



YOUR CONGO CONNECTION

A CELEBRATION OF HOPE & TRANSFORMATION

THIS IS THE “NEW WE”

By Dr. Paul Robinson, Co-Founder & Senior Advisor, Congo Initiative

Exactly one month ago, I found myself on a charter plane flying west from Uganda, over some of Africa’s most beautiful and yet most conflicted countryside. A group of us from the U.S. were flying to Beni, in Congo’s troubled North Kivu province, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Congo Initiative’s Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC), to participate in the university’s seventh graduation, and as a global community, to talk, pray, and strategize about the next steps in our journey together to bring transformation to this part of Central Africa. As we passed over the eastern fringes of the vast Ituri rainforest that defines this region, my thoughts turned to a similar flight almost 15 years ago.



The Ituri Forest canopy

In 2002, these grasslands and rainforest were the setting for a brutal conflict, sometimes described as Africa’s First World War, fought by competing militias and governments over access to and control of Congo’s immense resources. This war drew nine African countries into a regional conflagration that cost over five million lives, and that still simmers and flares today. At that time, we were flying into Beni while the United Nations (UN) and other agencies were evacuating nonessential personnel, and as competing militias threatened the security of the city. We were coming to hold an extended consultation with pastors and church leaders, to talk together

about responding as God’s people to crisis. Indeed, we were crazy! But that week was transformative.

Those leaders shared with us the desperate condition of their people and communities, described the threats to individuals, families, civil society, and their nation, and considered how they would respond. Daily, at early morning worship and afternoon rallies in the city’s soccer stadium, the crowds of people began to grow. Despite hearing the thump of heavy artillery and clatter of small-arms fire in the distance, and despite the omnipresent heavily-armed child-soldier militias on the city’s streets, Beni’s people worshiped, celebrated, danced, listened to challenging messages, and confronted the forces of violence with an audacious and courageous hope that was irresistible and contagious.

Not long after this, the vision for Congo Initiative (CI) was born as a set of responses to Congo’s crisis, identified through an extensive and deeply-grounded consultative process with those most deeply impacted by Congo’s trauma and suffering. These responses center on educating the next generation, empowering women, equipping Christian communities, engaging current issues, and elevating peace and justice.

And so, in July 2017 and flying yet again into Congo, I considered all that has happened since 2002. The context of eastern Congo in some senses has not changed. While the militias had been largely disbanded, they are reforming and regrouping. Military presence--now the Congolese military and UN peacekeeping forces--is still ubiquitous. More than ever, Congo’s abundant and largely untapped resources draw the attention of the world’s powerful nations and their economic interests. The African proverb, “When elephants fight, the grass is trampled,” plays out daily in the lives of ordinary Congolese who continue to suffer.

And yet, the differences between 2002 and 2017 are remarkable and striking! As our plane approached the green



UCBC ALUMNI: A TRANSFORMING GENERATION

By Victor Ezama '13, UCBC Alumni Association President

It was truly an amazing moment as alumni from all over the region gathered to celebrate 10 years of hope and transformation through UCBC. After long periods of separation, we embraced and shared memories of our time at UCBC, both the good and difficult moments throughout our years as students. We sang, we danced, we prayed, and we shared stories about how our experience at UCBC helped us become the people we are today – a transforming generation – creating meaningful and lasting change throughout Congo. UCBC has touched our lives and the lives of our families,

employers, and the wider community. However, since UCBC is a global university, it is not simply a Congolese institution, but is making an impact across the world. In fact, there are UCBC alumni now located on three continents: Africa, North America, and Asia. UCBC has established a glowing reputation and alumni have gone on to do extraordinary things. In areas like Beni, Butembo, Bunia, Goma, and other eastern Congo towns, you can already witness the impact alumni are making!

For example, during the 10-year celebration, a manager of Airtel (a global telecommunications company) explained how UCBC alum, Serge Nyungu (pictured below), was one of the top recruits and performing employees in all of Congo.



Serge Nyungu, '14

The celebration also gave our newly formed UCBC Alumni Association the opportunity to discuss our role - as individuals and as a collective - to build a strong community of former students, rooted in Christian hope and committed to carrying the vision of transformation forward.

Alumni often refer to our slogan, “UCBC is my home,” because we are proud to be the fruit of UCBC. We are committed to supporting the high-quality education and values received through the university. We desire to build strong relationships that will generate resources to sustain UCBC long into the future. Ultimately, we long to see UCBC grow and increase its impact, because we have personally experienced transformation over the past 10 years.



Victor Ezama, '13



Aerial view of UCBC's campus in July 2017

hills that cradle the city of Beni, our eyes were immediately drawn to the white spires of UCBC's Hope Chapel Tent, a new 750-seat worship, teaching, and community space, an investment and gift from Willow Creek Community Church. It is a powerful and visible symbol of hope and inspiration.

