

## **A Candle for Peace in Congo**

### **Suzanne Lind**

Responding to the spirit of the old adage, "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," a group of peacemakers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) worked hard to teach peace during their country's recent election process. Now that those elections have led to the inauguration, in December 2006, of a democratically elected president (Joseph Kabila), it is exciting to look back at this special group and how they participated in that long and complicated process.

The Mennonite Churches in the DRC have historically remained aloof from political processes. But in 2004, as preparations began for the registration of voters and organization of elections for the 60 million people in the enormous country, many Mennonite church members wanted to be involved.

With encouragement and some funding from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the relief and development organization of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in North America, a small group of committed Mennonite lay leaders organized an Urgent Peace Project. As the local representative for MCC, I was privileged to work with this group as they sought to put their longing for honest government and their desire to teach nonviolent methods of change to work in the election process.

Early 2005 was a time of excitement as well as great apprehension in the DRC, as the United Nations and other international organizations began to work intensely with the DRC government and the Independent Electoral Commission to plan the massive voter registration and election process. Political arguments and intrigues abounded as those opposed to the process, because it seemed inadequately inclusive to them, tried to postpone or derail it. Military action continued in the eastern part of the country, where militia groups loyal to rebel leaders, and unruly government troops, as well as the private militias of the murky characters involved in illegal trade in arms and natural resources, vied for territory and control.

Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, is a huge, sprawling, hot, noisy, vibrant city. This is where the Urgent Peace Project committee did its planning, praying and organizing. "What can we possibly do to bring our longing for peace to this process?" was the primary question the committee asked itself. As discussions continued, three areas of focus were revealed: help to train mediators for voting stations; help to train people to vote and to be observers; invite some international peacemakers to join us as observers at election time.

And so a year of intense work began: bringing mediation trainers, planning seminars, training trainers, learning about the election process, coordinating and cooperating with other groups. And then, finally, hosting 30 international visitors during the July 2006 elections. We were astonished by how much we were able to accomplish, how many new relationships we had made, how

appreciative the Mennonite Churches in the DRC were of the Urgent Peace Project.

In August 2006 the money for this one-year project was gone. The committee sat down to evaluate and reflect. "But we can't stop now!" said one member, "There will be more elections. There are still a lot of people who don't understand the voting process, what it means to win and lose elections. There will be much conflict and misunderstanding as the new government gets organized. There may still be violence. We need to keep teaching about nonviolent ways to work for political change!" Heads nodded and eyes sparkled.

So the project evaluation was never written, but new seminars were planned, with shoestring financing, much volunteer time given, and intense determination on the part of committee members. They have spent so much time and effort organizing the project, and participating in its activities, that they have become skilled presenters and trainers themselves who will continue to make their services available in many settings. As my role on the committee diminishes, I reflect on an experience that truly was, for me, a chance to light a candle and to work in realistic hope instead of taking a more subdued and possibly cynical approach.

Working with the Urgent Peace Project has been a highlight of my life. It was born, grew and bore fruit in a most miraculous way - all in a year's time. It was a tremendous amount of hard work, but it also had a life of its own and rolled along as if it had its own spirit, which I believe it did. That spirit was the combined longing of people all over the world, and Christians in Congo, to do something, to show their deep concern for the seemingly endless struggle for survival - and survival with meaning - in this country in whose suffering we are all implicated.

Being part of the coordinating committee was a lifetime highlight in itself. Such vitality, such energy, such wisdom, such sweaty companionship. Committee members were realistic and task-oriented; they recognized when they had bitten off more than they could chew and apologized for uncompleted tasks; they were thoroughly thrilled to be planning what to them was an exciting new project; and they put compensation for their work at the bottom of their list of agenda items.

I had fun. I learned immeasurably much. I made wonderful new friends. I made a lot of mistakes and people were usually nice about it. I feel closer to Congolese colleagues and church members than ever before because we shared this experience.

The next step, as committee members have so eloquently announced, is advocacy, education and information-sharing, within DRC and beyond. Peace-loving Christians in Congo must not give up their efforts to teach peace and nonviolence. They must model nonviolent participation in political processes. International people who participated in the Urgent Peace Project must encourage the countries they represent to provide responsible and non-

manipulative assistance to the DRC. Everyone who is aware of and concerned about the DRC must expose corporate abuse and lobby for control of exploitative companies which are bleeding the country of its natural resources and supporting militia groups in the process.

A new government is forming in the DRC and beginning its work during the early months of 2007. Let us pray that the candle lit during the Urgent Peace Project will continue to shine as peacemakers in DRC find new ways to teach and demonstrate peace and the effectiveness of non-violent political action. *F*



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