

**The life and work of Cecile de Sweemer**

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David L. Gosling

(former director of Church and Society, World Council of Churches)

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## EMPOWERING THE WEAK AND CONFRONTING POWER

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### The life and work of Cecile de Sweemer

Gales of laughter increasing in volume would herald Cecile's daily arrival at our shared offices at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Appearing in the doorway she would radiate a warm smile and extend both arms in readiness for a hug with whomever happened to be nearest.

#### (i) Early years

Cecile was born in Ghent, Belgium, on 29 June 1936, the only child of Mathilde, an accountant and amateur actor and Arthur, a journalist – both peace activists between the world wars. They were known to be anti-Nazi, and therefore had to flee Ghent for France when the Germans invaded in May 1940.

Returning to Belgium, Cecile's early schooling took place under the aegis of the Nazis, who tended to favour her on account of her Aryan characteristics – blonde, blue eyes, etc. But she carried messages for the Resistance. By the age of twelve she had developed a strong interest in science, and was consistently at the top of her class. A vegetarian, Cecile admired Buddhism, and designed her own clothes. Her parents separated, and she became financially dependent on her teachers. In 1952 Cecile set up a relief effort at her school for people who had lost their homes in massive floods in Holland – her biographer observes that her assertiveness upset the headmistress!

Cecile's intelligence and abilities carried her through the next few years. Her father was elected to the Belgian Parliament for the Socialist party in 1946 and remained there until the mid-sixties. But he began drinking heavily and womanising. Cecile reports that in the course of the decade beginning in 1950 her parents were reconciled a dozen times. Finally, in 1972, they divorced; her father later told Cecile: "Your Mum was a saint – she sacrificed herself for me and you, but I hate her.....".

Cecile's medical studies lasted twenty years, beginning in Ghent (1954-62) and extending to John Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she obtained a doctorate in Public Health in 1974, subsequently joining the faculty. But she encountered a considerable amount of anti-feminism, and one professor tried to stop her graduation completely: "He was upset about my whole lifestyle, always in pantsuit and sandals (plastic as those were the cheapest), on a bicycle, openly active in progressive causes and talking with patients and their families in dialect to be better understood.... I felt that we doctors should not lord it over the patients but help them make decisions based on accurate information."

Cecile's brief flirtation with Chinese communism ended with their invasion and savage repression of the Tibetans in 1950. Her fieldwork studies took her to India, where she met the Dalai Lama, and tried to get scholarships for a dozen young Tibetans to study abroad. One of these, Tenpa, went via Manchester to Switzerland, where he worked for the Red Cross among refugees, where I met him. Cecile returned to John Hopkins University where she became an associate professor. Her mother died in 1977.

#### (ii) The World Council of Churches

At about this time Cecile received an invitation to become associate director of the Christian Medical Commission at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Unfortunately the head of this sub-unit had difficulties working with colleagues more competent than himself, especially women. The General Secretary, Emilio Castro, therefore arranged for her to become a consultant for the sub-unit of Church and Society, which I headed. Cecile continued her advocacy on behalf of the victims of apartheid in South Africa, and we were able to collaborate with anti-apartheid leaders such as Frank Chikane. Pat and Renuka Naidoo spent time with us, and Barney Pityana was appointed director of the Programme to Combat Racism. Cecile played an important part in promoting primary health care in West Africa.

Cecile came very much into her own in December 1984, a few months after I had joined the WCC, when the release of toxic gases from a Union Carbide plant at Bhopal in India killed an estimated 2500 people and maimed another 10,000 to 200,000. This was the worst ever industrial disaster. Cecile helped the WCC General Secretary to issue an appropriate statement, following which we received a request from a Bombay/Mumbai-based film team to show their film of the disaster. Union Carbide also approached us to ask if we would let them try to rebuild public confidence.

We decided to combine the two events, but when Cecile produced her position paper about the disaster, the Union Carbide representative became so angry that he walked out. There were many other occasions on which Cecile's forensic skills drove a coach and horses through the bluff and bluster of vested interests.

Above all else Cecile deserves credit for masterminding through our sub-unit the first ecumenical and international consultation on AIDS. The World Health Organisation (WHO) had approached the WCC to ask for an investigation into the reasons why certain churches, especially in the USA, were blocking funding for research on AIDS on the grounds that it was God's judgement on homosexuals. Our consultation was held at Cartigny in Switzerland and was attended by a distinguished group of medical experts, ethicists, educationists, theologians and others. Meetings were chaired by Tom Tull from the USA, who was HIV-infected, and died some time later, as did Kevin Gordon - a Roman Catholic also from the USA.

