



# African-American Presbyterian missionary brought reform to the Congo

Mission Around the World February 7, 2017

## William Sheppard: Missionary to the Belgian Congo, 1890-1910

by Michael Parker | *Mission Crossroads*

*This article originally appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of **Mission Crossroads** (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/world-mission/mission-crossroads/>) magazine, which is printed and mailed free to subscribers' homes three times a year by Presbyterian World Mission.*

Early in our Presbyterian history of international mission, William Sheppard took on the challenge of evangelism in a distant, unknown land. His faith helped to build the church; his advocacy for the Congolese changed the world.

Though often neglected today, William Sheppard (1865–1927) was an important black leader and the first African-American to serve as a missionary in central Africa. He played a crucial role in exposing the scandal of Belgian King Leopold II's depredations in the Congo, a story revived in popular culture by Adam Hochschild's 1998 bestseller, *King Leopold's Ghost*.



William H. Sheppard, his wife, Lucy, and their children, ca. 1900. (Photo courtesy Presbyterian Historical Society)

Sheppard was born in Waynesboro, Virginia, about a month before the end of the Civil War. In 1880, at the age of 15, he attended the Hampton (Virginia) Normal and Industrial Institute (later Hampton University) and then Tuscaloosa Theological Institute (later Stillman College) in Alabama, graduating in 1886. After serving for a year at Calvary Presbyterian Church in

Montgomery, Alabama, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. ordained him as a missionary.

The region of the Congo, which had only recently been explored, caught the attention of King Leopold II of Belgium. The Berlin Conference, held in 1884-85 to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa, officially recognized the king's rule over the Congo Free State as a personal possession not subject to review by the Belgian government.



William H. Sheppard with his wife, Lucy Gantt Sheppard, ca. 1900. (Photo courtesy Presbyterian Historical Society)

Sheppard, who arrived in the Congo in May 1890, was well aware that he was entering a region deadly to Westerners. The rivers and lakes were filled with crocodiles and hippopotami, and the dense forests with elephants and panthers. One was not safe at home, as the houses were invaded by scorpions, chigoes (small fleas or “jiggers”) and snakes. Common illnesses included deadly “blackwater fever” and malaria. Sheppard suffered 22 bouts of malaria in his first two years.

The Congolese soon grew to love Sheppard, whom they referred to as Mundele Ndom.

William Phipps, a recent biographer, translated this name as “black man with clothes.” Sheppard learned Bushonga, the language of the Kuba, which he described as “highly inflected and musical.”

Sheppard came to appreciate the culture, becoming a collector of Kuba crafts.

However, he was not a cultural relativist. He opposed belief in witchcraft and practices such as interring live slaves with deceased superiors and the “trial by ordeal” of drinking poison.

Ivory and slaves had been the Congo's main exports, but Leopold focused on rubber. The mass marketing of bicycles and automobiles in the 1890s greatly increased the demand for rubber and sent prices soaring. When a rubber producing vine was discovered in the rainforests of Congo in 1890, Leopold forced out the competition and acquired a monopoly on the scarce commodity. By one estimate, the Congo was producing 20,000 tons of crude rubber a year at a 900 percent profit. The high return was due largely to cheap labor.

As word of atrocities leaked out of the Congo in 1896, Leopold responded with sham investigations and hollow promises of reform. The American Presbyterian Congo Mission (APCM) decided to become a whistleblower. In 1899 it directed Sheppard to investigate personally the villages that were purportedly being attacked by the Zappo Zaps, a subtribe of the BaSonga Menos that Leopold's agents

employed in the Kasai district. They were cannibals who filed their teeth to a point, tattooed their faces, and carried poisoned-dipped spears and arrows. Leopold supplied these mercenaries with guns to terrorize the Congolese into harvesting rubber for him.

On encountering the Zappo Zaps, Sheppard feared for this life. He soon discovered, however, that they assumed all foreigners were allied to Leopold, so they did not hesitate to describe their activities to him. Sheppard carried with him a Kodak camera, which was just then becoming popular. He took photographs of the atrocities and wrote a damning report.



Sheppard, left, with two Congolese men and camels. (Photo courtesy Presbyterian Historical Society)

The APCM hired William Morrison as its legal representative. Morrison, a Presbyterian missionary in the Congo, wrote letters, gave speeches and twisted arms in private. His actions led the British Parliament to pass a unanimous resolution calling on the signers of the Berlin accord of 1885 to take action to protect the Congolese.

In 1904, Sheppard returned home on furlough and, like Morrison, spoke out against the cruelties taking place in the Congo. President Theodore Roosevelt received Sheppard at the White House on January 14, 1905, to hear the case against Leopold. In 1906 the U.S. Senate gave unanimous support for a resolution introduced by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge that called on the president to take measures to end the atrocities in the Congo.

Sheppard returned to the Congo in 1906 and in 1907 wrote an article for a church journal in which he attacked the Kasai Rubber Company, a Belgian contractor, for the degradations occurring in the Kasai basin. The company brought libel charges against him, but these were dropped at the 1909 trial when the prosecution could produce no evidence to support its accusations.

The Belgian legislature ended Leopold's control of the Congo on November 15, 1908, and issued a new charter that placed the Congo under its control. Amid scandal and disgrace, Leopold died in 1909, several weeks after Sheppard's trial. During the 25 years of Leopold's rule in the Congo, the population declined by about 50 percent.

Sheppard returned to the U.S. in 1910 and soon settled in Louisville, Kentucky, where he served as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church and helped to establish a highly successful settlement house for Louisville's black population. He died on November 27, 1927.



Annie Taylor, left, and Lucy and William Sheppard pose with a dead snake. (Photo courtesy Presbyterian Historical Society)

*Michael Parker, a PC(USA) mission co-worker in Egypt, serves as the director of Graduate Studies at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo.*



(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) You may freely reuse and distribute this article in its entirety for non-commercial purposes in any medium. Please include author attribution, photography credits, and a link to the original article. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Categories: Mission Around the

World (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/category/mission-around-world/>)

Tags: african-american (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/african-american/>), central africa (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/central-africa/>), congo (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/congo/>), grace presbyterian church (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/grace-presbyterian-church/>), history (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/history/>), lucy sheppard (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/lucy-sheppard/>), pcusa (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/pcusa/>), presbyterian (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/presbyterian/>), william sheppard (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/william-sheppard/>), world mission (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/tag/world-mission/>)

Ministries: Mission Crossroads Magazine (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/mission-crossroads/>), World Mission (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/world-mission/>)

**“Let your light shine before others.” —Matt. 5:16**

[Contact Us](#)