

April/May, 2006

Dear Ministry Partners,

The response to the March newsletter was so encouraging we decided to continue to expose you to more of our Congolese staff who are worthy of your attention. This month we feature Pastor Gary Kapinga in Laban's Hall of Fame.

Gary is the National Director of Laban Ministries in Congo. He resides at Nkara with his second wife, Jean, and their six children. He oversees our multitribe staff of 100, deals with the State when they come in to "tax" us, negotiates on our behalf, and has the final word in our absence when it comes to decision making. His story goes like this:

As a teenager of very lean stature, he earned money by distracting men walking through a particular area of hangout for him and his friends near his village. When the targeted individual passed by, Gary caught his attention by harassing him and calling him names. As the victim neared the secluded gang members, Gary annoyed his prey to the point of being chased by him, leading the unsuspecting person right to the gang who then attacked the individual, and stole whatever he might have in his possession. This is how he eked out an existence until he became notoriously known in the area.

From his village of Gombe, (remember this name) this young man from the Bawongo tribe, made the 130 mile trek to Kikwit, a city of 1,000,000 people to make a decent living. In 1978, Mrs. Marcella Smith, wife of the late Dr. Laban Smith, was shopping in Kikwit for supplies while staying at the guesthouse, an extension of which was built by her husband in the 40's, which served as his dental office. Mrs. Smith, Jim's mother, had just returned to Congo to precede us and help us get settled into missionary life at Nkara. This was October; we left for Congo on Dec 4 that same year.

Gary was assisting Solomon, the cook, at the guesthouse. Mrs. Smith asked Gary to help her with her shopping as she looked for large items like a refrigerator, mattresses, stove, etc. After several days of traveling with him at her side, they struck up a friendship, and one night in the guesthouse she introduced Gary to the Savior. Marcella Smith left a note which Solomon gave us months later when we arrived at that same guesthouse, urging us to consider Gary as a potential worker because he always gave her the correct change and was so kind to her while she was in Kikwit. His transformation was underway!

On November 14, 1978, Mrs. Smith went to be with the Lord at Nkara. She died in what is now Jim's office as she was leaning over her bed. In March of 1979 we arrived at Kikwit only to find Gary still working there and very willing to help us adjust. After six weeks in Kikwit, we made our way to Nkara, and Gary became a beloved member of our family. He "grew up" in our home with our own children, spending as much as 12 hours a day with us. The only two phrases Nancy could muster at first were masa ya madidi, masa ya tiya, meaning cold water and hot water which were hand carried upstairs for daily bathing. Gary saw Nancy's pain, culture shock, and pregnant state and was a great help to her.

In the summer of 1979, Gary was imprisoned. The local "pastor" Mapungu, an infidel and reprobate whom Mrs. Smith had taught English, falsely accused him of fathering a child with a single girl on

the station. Gary was taken to Bulungu, put in chains in his cell, and tortured for no reason. After two months of unjust punishment, he was released without bond and walked the 60 mile trip back home to Nkara. We can still see our children running across the valley to hug him and welcome him home.

Late that fall, Gary returned to Gombe to find a wife. Suzanne had never seen a white person in her life. He brought her to our home soon after their wedding to introduce her to us. She had the look of electric shock in her face and was extremely shy. One year later they lost their first baby. In all, Gary and Suzanne lost 5 children, among them twin boys. Their beloved Diana died in 1995 of Hepatitis B at the age of 7.

Then in 1997, after suffering from liver cancer resulting from Hepatitis B, Gary lost the love of his life, Suzanne. By this time Suzanne and Gary had become such a strong team. She did all the cooking and gathering of food for the Bible school students who lived on campus at Nkara. She was Nancy's good friend. Whatever job she was given, one could be sure it would be done. Often, she would come to our house to say "hi", and there in our kitchen, Gary would wrap his arms around her and say, "Nothing will ever separate us but death." When Gary lost Suzanne, we all lost. . . a wonderful friend and partner in ministry. Gary spent many hours on his knees begging God to let her live. In Congo, the person who is in the last stages of life is seldom told the truth by the medical personnel who deal with each case. They are sadly given false hope, and the family is left unprepared for death.

Finally, Gary realized that she was not going to make it. After burying their premature twin boys, Gary hired a truck to take Suzanne back to her village to die. The truck took them most of the way, and then he and friends carried her on a stretcher-like apparatus on the road for miles. At one point they stopped, and in great pain and agony, she made him promise to take care of the children. Then her spirit and soul fled like a dove into the courts of heaven, never to suffer or sorrow again. Heartbroken, Gary returned to Nkara. How we longed to have been there with them in those final hours. Nancy's father at the time was dying here in the States, and our first grandchild was born.

The Lord provided another woman for Gary from Gombe to love him. Jean is also a gift from God. She has been a wonderful asset to Gary, his children, and the ministry.

Gary Kapinga graduated from Laban Bible Inst, and has been directing the work in Congo for many years. His two oldest boys, James and Todd, are now in university. Shines Peace is a teenager along with Caleb, and Jean and Gary have three children of their own. He has remained faithful under excruciating pain and rejection of tribalism. He has defended the faith and Laban Ministries in Congo. He is totally trustworthy. He knows our sense of humor and is fun to be around. He is a great husband and father. He has lovingly and justly dealt with staff who have defied his leadership because he is an outsider. No matter what is set in front of Gary, he has chooses to sing Hallelujah. He praises God through every storm. He is a hero of the faith. He is the man of God's choice for the hour. He is a marvelous trophy of God's grace. And best of all, he is our true friend and brother.

We told you to remember the name, Gombe. That's because today in Gary's village where once he made a living as a thief, a Bible school stands. Laban Bible Institute III, faithfully cranks out God's awesome Word, and 20 men and women are being trained this year to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ. More than 50 have graduated from Gombe. The transforming power at Gombe is more living

proof of II Cor. 5:17. . . old things are passed away; behold, all things become new.

Just today we talked with Gary. He told me to thank you so much for your faithful support of Laban Ministries because it means that he along with 99 other men and women are able to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in Africa at Nkara, Iwungu, Gombe, and Kinshasa. Your monthly gifts help us pay these awesome people who are so rich in faith and glow with the sunshine of heaven on their faces. Your participation with us in the Gospel translates into producing fruit like Gary. Your gifts are being harvested in transformed lives that lay hold of eternal life and anchor themselves steadfast and sure in Scripture. God bless you for keeping us and our family in Congo on the move for Jesus' sake. Amen and Hallelujah !

Please remember our banquet on October 12, 2006. Greg Sponberg, M.Div., will be our featured speaker and his wife, Nicol, also our daughter, will sing from her heart.

Please, please, also pray for us as we prepare to depart for Congo on July 3. We do not take your prayers for granted; we are desperate for them and for God's blessing.