

[DACB Event: Launch of the Council of Friends of DACB - September 28, 2022]

"In pursuit of conversion, connection, and restoration: The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* 2012-2022"

By Michèle Sigg, Executive Director

The story I will tell you now is about the enlarged, renewed vision I hope to pursue in the work of the DACB and the Journal in the next decade. This story unfolds in three movements: conversion, connection, and restoration.



The classroom you see in this photo is in Burkina Faso. The spellbound students are pastors in theological training from various churches in West Africa and they are listening to Dr. Anicka Fast (in the 2nd photo), a Mennonite missionary living in Burkina Faso with her husband and two daughters. Anicka is a friend and colleague,

a BU grad and one of Dr. Dana Robert's many doctoral students. Her half-time assignment is to teach African Christian history in francophone institutions in West and Central Africa. She has designed the curriculum of her classes using biographies from the DACB which serve as fundamental texts and models for the students' final project: the writing of the biography of a local Christian to be published in the DACB.

First movement - conversion: When Anicka first started teaching in West Africa, the curriculum and the final biography were hard to sell to the students. At first, they simply could not see how they would overcome all the obstacles of oral history research. And what is this project anyway, this DACB, they asked? Just another project conceived by a foreign researcher that had no relevance to them and would not benefit them or their church? However, as these students read biography after biography of *African* missionaries, pastors, evangelists, catechists, and teachers, they began to see African Christian history in a completely different light. This new narrative deviated sharply from the Eurocentric history they already knew that stated, formulaically: "missionaries brought the gospel to Africa and then.... there was an African church." They realized that the missing actors in the old narrative were the innumerable African men and women who built the church in Africa. When the students finally understood

that the history of Christianity in Africa could NOT be told without African Christians at the center of the story, it was a game changer for them.

This realization prompted two initial reactions. First, they grieved that these stories were largely unknown. One student pondered that “the church in Africa seemed to be ‘like a canoe that passes without leaving a trace.’” Secondly, they heard an implicit call to action. They realized that “the Church has a great responsibility” to tell such stories for future generations. One [student] marveled that ‘God wants to use us to unveil’ the stories of the ‘Africans that God used.’”



Second movement - connection: Enter another actor in our story: the *Journal of African Christian Biography*. As the students participated in the process of writing a biography in the collaborative setting of the DACB, the students gained a sense of connection with the global church. The stories not only brought them together as Africans (these were *their* stories!) but also connected them to other global Christians (they were *shared* stories). The collaborative process empowered them and gave them dignity as authors. Several students had their biographies published in this special issue of the JACB which was distributed at the Mennonite World Conference that took place in Indonesia in July 2022. Here their biographies served as a bridge between them, the global missions of the Mennonite church, and beyond, the world church.

Final movement - restoration: Dr. Kyama Mugambi (new assistant professor of World Christianity at Yale Divinity School) has pointed out that many scholars and graduates of theological institutions in Africa feel a growing sense of disillusionment because, for them, “the academic study of religion in Africa is an imported product” and the courses not relevant for ministry in Africa. But here, Anicka’s students engaged with issues deeply relevant to their own contexts. I will mention just one example. In one session, Anicka led her students in the discussion of Andrew Walls’ biography of Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Crowther was liberated from slavery as a boy, then went on to become a brilliant theological student, then priest, missionary, Bible translator in the Niger Delta and finally the first African bishop of the Anglican Church. In class discussions, the students had an opportunity to wrestle with the painful stories of racism and unequal power dynamics between young white missionaries and Crowther. Focusing on the life story of this African Christian and his suffering opened a space for the students to lament grievances that they also shared, leading to a first step towards healing and restoration of relationships in the church – Christ’s church in the world, one global body.

Unpacking: Let me now expand on these three overlapping movements of conversion, connection, and restoration to describe how DACB's mission has grown in the last ten years, since it moved from OMSC to BU.¹

First movement - conversion: This movement was the primary focus of the first twelve active years of the DACB. From 2000 to 2012, the yearly oral history workshops in Africa and Founding Director Jonathan Bonk's actively promoted the project and his numerous presentations were key to awakening the consciousness of both westerners and Africans. He underlined the urgent task of documenting the lives of African Christians before their memory was lost, shining light on the *African* agents responsible for the explosive growth of Christianity in Africa.

The DACB's reputation grew during this period. The Project Luke Fellowship brought a total of 21 African writers to OMSC to write biographies for the DACB. At oral history workshops in Africa, the project was always enthusiastically received. In a few African institutions, students and scholars were trained in oral history methodology and writing biographies. Thanks to their contributions and many others, the online collection slowly expanded. Nevertheless, something else was needed to expand the DACB's vision and reach.

Second movement: connection. In 2012, at the invitation of Professor Dana Robert, the DACB moved to Boston University's School of Theology where it joined in the vision of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission (aka CGCM). Here it gained new and far-reaching connections through academic networks.

