

Walking the Path Together

“During difficult times, the two churches have walked along the path together, a sign of solidarity of the children of God.”

This is how the Rev. Nzeba Kalombo Berthe (Mama Nzeba), Director of the Women and Family Department of Église du Christ au Congo (ECC), described the relationship between her church and The United Church of Canada during her one-month Face to Face visit to Lindsay Presbytery.

Mama Nzeba, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), brought a powerful message to diverse communities in Lindsay Presbytery, to the Bay of Quinte Conference annual meeting, and to meetings with church and political leaders in Toronto and Ottawa. Mama Nzeba described Lindsay Presbytery, located northeast of Toronto, as having “welcomed me with open minds and open hearts” in a trip that was “far from a tourist jaunt, in spite of the natural beauty of your country.”

Connecting with Canadian women was a key part of the trip: the visit included meeting with United and Presbyterian women’s groups, a Mother’s Day lunch, a workshop with a women’s choir, and visiting a women’s shelter. Other elements included spending time with congregations, visiting First Nations communities, local farms, and community support organizations, presbytery and Conference meetings, and time in Toronto and Ottawa discussing issues of the DRC with church, government, and non-governmental organization leaders.

At the Conference meeting, she was welcomed by songs from the DRC played by ReVolve, who had people up dancing, as well with the inclusion of hymns in French in worship. Throughout the trip, not only her deep dedication to her work but also her sense of humour and gift for being warm and present with different types of people shone through.

As the Director of the Women and Family Department of the ECC, Mama Nzeba’s work includes coordinating the church’s response to women and children affected by the devastating war in the DRC. That war continues in the form of guerrilla warfare in some regions of the country. Sexual assault, not a common form of violence in Congolese culture, is commonly practised by foreign soldiers, particularly in rural areas. Women and children have been profoundly affected by this violence. In addition to physical trauma they are often afraid to leave their homes, and could be cast out of their families if they have been assaulted. The war has also resulted in thousands of children being orphaned throughout the country. Mama Nzeba spoke of the DRC as a society of traumatized people as a result of the war and ongoing violence. This sharing had a profound impact: at one gathering a male listener approached her at the end, knelt down in front of her, and told her what an honour it was to be with her and how saddened he was at how other men were behaving.

In a small room, Mama Nzeba circulated photos of women overcoming the effects of the war with support from the ECC’s programs. Response by the ECC has been multi-faceted: developing awareness among women of their own dignity and strength, creating employment and microcredit systems for women who no longer have family support, and reinforcing women’s leadership throughout the church. A key focus has been educating children from a very young age to understand and support gender equality.

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Like the United Church, the Église du Christ has a history of struggling for women's rights within the church as well as wider society. Mama Nzeba described how women, initially hired by the church only to work on "women's business," persisted in speaking out on all issues and claiming a larger presence. Now women are much more visible and active throughout the church, although there is still more work to do to attain true equality. She named some scripture passages that have commonly been used to suppress women, such as the creation story, and how they are now being read in a new way to lift women up.

Mama Nzeba's visit didn't focus only on gender issues. Several other issues of importance to the DRC were discussed throughout including mining, small arms, and global debt. Mining is a significant part of what Mama Nzeba named as the "three waves" of colonization in the DRC: the initial invasion and control of the region by Belgium, the economic control exerted by Western countries after the DRC became independent, and the ongoing power of multinational corporations, who have used the recent war to take advantage of opportunities for exploitation that violate international laws. Diamonds and coltan (used in computers and cell phones) are key mining products.

Mama Nzeba called for churches to be more actively engaged with the Canadian government in speaking out against the "pillaging" and "polluting" that the companies are responsible for as she described the uprooting of entire villages who have nowhere else to go. She challenged the "contradiction or complicity in the Canadian government" that forbids most Canadian citizens from working in the DRC, but gives mining companies a free rein. According to one participant, she was "very clear about how complicit Canadian companies and we who support them are."

The hope in the EEC and in Lindsay Presbytery is for this mutual sharing to continue. This visit followed participation in an Extra Measures project that specifically supported the Bethsaida Orphan Centre in the DRC, and then a 2008 exposure trip of 13 people from Lindsay presbytery to the DRC. "People took it heart and are asking what the next steps are."