

Interfaith training for a new generation of leaders

Ecoforleaders

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The Democratic Republic of Congo is among the largest and most populous countries in Africa, as is the life of the Church there as well. Due to its geographical position and enormous natural and mineral resources, Congo is experiencing extreme social, cultural and religious challenges on geopolitical and societal levels. Alongside a Christian majority of various denominations, there are Branhamites¹, Kimbanguists², Muslims, members of the Baha'i, and a vast richness of peoples, tribes, languages and cultures. In this context, a project to form young leaders able to change the country and renew society is developing. The author is among the protagonists of this initiative.

In June 2016, two Congolese politicians from opposing political factions, Hons. Dieudonné Upira and Georgine Madiko, participated in an international congress in Rome sponsored by the Movement for Unity in Politics (MppU)³. Upon returning to Kinshasa, they shared a common desire to do something for the new generations in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Precisely in this moment when Congo was – and still is – experiencing major political and societal upheaval, they dreamt of "new" leaders who would authentically try to live communion in politics by putting the common good first before party or personal interests.

A first meeting on October 29, 2016, drew not only active politicians, but also ecclesial and religious leaders, members of associations, NGOs, university professors, experts, and professionals from various sectors ranging from communications to entrepreneurship. What emerged from this first meeting was a sharing of experiences and discussion, and above all a common will and desire to build a better Congo.

"Each of us in our group or Church had always worked at the grassroots level for various initiatives, but faced with insurmountable problems, we were tempted to become discouraged and had asked ourselves: 'Isn't there anything else that we can do?' We realized there many positive experiences had been made by capable, competent people trying to go against the evils that seem almost endemic, such as corruption and tribalism. And it was as if our eyes were opened to see that together we could really do something. Our treasure was

“us” and the relationships among us. We then began thinking and asking assistance from people with whom we had established true, trusting relationships in recent years: university professors, politicians, experts in communication, and leaders of other Churches.⁴”

Preparing a Program Proposal

A small working group was set up with the aim of scientifically analyzing and identifying the obstacles and needs of Congolese society in order to develop a ‘profile’ of the suitable leader. Chiara Lubich's charism of unity formed the shared basis upon which different participants could find one another and move forward.

The fundamental question was: *What kind of Congolese citizen, African, and global person did we want to offer to society?* It was a long, tiring, and exciting job. Dialogue and discussion were always on equal footing and without complexes, arriving at the point of becoming fraternal. We wanted to propose to others what we ourselves were trying to live among us: Knowing how to dialogue in diversity, creating a think-tank and action network throughout the territory, one that does not stop at ideas alone, but gives priority to actual living realities.

After various analyses and proposals, a curriculum was developed and aimed at leaders already active in different social, professional and religious fields. The goal is to train the *person*, providing him or her with *problem-solving* tools and *skills* for dialogue.

The Ecoforleaders initiative takes off

On July 8, 2017, national media, university rectors and faculty, personalities from various sectors, including politicians, ministers, ambassadors and leaders of different Churches and religions, came together for the birth of *Ecoforleaders: Advanced leadership training in Unity*⁵, which aims to train "non-tribalist, non-corruptible, unifying leaders". In October 2017, the first course began with 120 students, including the national Islamic youth leader of Congo, the national president of Protestant youth, the president of the Orthodox National Youth, as well as leaders and professionals in fields of communication, medicine, education, and entrepreneurship.

Student diversity was a necessary condition for *Ecoforleaders* to be representative of the same Congolese society upon which it wanted to have an impact. Thus, once shared values and goals were defined, it became a true experience of formation for unity. One technique used to get to know one another was *buzz-groups* or "families". Group members – from different tribes, professions, and religious environments – would visit each other in their families, support one another in challenging times and discuss burning issues together.

In this way, everyone rediscovers the essence of their own identity in this dialogue. Moussa, national leader of the Islamic Youth of Congo, said: "I wanted to participate in *Ecoforleaders* as a faithful Muslim, to contribute and share our life together. The Prophet Muhammad

(peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, "No one can call himself a believer unless he loves his neighbor as himself." This is the source of my motivation, and we lived this teaching with people of other religions. Among the institutions training in leadership, *Ecoforleaders* is characterized by this approach, because it emphasizes communion and human values."