Connection is key to our mission. The DACB connects language groups across Africa through the use of English, French, Portuguese, and Swahili. It fosters interaction with international networks of scholars and church agents. It builds bridges that connect people across national, regional, denominational, gender, socio-economic, political, and educational lines. It dismantles the "divide and conquer" legacy of colonialism and displaces the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge through its policy of open and equal access. The DACB creates unity in diversity and reflects, in all its richness, the common body of Christ. From 2012 on, while I was getting my PhD under Dana's tutelage, the DACB flourished in the globally oriented, mission-minded, internationally networked context of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission.

Milestones: In 2015, the CGCM organized an inter-disciplinary conference at Boston University on African Christian biography—the first of its kind. Lamin Sanneh gave the keynote address and papers were presented by eminent scholars. New networks grew out of this shared experience. The proceedings of the conference were

¹ You can read a fuller version of this case study by Dr. Anicka Fast in the April 2022 Journal in her article on "Biography as Bridge within the Global Church" where she offers theological and ecclesiological reflections and implications for theological education.

published in this book, *African Christian Biography*, edited by Dana Robert. You will receive one tonight as a gift.

In 2016, another milestone: We started the *Journal of African Christian Biography*. It is a scholarly and pedagogical tool that embodies, disseminates, and promotes the mission of the DACB. The Journal has become an important tool for connection, being easier to distribute in churches or use in the classroom. Anyone can sign up for a **free** e-subscription. Our subscriber base has steadily been growing at an average rate of 10 per week. As of Monday (5/1/23), we had 4,036 subscribers. The average open rate of the journal email over the last two years has been 43.7%, which is well above the industry average.

In 2017, we did a complete overhaul of the original DACB website. The new website embodies our ethos of **open and equal access** through technology that follows the practices of minimal computing. The design and adaptive technology make it easy for African users to access the content on their mobile phones because the website requires very little bandwidth. Mobile use constitutes upwards of 66% of our website traffic.

Our ethos of open and equal access extends to authorship as well. We prioritize the contribution of African writers in telling the story of African Christianity. We publish biographies from students and scholars at all stages of their career as well as from lay people wishing to memorialize an important Christian figure or a family member.

I cannot underline enough the importance of our ethos of open and equal access. We believe strongly in promoting equity in knowledge production in the field of African Christian history. There are deep implications for relationships within the global church. Anicka Fast describes this effect in her case study:

the process of researching, writing, submitting, editing, and posting a biography in the DACB is a relational process that requires collaboration between North and South and so helps to develop webs of connection within the global church. It requires a level of trust from African students that the DACB project will not perpetuate the downplaying of local knowledge and the privileging of technical expertise that overwhelm many of their interactions with well-intentioned Westerners.²

Final movement – restoration. The ultimate goal of the DACB is one of restoration on an intellectual, theological, and relational level within the global church whereby the act of writing a truer and more complete history of the church in Africa will lead to a deeper understanding of God’s mission in the world, and to the restoration of relationships within the global church – across cultural and denominational boundaries.

² Fast, “Biography as Bridge.”

The many stories in the DACB and the JACB are living proof that Christianity is a global religion, growing much faster in the Global South than in western countries. One lesson in every DACB biography is that Christianity in Africa is *not* only the religion of the White colonizers. The proof is in the sheer growth African Christians— from less than 10 million in 1900 to more than 667 million in 2022. Christianity is very much at home in Africa.

In 2050, it is projected that there will be 3.4 billion Christians in the world. Of these, there will be 1.3 billion *in Africa alone*. Hypothetically, if we say that for the round number of 1 billion African Christians in the future we need 1 trained pastor for every 500 Christians, then we will need 2 million pastors. If a large, prosperous seminary could graduate 500 pastors per year, then we would need 200 large seminaries to produce enough pastors. Each seminary would need 30 faculty for a total of 6,000 faculty. As this hypothetical calculation suggests, developing institutions and resources for theological education in Africa is an urgent proposition. This is why the DACB and the *Journal of African Christian Biography* are participating in the drive to create more pedagogical materials for theological education in Africa.

In closing. In January 2021, I was moved by a short email message I received from a young man in Tanzania. His words captured, so eloquently and simply, something of the work we are doing:

Dear sir

I have read several time of my grand father Missionary Yohana maula Malecela. My name is Martin stephano Malecela, am fourth generation from Yohana Malecela and I am looking forward to start Church here at Dar Es salaam Tanzania. Am happy because the seeds of gospel is moving in our family we are serving God and his biography it is strengthen me to go ahead to speedy the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks.
Martin Malecela

The work we are doing here, using biography, is not only history. Biography is more than history, it is theology—a theology of imitation. Christians are imitators of Christ and of great men and women of faith. The DACB and the JACB preserve the sacred legacy of the imitators of Christ in Africa—the “great cloud of saints” who surround us and whose stories strengthen those who follow them, like Mr. Malacela.