

“LUKE”:



I remember first meeting him at a Life Skills class we were hosting at an area church. He had only recently arrived at the children's home which would prove to be his permanent residence for the remainder of his days. Children in the Life Skills class needed to be a certain age to attend, and frankly, he did not look much older than 10. “How old are you?” I queried him. “I’m 16,” replied Luke. I’m sorry to say I did not at first believe him, but he insisted that he had given me his true age. I made a mental note to make certain that the children's home staff knew that this class was geared for children at least 12 years of age. Later when I asked one of the staff, “How old is Luke?” I was told, “No one knows for sure, but from what we see in our records we believe him to be about sixteen.”

Apparently his body never developed like others; a pituitary gland problem caused his body to never attain full maturity. Later it was discovered that he had been born with a brain tumour, so many of his physical and maturation problems stemmed from that.

He had never before attended school before coming to the children's home. He knew nothing of learning but had a thirst to do so. He was entered into the ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) school programme. His teacher said that even when others whined about having to be at school or were late in the morning, “Luke” was never late, was always there, was always eager to learn.

I asked him once what he wanted to be when he finished school. “I want to be a children's doctor, to help children with sicknesses they have.” With a twinge of sadness I realised that despite his heart and enthusiasm, because of his difficulties caused by his mother's use of alcohol while he was in the womb and his resulting struggle with academics, he very likely might never attain that dream. I was saddened because he had the social skills and a definite gift for relating to children that were necessary to the making of an excellent paediatrician. He loved children and gave of himself to make them feel important, and they were drawn to him like metal to a magnet.

Luke often went to church either with us, or with some of the other children's home kids. He loved church. He especially loved it if he could get to a Tswana church where he could worship the Lord with songs in his native tongue. There were times we took him to a Tswana church, and even if he had never been there before in his life, he felt perfectly at ease getting up and giving a testimony, or starting a song and having everyone join in. He didn't have some of the “hang-ups” that some of us have. He accepted people openly and immediately, and expected that others would accept him that way, too – which sometimes led to his being hurt, if people made fun of him or didn't accept him for who he was. He was so friendly to others and loved to talk! One friend from the children's home admitted at his funeral that if he was very busy, when Luke entered the room, he would duck out the other way, to avoid a lengthy conversation. He loved people, he loved to talk with others and was interested in them, he loved to sing, and he loved life. All of this was true despite the fact that Luke had been found living on the streets north of Kimberley, and despite having had an alcoholic mother whose drinking had been the source of his own struggles and severe physical problems. In his heart Luke loved her too, though he said many times he would never touch alcohol because of his mama's problems. Despite her hopelessness she must have done something right, because Luke had learned a love for people and kindness that is never matched in many people. He was determined he was going to make something of his life.

He had heard of the children's centre in Kimberley and he wanted to come. The social worker tried to place him with a family in that area. He had begged to come to Kimberley. He was determined that the children's centre in Kimberley was going to be his family, his home. The social worker told him “No – you need to stay here with this foster family.” But next time that social worker came to the children's centre, there he was, proudly saying, “This is my home now. They will take care of me.” And they did – for the rest of his life.

The children's home is *supposed* to keep children only till the age of 18, then send them back to whatever family member can be found who can care for that young person. But for Luke, there was no one who stepped up to say, "I am his relative. I will care for him." They knew he could not care for himself in the world. So, to their credit, they kept him at the children's home, even though they could no longer receive a grant for him.

Luke did not want to get by on people's charity, and would often ask for work, from people who lived near the children's home. He often would go do their yard work, or babysit a child, or in some way help out. He did NOT want a hand-out. He wanted to do what he could to earn his own way, to be gainfully employed. Because of his friendliness and hard work, he became in the neighbours' thinking sort of a "son of the neighbourhood."

At one point we began holding a Bible study at the children's home where he lived. He would show up as often as he could. Later, we had to move the study to a different location, and our study grew into a youth group. He ALWAYS wanted to be in attendance. He would often come and almost immediately seem to fall asleep. It was a little bit frustrating, so we decided to ask him, "If you are so tired why do you push yourself to be here? We want you here, but are sad that you are not able to hear the lesson or gain from the fellowship." He responded that he was only resting his eyes, but that he was listening to everything that was said. About that time, he quite suddenly began to say that he could not see. His classmates ridiculed him, his teacher scolded him. "But you saw this work yesterday! Why are you not copying it down today?" He kept insisting, "I see only darkness. I cannot see the chalkboard." Once they believed him, they took him to the doctor, who discovered that he had a brain tumour which had taken his sight.

