

Gerda Heck: Interviews with the Avant-garde of Religious Charismatic Churches

Berlin. Lo-Lowengo Botembe: Strolling between West and East, North and South

Pastor Lo-Lowengo Botembe is in his late sixties and is still a very energetic person when I met him in his office in Berlin. As a young man, at the beginning of the 1960s, he came from Léopoldville (today Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo) to Germany. In 1988 he founded the first charismatic African-based church in Berlin: the African Ecumenical Church. Today, an estimated 70 African-based charismatic parishes exist in Berlin. Some 26,000 people of sub-Saharan descent live in Berlin and almost half of them are said to be regular Christian churchgoers (RACiBB e.V., 2010).

When I asked Pastor Botembe about the reasons for founding his church, he responded: “This is a long story, I think I have to be verbose.. I arrived in Germany in 1962 and at that time I had no thought in mind of founding a church. It was the time of the cold war, a lot of African countries had just become independent. The East wanted to win the Africans for their socialism and the West for capitalism. At that time, there existed a lot of fellowships for African students in Europe.

...We were about 40 young people of around 17 or 18 years of age, who came from Kinshasa to Germany. In Congo, they had promised us a four-year enduring professional training; when we arrived here, they told us to leave after a sixteen-month internship. They had just cheated us. For me, you know, I am the oldest in my family and my younger brother was already attending a technical professional school in Kinshasa, I couldn't go back with just a 16-month internship. I would have suffered from complexes.

...So, when the time came to leave, we celebrated the farewell party, I packed my bags and disappeared in the evening to Berlin, the others went back to Kinshasa. I was twenty years old, I didn't know anyone in Berlin. For the first three months I slept in the park in the winter.

...Then came the 60s, the time of the APO – oh, those were the times. I realized, I had been raised a Catholic, I was talking to the German Catholic priests, they were talking to me in a very reserved way: stay away from us. You could feel that. But with the students of the APO, I felt humanity there. I was sympathetic to them. We discussed a lot. And then one of them asked me, you know, why is Africa so poor? Because you Africans believe in God. Gradually I started to become more and more left-wing, I realized I was wasting my time in West Berlin and moved from the West to the East. That was in 1966. There was not that much luxury, but the people had a heart. There was solidarity. In the West I had been feeling very lonesome, the solidarity was an alternative family for me as an African. I was affiliated as a human being. I caught up on

my A-levels there, then I completed my engineering studies. Afterwards, in Gotha, I studied pedagogy and worked as a teacher in a vocational school for some years.

...In 1975, I wanted to go back to Congo, to build up a vocational school there. So I went, but no one was really interested in my idea there. My family told me to go back to Europe: "With your viewpoints it is too dangerous for you here!" I was really sad and depressed; I realized that I was useless in Europe and useless in Africa.

...I went back to West Germany to work as an educator and therapist in psychiatry. The Federal employment office sent me to a job interview at my new workplace. At that time my name was still Pierre Botembe. The board of the psychiatric clinic had read my application and they thought I was French. The clinic was across the road from the British Royal Air Force. The head of the department opened the door and told me: Mister, I think you are lost, the English are on the other side of the street. I explained that I was here for the job offer and everyone in the team was shocked. This must be a joke; this African is supposed to take care of the mental health of Germans? But they took me on for this job because the people one had to work with were alcoholics, drug addicts, etc, and they couldn't find anyone else who wanted to do it. But exactly those patients that I coached, they would ask me, why are you not a pastor? You should do this. I went home, I thought about it, and it didn't take me very long. Yes, I had an enlightenment, I wanted to become a pastor. So, I went to the Humboldt University in East Berlin and registered for theology. I chose to study in East Germany again because of the confrontation between Marxism and theology. I finished my studies just before the fall of the Berlin wall.

...Having completed my studies, I went to the bishop, and he told me that they are not going to employ me. "You come from Africa, you should preach there. We can employ you if you go to Africa and you come back to work as a guest pastor here. The words of the bishop evoked a crisis in me. Exclusion again, I thought – how can it be, are there two Jesuses, one for the white people and one for the black people?"

...So, when I founded the African Ecumenical Church together with some other believers, it had not been planned. The Africans joined our church and we started to celebrate in our way. We founded a choir, and the people who had not wanted me to be a pastor now invited my choir to perform here and there.

...And why is such a migrant church necessary? First of all, the migrants living here, they experience institutional racism, institutional exclusion and the church is the only space where they can feel at home. Here they find spirituality, here they can experience their own culture and can feel understood.

...The Protestant church here in Germany leans towards atheism and rationalism. For instance, a lot of Protestant priests do not believe in ghosts. But of course there are ghosts: as long as the human has a body, he is a human being. But as soon as the body is away, he is a ghost. It is like he has just put on a coat which is called body. There are good ghosts and bad ghosts.

...And you know, the church is German, and even in the church there exists that kind of nationalistic mentality. They do not like to see that Africans are coming here to help the church.

...In 1988 we founded the church, but officially it was recognized in 1991. In 2006 we received the Federal Cross of Merit from the German government for our engagement against racism, anti-Islamism and anti-Semitism. Before the fall of the Berlin wall, we had a room in West Berlin, in Wedding. In those days we had around 300 regular churchgoers coming every Sunday. A lot of them were refugees. Nowadays, many of them have left Berlin, as there is not enough employment here. Some of them even went home. Today we are around 20 in our parish, but we do also have churches in Congo and in South Africa, where we have many more members. But it is not only about the church. It is written in the Bible: a man does not live on bread alone, but also on the word of God. Anyway, there has to be bread too. Today we do have another development; we try to organize the Africans here in Berlin to participate actively in German society. The Africans in Germany are invisible, but if you want to sustain your position you have to participate. So right now we are trying to get the Africans here in Berlin into professional vocational training, for example as varnishers or in gastronomy. We also do counseling: marriage counseling, counseling about problems in school, etc.

...In church we preach in German and in Lingala. Mainly Congolese attend our worships, but also Angolans and Germans. I am the spiritual leader, we call it the patriarch of the church, then we have a Nigerian pastor who also does services on Sundays. The church is for everyone.”

How to cite this article: Heck, Gerda (2011). *Interviews with the Avant-garde of Religious Charismatic Churches. Lo-Lowengo Botembe: Strolling between West and East, North and South.* global prayers • redemption and liberation in the city. Retrieved from: www.globalprayers.info.