An Introduction to the
Dictionary of African Christian Biography

Dr. Jonathan Bonk
Project Director

Mrs. Michèle Sigg
Project Manager
“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you…”

Luke 1:1-4
Why the DACB?

- The information gap
- A few statistics
- Response
Who are these people?
- DAVID LIVINGSTONE: 19th century Scottish missionary-explorer to southern Africa; fought the slave trade

- MARY SLESSOR: Missionary to Nigeria: planted churches, started schools, fought infanticide and other traditional practices

- JOHANN LUDWIG KRAPF: Pioneer missionary to East Africa; early Bible translator.
• WILLIAM WADE HARRIS:
West African prophet who baptized over 100,000 people in 18 months in Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire

• SIMON KIMBANGU:
Died in prison after a five month ministry of evangelism and miraculous healings; founded one of the largest independent churches in Central Africa

• KIMPA VITA:
Prophet and leader of one of the earliest independent church movements (16th century); burned at the stake.
While these pioneers planted the seeds of Christianity on African soil, they had little impact on the growth of the church. And yet they are well known because reference books document the work of the Western missionaries in Africa.
VS. what we haven’t…

In contrast, many of these same reference works do not mention pioneer African church leaders and founders such as these whose ministries yielded astounding fruit in the birth and growth of the African church.
• Contrary to the Western church which *plateaued* or *declined* in Europe and the U.S.A. during the 20th century, the Christian church in Africa *grew* at an astounding rate.
• During the 20th century, the number of African Christians exploded
  – from 8.8 million in 1900
• In 1900 there were **4 times more Muslims** in Africa than Christians.
• By 2001 this demographic was **reversed**. Africa’s population was made up of:
  - **41.3% Muslims**
  - **48.4% Christians**
The Information Gap

Despite

✓ the **decline** of the Western church AND
✓ the **growth** of the African church

➢ Few people are aware of the astonishing transformation taking place within world Christianity.
Why this Gap?

• Most of the key African church fathers and mothers left no written record of their lives.
• The available stories are inaccessible to most because they are oral.
Editors of reference works and professors of church history don’t have information on the pioneers of African Christianity.

African institutions do not have adequate tools to teach the history of Christianity on the African continent.
Cycle of Misinformation

Lack of historical data on the African church

Few understand the importance of the African church in World Christianity
In 1995, a consultation at the Overseas Ministries Study Center discussed the need for “an international dictionary of non-Western biography.”
The major outcome was an announcement of plans to create a Dictionary of African Christian Biography

www.DACB.org
The DACB Vision

By Dr. Jonathan Bonk, Founding Director:


*Title of article in Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 71-83*
What is the DACB?

- The Challenge
- Accessibility
- Scope
- Non-proprietary
The DACB challenge is to create a memory base of African church history, written for Africans, by Africans, and available to Africans and African institutions at no cost.
To reach as many people as possible, the DACB was designed as an *electronic database*:

- **free** access online (no subscription fees)
- distributed on CD-ROM to African institutions **free of charge**.

www.DACB.org
• The DACB documents the history of the church in Africa from the time of Christ to the present....
Geography

- ...over the entire continent.

75-95% Christians in 2000
50-75% Christians

Any denomination that self identifies as “Christian” is included.
As a research tool, the DACB aims at inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.
Inclusion Criteria

- As broad and as flexible as possible.
- Included: All persons deemed to have played an important role in the African church on the local, national, regional or denominational level.
• This includes non-Africans and even non-Christians for their roles in the growth of the church.

Robert Moffat: Scottish

False monk: Fiqtor Abba, was a false monk, said to be from Syria, who...
The DACB database contains over 2,000 stories in **English**, with about 500 in **French** and a handful in **Portuguese** and **Swahili**.

While we have a few funds for translation, more are needed.
Both *oral* and *published sources* are used.

Documentation standards are those used by people working in the field of oral history.

**Sources:**

Short biography of Dr. Pastor Bekele Lakew, read at his funeral ceremony, Alemaz Zewdie (Bekele’s widow), interviewed by the author in June 2005.
Legitimacy

• Each story is identified with its author, the participating institution, the supervisor, and the liaison coordinator in order to ensure the legitimacy of the subject and the accuracy of the story.
Non-proprietary

- Publishing rights are freely granted to churches, institutions or publishers who wish to print any portion of the DACB for classroom materials or church history booklets.
• The CD-ROM can be copied without restrictions.
• We ask that proper attribution be given to the DACB for materials used.
How the DACB works

- Africa
- Staff
- Serving the academy
- Serving the church
Academics and students in church-related educational institutions in Africa write stories for the DACB, using both oral and written sources.
NBTS in Ogbomososo organizes 2-week Ph.D seminars that require students to write 2 biographies of Nigerian Christian figures. From 2007 to 2011, NBTS contributed over 70 stories.
Other sources of stories:

- Academics, scholars, and lay people from around the world
- Biographies from published reference works, used with permission
- Project Luke scholars
a. In Universities
b. *DACB*-inspired projects
c. Collaboration with International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS)
The DACB is virtually the only centralized source of information on African Christian biography. Increasingly instructors require that students use the DACB for their assignments on African church history.
• Traffic increase on the Web site from an average of 540 pages viewed per day in 2003 to 2,805 in 2011.
• Approx. 650 unique visitors per day (2011)
b. DACB-inspired projects

• The *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, launched in 2005, was incubated at OMSC using the *DACB* model.

• Centers in Singapore, India, and Malaysia are also producing databases modeled after the *DACB*. 

[www.bdccconline.net](http://www.bdccconline.net)
c. Collaboration with IAMS

- The DACB collaborated with the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) to produce a multilingual archives manual for use in African institutions.
Serving the African Church

- The DACB is a tool designed to:
  - Record the memory of the African church
  - In order to equip the African church with tools for the present
  - And prepare the African church for the future
“A people is defined and unified not by blood but by shared memory…. Deciding to remember, and what to remember, is how we decide who we are.” Robert Pinsky

Until lions start writing down their own stories, the hunters will always be the heroes. (proverb, Kenya and Zimbabwe)
The future of the church in Africa will be shaped by her understanding of the past.

Coming to terms with her history:
- The legacy of the Western missionary movement
- The aftermath of colonialization
- 20th century church growth
To Provide Tools for the Present

- Understanding the genesis of African Christianity in order to come to terms with the present:
  - Defining African Christianity in theological, ecclesiological, and liturgical terms
To Better Face the Future

• The African church facing the future:
  – As a leader in World Christianity
  – As an example of Biblical leadership to the West, where secularization is taking its toll on the church
  – Offering a model of renewal to the Western church.
DACB as a facilitator for:

- Ecumenical cooperation
- New initiatives in oral history research on African Christianity
- Development of new curricula for Christian education, in Africa and the West
- Providing research tools on Christianity in the Global South
“A huge cloud of witnesses is all around us.”
Hebrews 12:1 (NIrV)

Let us remember their stories...

...and be encouraged.
Visit the DACB database:

• Online at www.Dacb.org
• On our CD-ROM (no Internet connection)

Sources:

• Statistics are from David Barrett and Todd Johnson and Operation World (2001), quoted from J. Bonk’s article.
• Photo credits: Dan Nicholas, Jonathan Bonk, Fohle Lygunda, Annie Sigg, Michèle Sigg.
• Special graphics created by Michèle Sigg.