Though we were frustrated with "the system" of government medicine which had put him on a waiting list for the surgery he needed, even having emergency surgery at the point of discovery probably would not have made a lot of difference. The tumour had been growing since he was a baby. If he could have had the tumour out when he was a child of 5 or so, he likely could have led a more normal life, but no one discovered or did anything about it then. The doctors were quite baffled as to HOW they were going to get this large mass out of his brain without damaging his brain. They knew that there was only a 50-50 chance he would live through such a surgery. However, without the surgery, there was a 100% chance that he would continue to lose his ability to think, he would continue to have more and more severe headaches, he'd already had one stroke and was likely to have more, and he would after a while end up completely needing 24-hour care and not know anyone or anything around him. That would be a s-l-o-w death. In November of 2015 he was hospitalised for a couple of weeks, with several CAT scans and a lot of observation and decisions by the doctors. He was given a date of December 9 to return to the hospital. We were unsure whether this was for the actual surgery or more observation. Even Luke himself did not know.

December came. I was diagnosed with a malignant tumour on December 1, went to the surgeon on December 2, and the surgeon would have done the surgery that week, but I was directing our church's Sunday School Christmas programme that weekend, the 6<sup>th</sup>. We had planned for a Dress Rehearsal in front of our teens on the 4<sup>th</sup>, their regular Friday night meeting. I was running around all aflutter trying to get kids into their costumes, and trying to keep them from going outside and soiling their costumes before the rehearsal started. Then Luke came to youth group. Suddenly I noticed the children were not running all around anymore. When I looked more closely, I saw that they were all clustered around Luke, who was sitting in the church auditorium, singing Christian Setswana songs with them, telling them stories, and keeping them all occupied. What a huge blessing his gift with children was to me that night! That was the night when, after the children went home, I told our teens about my cancer and upcoming surgery. I was to enter the hospital on 8 December for my surgery. Luke was to enter another hospital on 9 December. The teens gathered around us, held hands and 6 led out in prayer for my surgery, and for Luke returning to hospital. What a special time it was for all of us!

I drove my usual teens home after youth that night, and most of them were sitting in the back talking with one another. Luke was in the front seat with me. I almost always play Christian CDs in the car. "Turn up the music, Auntie Sonia," requested Luke. I did, and then a song came on speaking of the peace of God during troubling times in our lives, about God being there for us. He and I decided that would be "our song" for our going into the hospital. It was a peaceful, holy moment, listening to the words, and enjoying visiting with each other on the way home that night.

That was the last time I saw Luke. A few days later, I was admitted to the hospital for surgery, and the day after my admittance, he went into another hospital across town. We usually would have gone to visit anyone we know in hospital. But with my own hospitalisation and then recovery at home, we didn't get a chance to do that. We were told on Friday the 11<sup>th</sup>, "he is in I.C.U." A few days later we were told that he HAD had the procedure, but he had never awakened after surgery. René had the difficult task of going around to each teen's home and letting them know of Luke's passing. Though some teens had scattered for the holidays, sixteen of them attended his funeral with us, on 22 December 2015.

We never knew for sure whether Luke had actually trusted Christ as his Saviour and Lord. We knew he was deeply religious, loved being with God's people, and loved to sing God's praises. But one of our serious teen girls said, "I KNOW where he is. When we came to youth, he used to always tell me the Gospel."

One life – seemingly insignificant, seemingly uncared-for by family, but not insignificant to God. Luke had purpose and meaning, brought people together, pointed people to the Lord as he lifted his voice in Christian songs, loved and was friendly with everyone he met. How I thank God for bringing Luke into our lives and for the wonderful opportunity I had in knowing him. How many times his smile, his kindness, his joy, and his love for people deeply touched my heart. He didn't have the things that many people consider as important, but he offered only from his heart the best that he was. I am thankful, humbled, and proud to have called him friend. I am glad to have had input into his life as he did into mine. I am grateful for that final time of fellowship and praise as I drove him and the others home that night. His influence is more than we will ever know this side of Heaven, but God knows... and that is all that matters.