

A faith explosion: The global reach of Congo's churches

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Most Western observers of the Christian scene have learned to take African developments very seriously. They know that Africans will make up an increasing share of most denominations. The thriving churches of Nigeria and Uganda have become familiar to Western journalists through the activity of their leaders in the current Anglican schism.

Even so, most people in the Anglo-American world still underplay the importance of the Francophone countries of Africa, especially that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This neglect derives partly from the linguistic gap; also, Western Protestants tend to be less interested in predominantly Catholic nations.

The raw numbers on the Congo are impressive. With 66 million people, it is the largest Francophone nation, more populous than France itself. It claims 33 million Catholics, plus 14 million Protestants, and several million more members of independent churches, like the followers of indigenous prophet Simon Kimbangu. Religiously, the country is thus 80 percent Christian. With a fertility rate of 6.28—one of the world's highest—the Congo's population will swell mightily in coming decades, and so will the Christian share of that number. By 2050 the Congo could have 120 million Christians, which would give it the world's fifth- or sixth-largest Christian population, close to that of Nigeria.

Impressive statistics make for interesting factoids, but those numbers also have weighty implications for the contours of Christianity. For one thing, the Congo's burgeoning churches operate in what by some standards is the world's most lethal region. Over the past 15 years or so the Congo has witnessed a series of extraordinarily savage wars and massacres, which have killed over 5 million people. This is the bloodiest carnage seen on the planet since 1945. The struggles have drawn in various outside nations, and the worst of the conflict—between 1998 and 2003—earned the title of Africa's First World War. For many Congolese Christians,

that inconceivably horrible experience is the central fact of daily life, and it shapes their understanding of the Christian message. The Bible, with its tales of war, famine and plague and its core message about a hope that this world cannot supply, has an acute relevance in such a setting.

Though the Congo is 80 percent Christian, it is also 100 percent attached to older African faiths. Catholics especially work hard to incorporate into their practice as many of the symbols and assumptions of the old religious regime as they can without crossing the line into syncretism. They heed the pithy warnings of Cameroon's daring Christian thinker Jean-Marc Ela, who died just last year. Ela said repeatedly that inculturation is at the heart of mission: "If Christianity seeks to be anything more than an effort to swindle a mass of mystified blacks, the churches of Africa must all join to come to terms with this question."

The success of these efforts matters greatly for Christians who will never set foot in the Congo, because Central Africans have become one of the world's great diaspora communities. Migrants have carried their forms of faith worldwide. As Nigerians are much in evidence throughout the English-speaking world, the Congolese now play a large role in the Francophone world.

In both France and Belgium, the Catholic priesthood maintains its depleted ranks by drawing on recruits from the global South—from Vietnam, but also from the Congo and Cameroon. In the 1980s, amid the tyranny and violence, the Congo became the scene of a charismatic revival that has since spilled across Europe. Congolese-founded Protestant and Pentecostal churches abound in Paris, London and Brussels, and these are some of Europe's largest and most fervent megacongregations. However chaotic and turbulent the nation is, and however poor and troubled its people, the Congo's churches will play a role far beyond its borders.