

## The Rev Dennis Fowler obituary

Missionary who preserved the language of the Ila people of Zambia and was honoured for his study of plants used to treat malaria



Fowler with his children Stephen and Rebecca on a visit to Victoria Falls in the early 1960s

During his National Service, in the postwar years, Dennis Fowler got some work on the side. The leader of the regimental dance band was demobilized, so Fowler took over; he was a gifted pianist, with a particular love of jazz and boogie-woogie. He and his band, the Ordinaires, would play for the young soldiers, earning a few pounds and some free drinks. They split the money five ways and, after his service, he had earned enough to take his mother and sister on a trip to Paris.

That might not be the sort of behaviour one would expect from a young man who would later become a Methodist minister and missionary. Yet Fowler — reverend, linguist, honorary botanist, fan of music, poetry and deeply silly jokes, who was known as “the little man who smokes a pipe” by the Ila people of Zambia — did many things that one would not expect.

Dennis George Fowler was born in Barrow-in-Furness in 1929, the youngest of the three children of Stephen Fowler, a sawmill worker, and his wife, Alice. Dennis was educated at Barrow Grammar School for Boys. His father died of a brain tumour when Dennis was ten, which was a cruel blow. He was, however, a bright, academic child, and found a mentor in one of his teachers. He excelled at school, and went off to Oxford a year before his peers, reading modern history, followed by theology at Richmond College, now part of the University of London.

A man of a deep and calm faith, he joined the Methodist ministry, and it was at an event for Methodist freshers in Oxford in 1949 that he met Ena Bradley. As he recorded in a memoir: “The door opened and the most beautiful girl I had ever seen came in. I resolved to marry her.”

She would indeed become his wife four years later. They joined the missionary service and, in 1958, the couple, with their six-week-old daughter, Rebecca, sailed to what was then Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, where they would have three more children, Stephen, James, and Sarah. For eight years they lived at the missionary station in Kasenga in the south of the country, where they worked among the Ila people, whose lives, language and knowledge Fowler did so much to document and preserve.

They ran a hospital; they built two churches and a school; they helped many youngsters to go to university themselves. Most of all, they threw themselves into the lives of the Ila people. They learnt the language fluently, no small feat given its entirely alien grammatical structure (to European speakers), but as Ena was a linguist by training and Dennis had learnt Hebrew and Greek to allow him to read the Bible in its original forms, they were well equipped. And they steeped themselves in the Ila's folklore and the deep understanding of the world around them, especially plant life.



Fowler in 2015, when he was presented with his MBE by Peter Field, the lord-lieutenant of East Sussex

In 1966 they came home to England. For a while Dennis worked as a minister at a church in Colne, Lancashire. He loved the work and the people, but he found it hard to support his now rather large family on a minister's income. Four years later he became a religious education teacher at a local school, where he worked until retirement.

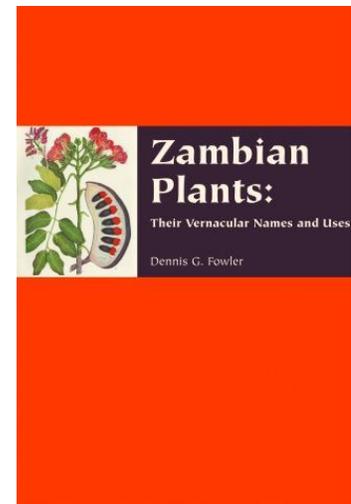
Retirement was just the start — the end of his working life brought more surprises. An old friend from Zambia, Dorothy Nabanyama, had remained in touch; she spoke no English, so he would write to her in Ila. She suggested that he write a book about the language; it had been widely spoken in Northern Rhodesia, but by the 1960s only about 13,000 speakers survived. Another local language, Tonga, had been chosen ahead of it as one of the five languages of independent Zambia.

Between 1995 and 2000, Fowler, with help from another Ila-speaking friend, a linguist called Pearson Likukela, and the copious notes of the many Methodist ministers who had worked at Kasenga before him, spent two hours every day, from 6am to 8am, documenting the language for posterity. The resulting 890-page work was called *A Dictionary of Ila Usage, 1860-1960*, but it was more than a dictionary: it recorded the folklore and sayings, the grammar, and much of the local knowledge of the Ila people, a corpus that would otherwise have been lost. Today only a few very elderly Ila speakers survive.



Fowler was still not finished. Paul Smith, a senior scientist at Kew Gardens who had grown up in Zambia and specialized in the flora of the country, became aware of the dictionary and recognized its importance.

Among the thousands of entries were the names, and, crucially, the medicinal uses, of more than 400 Zambian plants. Smith and his colleague, the botanist Olwen Grace, approached Fowler and encouraged him to turn that information into a scientific paper. Despite no training in science, let alone botany, he succeeded.



From his home in Eastbourne, East Sussex, using the small lending library near his home to seek out long-out-of-print works on the flora of rural Zambia, he tapped away at a computer in his study behind piles of obscure textbooks. *Traditional Ila Plant Remedies from Zambia* was published in 2002. Five years later an expanded work, *Zambian Plants: Their Vernacular Names and Uses*, was published by Kew.

Several more papers followed. Fowler's driving interest was in local Zambian remedies and prophylactics against malaria, which he had caught while in Africa. His brush with malaria and dysentery had left him, at the age of 40, unable to eat solid food for seven years, until one day he decided to throw caution to the wind and eat a tomato. His work continues to inform ethnobotanists' work, and he ensured that the Ila people's knowledge was not lost. He was publishing scientific papers as recently as 2012, at the age of 82.

That same year, he was elected a fellow of the Linnean Society in recognition of his contribution to the study of natural history. In 2015 he was awarded the MBE, "for services to botanical research and for the preservation of the Ila people's culture".

By this time Ena was suffering from dementia and he had become increasingly frail. As they were unable to attend Buckingham Palace for his MBE ceremony, the lord-lieutenant of East Sussex, Peter Field, presented it to him in Eastbourne. Ena became too unwell for him to care for her and she had to go into a local home. Partly through faith and partly through an unshakeable optimism, Fowler saw even this heartbreak in a positive light. "If one is faced with the painful necessity of separation after more than 60 years together," he wrote, "this is the way to do it." He pointed out that the care home had "the most succulent chips in Eastbourne", which, as anyone who knows Eastbourne will tell you, is a strong claim.

Ena, who is 87, survives him along with their children. Rebecca teaches English and drama; Sarah is a nurse at a surgery in Eastbourne; James lectures in French at the University of Kent, while Stephen is a private tutor.

As the Ila noted, Fowler was small, perhaps 5ft 4in, and he did indeed smoke a pipe. He was also softly spoken, but able to project his voice remarkably when singing or reciting poetry, which he did often. His smile was broad and quick, illuminating whole rooms. In his last weeks, Rebecca brought an old keyboard down from her home in Wales. Although he had always said that to play jazz piano properly one had to stand, he faced up to the realities of old age and, sitting in his chair, he played *The Honky-Tonk Train Blues*, a favourite from his days with the Ordinaires, as both his carers danced around the room, laughing.

**The Rev Dennis Fowler, MBE, Methodist missionary, was born on June 30, 1929. He died from pulmonary fibrosis on July 26, 2018, aged 89**