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Time to tell the stories of the greatest missionaries in African Christian history

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Throughout African Christian history, catechists and evangelists have carried out the lions' share of the work of mission. Catechists were generally served in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches as lay (non ordained) ministers and indigenous teachers. Their role was to instruct inquirers or new believers in the Christian faith. In Protestant churches, evangelists played an important role in outreach, often preaching in public places to draw people to the church. Their goal was to inspire their listeners to convert to Christianity.¹ Many churches had male and female evangelists although the women were often not recognized and remunerated for their service, as the men were. Both catechists and evangelists traveled frequently, moving from village to village as the needs arose.

Although these lay ministers—catechists and evangelists—played primary roles in the spread of Christianity and the decisive growth of the African church, historically, they were not referred to as “missionaries” as were the Europeans and North Americans. Although the purpose of Africans and expatriates alike was to evangelize and teach people about the Christian faith, in the practices of the time, the title of “missionary” was reserved exclusively for white foreign agents. And yet, from the earliest contact with the message of the gospel, Africans have been the most zealous and successful missionaries in Christian history. It is thanks to the work of African *missionaries* throughout history, whether they were performing their ministry as a catechist or an evangelist or in another role, that the Christian population in Africa has grown to be the largest in the global church (2023).²

This issue showcases the biographies of three exceptional African missionaries. Fr. Cosmas Sarbah, PhD, writes the story of his grandfather, John E. Sarbah, a catechist in the Roman Catholic Church of Ghana, who performed almost all the work of a parish priest for countless parishes throughout his region filling in where there was a shortage of priests and of European missionaries. Kimeze Teketwe presents the exciting story of Sembera K. Mackay, the first Anglican convert and the first to request baptism in nineteenth century Uganda. Sembera had such an impact through his lifelong ministry as a catechist that the author theorizes that his name might have been chosen to express the Luganda concept of Christian eucharist (communion) – *Oku-sembera*. Professor Dickson Nkonge Kagema gives us the story of Jerusha Kanyua, an extraordinary

¹ According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2022), a catechist is described as “In modern usage occasionally a person appointed to give instruction in Christianity” or “In the mission field a native teacher.” And the word “evangelist” describes “certain laymen [sic] in Protestant Churches who undertake popular preaching with a view to facilitating spiritual conversion.”

² According to the *World Christian Database*, in 2020, the number of Christians per continent was: 655 million in Africa, 603 million in Latin America, 572 million in Europe, 378 million in Asia, 369 million in North America, and 29 million in Oceania. Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed July 2023).

woman who ministered as an evangelist, a teacher, a midwife, a prayer warrior, and a prophetess, leaving a lasting legacy in her home region in Kenya.

In the second half of the journal, Dr. Aweis A. Ali leads an interview with a courageous pastor and missionary, Rev. Abtidoon (not his real name) who, in spite of living in one of the most dangerous regions on earth for a Christian, is one of the oldest known Somali Christians in the world (p.29). Next, a recently published volume on Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima, *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema* by Tekletsadik Belachew, a member of the DACB International Editorial Board, is the focus of a book review by Dr. Nebeyou Alemu Terefe. In the resources for education section, my recent presentation and that of Dr. Anicka Fast at the American Society of Missiology (2023) offer some insights into a possible model for teaching and publishing for theological education in Africa.

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