In the end I got home only 30 hours later than planned!

My strong impression is that the Anglican Church in Congo, while smaller numerically than its better known northern neighbours, is in good health; it wants to be Bible-based, evangelistic and GAFCON-affiliated, but also is determined to be fully involved in providing relief to the suffering, development of local communities and the reconstruction of the nation.