The General Secretary opened the proceedings by declaring AIDS to be a virus with no particular divine connotations. The consultation strongly endorsed this view and urged the churches and other bodies to rediscover their ministry to the sick and dying, to protect the rights of people with AIDS and to undertake education for prevention. These recommendations were approved at the Hearing timed for a meeting of the WCC Executive, and also by the WCC Central Committee. Jonathan Mann, head of the WHO and Edmund Browning, Presiding Bishop of the US Episcopalians, participated in the Hearing and the Archbishop of York, John Habgood, chaired the Central Committee debate.

But then there was a snag. Some members of the Orthodox churches (not the Russians) were unhappy with the recommendations, and some members of the WCC General Secretariat (especially from the USA) believed that their jobs might be at risk if such controversial statements were made. They therefore blocked the news reports to prevent them reaching a wide audience. At this point, Cecile persuaded a young Swiss member of the communications department to leak the recommendations in French through ecumenical channels in Paris.

### (iii) International development

In 1986 Cecile received an offer from the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC) to be their regional programme adviser for health, covering West, Central and South Africa. This period, lasting until 1992, was the longest stretch of time Cecile worked for any one employer. She rented a house in the suburbs of Dakar, Senegal. Her correspondence during this period doesn't say much about the details of her work but dwells on her various relationships, including those with God. She married Ousman, a Senegalese IDR co-worker, nine years her junior; they separated in 1994 and divorced four years later.

In 1993 the Belgian Technical Corporation seconded Cecile as a consultant to the World Health Organisation to work in Cambodia; during her final year, 1996, she was employed by UNICEF as well. She survived an attempted kidnap and managed to avoid conflict with the Khmer Rouge. A young Cambodian carpenter sold Cecile a beautiful wood carving of village life; she carried it to Laos and presented it to me when I visited her there in Vientiane during her next job.

Laos is "a communist regime that tries, since about 1991, to be a free market but it's barely at subsistence level. So it's not very meaningful to say free market, if people have no money to participate in it...." Her work, still funded by the Belgian Technical Corporation, was to develop a network of health centres. In 2002 her role for the Belgians was

taken over by the Japan International Co-operation Agency. This involved additional spells of a few months in Sri Lanka.

In 2002 Cecile decided to offer her services to the Presbyterian Church of the USA (PCUSA) as a medical missionary to work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In spite of her being past the normal retirement age of 65 they accepted her to work in the two provinces of Western and Eastern Kasai. But within a year tensions had developed between Cecile and the Presbyterian Mission Board, and by February 2005 her employment with PCUSA had been terminated.

Within a few months Cecile had founded Butoke (a Congolese word meaning “light”) as an NGO, and was regrouping her support networks accordingly. Jean Lumbala, a young agronomist became president of the project and continued to function as Cecile’s right hand man. Cecile joined the Dinanga Presbyterian Church in the Congo, while remaining an affiliate member of the Maryland Presbyterian Church.

(iv) Missionary impossible?

In her comprehensive biography of Cecile, Dickens Warfield describes her as a “missionary impossible” and as a saint. Cecile has no objection to the former, insofar as she was employed at least latterly by the PCUSA. But “missionary” has religious connotations which are not really applicable to Cecile, who is more spiritual than religious, which may at least partially explain her attractiveness to young people of all backgrounds and nationalities. “Spiritual” may also explain why both religious and secular institutions had so much difficulty in relating to someone who is constitutionally incapable of not responding to human – or other – suffering (she had three cats and a dog when I visited her in Laos).

“Saint” is too tarnished by religion, and unrealistic, to apply to Cecile, and the very idea made her laugh. And that laughter will always be my strongest recollection, growing more intense every morning as it moved along the corridor outside our shared rooms.....and the warm hug that followed it.

David L. Gosling  
[dlg26@cam.ac.uk](mailto:dlg26@cam.ac.uk)

(former director of Church and Society, World Council of Churches)

For more information about support for Butoke, contact Paul Evans at [paulevans@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:paulevans@blueyonder.co.uk)