Over the course of the next week, we heard powerful stories of hope and change. We listened to UCBC students and alumni who are making a difference, preparing and living transformed lives. As individuals and cohort groups they are investing in their country, starting businesses, entering into various professions, serving in private and public sectors, and continuing their education. These young people embody the change they want for Congo.



2017 graduate, Sifa Mulisya, shares during a panel discussion.

We also received reports about CI's various initiatives:

- counseling intervention for traumatized children, women, and men;
- reconciliation work in communities all over northeastern Congo;
- workshops on the ethical practice of business, environmental stewardship, marriage and family relationships;
- women of all ages finding voice, organizing, speaking, and acting on key issues;
- cohort groups of lawyers, judges, and legal aides

growing jurists' associations in key regional cities, committed to justice and advocacy;

- women who had been victimized by violence, learning new skills, finding community, being enabled to provide for and educate their children;
- growing and flourishing primary schools educating and forming Congo's children.

We participated in multiple planning sessions, where our teams envisioned and mapped strategies and activities that will deepen the shape and outcomes of CI's work in the light of Congo's changing context.

And we celebrated! Vibrant Congolese worship led by UCBC's Ebenezer Chorale and other local musical groups, together with stirring narratives of those impacted by CI and UCBC, shaped two full days of reveling in the new thing God is doing

From the beginning, I was drawn to CI because it was a vision of Congolese Christian leaders to address the challenges of their own context. As one not only born in Congo, but deeply aware of how the wider world has shaped Congo's history, I want to accompany this group of women and men. CI is one of the most grounded and hopeful responses to Africa's challenges that I have seen in a lifetime of teaching and practice in international development. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.



Dr. Paul Robinson

WHERE ARE ALUMNI NOW?

Here is a sampling:

8 are working in bank enterprises.

More than **20** are working with CI or UCBC.

6 are working in the mining industry.

3 are working with the DRC government, mostly in Ministers' cabinets.

More than **15** are serving as pastors in churches.

More than **50** are working in national and international NGO's based in eastern Congo.

More than **100** are innovating new start-ups, businesses or consultancies.

More than **50** are pursuing advanced studies at universities across east Africa.



Dr. Kasereka Kasomo (left), CI-USA Board Member

AN INSIDER AND OUTSIDER: CI-USA BOARD MEMBER RETURNS HOME

On July 18 2017, I left for Beni, Democratic Republic of Congo. I joined a team of Americans who were traveling to attend the celebration of UCBC's 10-year anniversary. I was looking forward to visiting and seeing what God has done through UCBC in the past 10 years. I was not only going to celebrate as a CI-USA board member, but as a native of Congo and the Beni territory. Therefore, I found myself both as an insider and an outsider.

I grew up in Oicha, 20 miles from Beni, and know fairly well the people, context and culture of that region. Prior to coming to the United States, I was involved in ministry in Congo for several years, and in fact, I have known a number of people deeply connected to, or working for, CI-UCBC since its inception. In many ways, you could say I'm an "insider." At the same time, having lived in the USA for over 20 years, I can also see things through an American lens. In that sense, I am also an "outsider" who is gradually coming to learn more of the impact CI and UCBC is having on Congolese lives.

In short, I am amazed! At our leadership retreat in July, participants were asked to share reasons for being a part of CI and UCBC. The testimonies from these participants caught my attention as each explained with excitement what it means

to them to be a part of the CI community. They expressed their joy of being in the right place, doing good work that has changed not only their lives, but the lives of their family and the community. A second impression was their clear understanding and expression of CI's vision of transformation. Without a doubt, they all know that the Congo is in need of change. They understand that CI exists to serve the common good through social and spiritual transformation.

However, my curiosity was not limited to the leadership. During my 11 days in Beni, I went to other staff and students with this question: "How has CI and/or UCBC impacted your life and the society in eastern Congo?" All of them explained why they came to UCBC - to be equipped and create a better Congo and even a better Africa. A unique point I heard was that while there is a lack of meaningful jobs in Congo, these women and men want to create jobs through innovative ideas and enterprises. One of the worst consequences of colonization was the death of the Congolese people's creativity. Therefore, to me, reviving that creativity, which I consider to be part of our Imago Dei ("image of God"), is the most important realization of UCBC's impact.

It was striking for me to witness and hear from these ordinary students and alumni doing extraordinary work. And though the journey ahead of transformation is a long process, the stories I heard while in Beni testify that God is truly at work in Congo through CI and UCBC.

Kasereka Kasomo holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology and currently serves as the pastor of African Community Church of Southern California in Los Angeles. His dissertation was on "The Creation and Maintenance of a Culture of Violence in Eastern Congo." Dr. Kasomo joined CI-USA's board in 2016.

Many of you have made these remarkable testimonies possible with your gifts of support to UCBC. Many others of you give to CI's other programs. To ALL of you, we say **THANK YOU!** We could not imagine a transformed Congo apart from the investment of loving women and men across the world who share this mission with us. And so, we hope and pray that you'll continue on this journey with us for the **next 10 years!**



Together we are