

# Across the Border

## Kintambo women's meeting

by Suzanne Lind

Kiss, kiss, kiss; right cheek, left cheek, right cheek, "Welcome, friend of my age group!" Right hand extended, left hand on forearm, slight dip as you grasp the hand, "Welcome, respected woman older than I am!" Stoop and gently squeeze the cheek, "Welcome, little girl!" The women of Kintambo Missionary Parish in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo are meeting for their Wednesday morning prayer-praise-sharing-craft-making meeting. The cloth in the dresses is bright; the hair and head scarves are amazing.

The white plastic chairs are arranged in a careful semi-circle on the cement floor; the door is open to the sandy, cluttered courtyard and the stately palm tree. "Welcome!" Anicka, Mary, and I enter to join our friends. I have been attending this church frequently for four years, Anicka has recently arrived for a three-year term of service, and Mary is spending one

month in Congo: three North American Mennonite Central Committee workers. Kiss, kiss, kiss; cheek, cheek, cheek; shake, shake, shake.

As we share in the rich singing, the heartfelt praying, and the excited sharing of craft projects, we are drawn more closely into the circle of friendship with these women. Mary is a nurse and someone shyly asks if the women could ask her some questions. Her big smile welcomes all, and soon we are discussing diabetes, malaria, and nutrition. We are finding that we share many of the same health concerns in our own lives and in our families.

The conversation turns to issues that are of special concern for women in Kinshasa, including the lack of employment for the majority of people, the pain of illness and death in a place where it is difficult to get good medical care, the difficulties of caring for



*Craft-making is part of the women's meeting in Kintambo*

*Photo by Suzanne Lind*

# Across the Ocean

aging parents. “And we are so worried about our young people,” says Régine. “Many of them do not want to come to church and it is hard to help them find faith and purpose in their lives.”

“You know,” says Anicka thoughtfully, “our churches in North America are struggling with those same things.” “Oh yes!” Mary chimes in. “Our congregation is very worried right now about how to engage young people in the life and work of the church...and many people are out of work.”

So we decide to pray for our common concerns: “Help us to help those who are struggling to find work, those who are grieving and discouraged, and please show us how to walk with our young people in their search for purpose and meaning in their lives.”

Somewhere in the ongoing conversation, I mention that a few years ago we began to learn that there is far more violence in Christian homes in North America than anyone had previously realized. “Is that also true here?” I ask. “Is there sometimes violence in Christian families, perhaps even in Mennonite families?” There is a moment of silence, and then Thérèse says in a low voice, “Yes, that is a problem here, too.” Women from very different backgrounds and cultures, we nevertheless probe, in a rather halting and careful way, some of the reasons—cultural and spiritual—for this terrible reality in many lives. We also joke a bit about some of the silly excuses men give to justify violent behavior!

As the conversation ends and bottles of orange Fanta, soft bread rolls, and peanuts are passed around, someone asks, “But violence is never right, is it?” The question is folded into the general friendly chatter of Mennonite women sharing a coffee break and showing off their handicrafts and catching up on news.

March, Women’s Month, is taken very seriously by people in Congo. In addition to demonstrations, seminars and speeches, special fabrics promoting women’s activities flood the market and can be seen in a dazzling array of different styles of African dress. This year one of the main themes promoted is “*Je dénonce!*” (“I denounce violence against women!”)

What a blessing to be with the women in Kinshasa as they rejoice in who they are and face so many challenges. What a blessing for MCC workers to be kiss-kiss-kissed knowing that, in spite of great differences, we pray-pray-pray for many of the same things. 📖

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