Joel Mutombo, head of the Bahá'í Community Schools Network, explained: "I often found myself in the role of spokesperson, and the Bahá'í Community has entrusted me with responsibilities. I resumed an activity in the educational sector initiated by a foundation, but which the Baha'i institutions had decided to discontinue because those involved could not agree among themselves. I, on the other hand, firmly believed in this project and wanted to find the means and resources to carry it forward. But I didn't know how. In this context, I heard about *Ecoforleaders* as an institution that trains people in the leadership of unity, and was interested after reading about the program and its various activities. Being a Catholic initiative and myself a Baha'i, I doubted they would admit me, but I later learned that it was an initiative that seeks unity in diversity. I said to myself: This is the same goal pursued by the Baha'i Faith, which urges that all believers be associated in a spirit of love and fraternity. That's why I got involved in *Ecoforleaders*. Each course was more than positive because I tried to put into practice what I learned right away. I grew so much as a person and in the exercise of my leadership. Our collaboration has continued even after the program and we carry out activities together both at provincial and national levels. Everyone helps in the organization each other's initiatives. It seems inconceivable to us now that we don't do these big things together."

Learning by Doing

Ecoforleaders is not so much a standard kind of training program, but rather an *experience* in which every participant is directly involved, even the professors.

"We try to make sure there is true reciprocity between professors and students. For each training module there is a university professor who illustrates fundamental theoretical aspects, such as political or economic theory. This is then supported by a professional expert working in the field and who knows the challenges of that field. This could be a former minister, a politician, an activist... This method triggers a dialectic that is then further enriched by the students."

Lino Pungi, Professor Emeritus of Social Communications at the Catholic University of Congo and the Academic Secretary of *Ecoforleaders*, said: "I was attracted by the *Ecoforleaders* formula. I had been teaching leadership as part of the faculty in Social Communications for years, but most students considered the subject from a theoretical aspect and I had not been so happy when I saw the results in the field [...]. One of the advantages of *Ecoforleaders* is that a large proportion of students are already employed in management positions or in various work fields, and thus can immediately apply what they learn by putting it to the test. In my opinion, this speeds up learning."

A professor, even a renowned one, knows well that when he comes to *Ecoforleaders*, he must not simply explain a subject, but get involved and step out of his or her comfort zone. He or she is asked to share their life and above all their experiences, sometimes even their difficulties and failures... This leads to real surprises even for the teachers themselves.

Ecclesial and religious leadership

A formation module concerning ecclesial and religious leadership has been developed by Prof. Léonard Santedi, rector of the Catholic University of Congo; the Protestant bishop of Kinshasa, Rev. Sadath Mossi, who teaches at the Protestant University of Congo; and by the Imam of Kinshasa. For students, seeing these leaders together is as eloquent as their words. A friendship and mutual esteem have also been born among the three, who previously did not know one another very well.

Although *Ecoforleaders* is just a small spark, a school of life emphasizing unity in diversity continues to develop. It is a rediscovering in new and vital ways, the heritage within African culture, such as the *ubuntu paradigm* or the *arbre à palabra (palavra tree)*, as forms of conflict resolution. Now, seven years after its beginning, *Ecoforleaders* is a post-graduate master's degree recognized by the State with three specializations: 1) Techniques in conflict management and resolution in organizations; 2) Leadership for Social Change, and 3) Elections, Governance and Democracy.

The friendships forged remain even after the program ends, and participants continue to help each other face difficulties in their different positions and roles. It is a journey that continues!

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- ¹ Followers of William M. Branham, American Pentecostal pastor (1909-1965), one of the initiators of the faith healing movement.
 - ² First born as a movement within the Baptist Church in the Congo in 1921, the '*Eglise de Jésus Christ sur la Terre par le prophète Simon Kimbangu* (EJCSK) is one of the largest independent churches in Congo. With a complex and troubled history, it is one of the first indigenous attempts to enculturate the Gospel message in African culture in a colonial context.
 - ³ Political Movement for Unity, born out of the Focolare Movement's engagement in the political sphere. It defines itself as an international laboratory for non-partisan political work between citizens, officials, scholars, politicians, engaged at various levels and of different cultural inspirations.
 - ⁴ Quotes are from members of the Organizing Committee of *Ecoforleaders*, unless otherwise specified.
 - ⁵ *Ecoforleaders: Ecole supérieure de Formation DES Leaders de l'unité.*