



75 ☞ All I have to give is a daughter

In late summer of 1959 there was a flurry of activity at the Kandala mission station as young people from surrounding villages came to apply for entrance into the station schools for the coming year. One morning there was a tap at the veranda door of a local missionary. It was Pierre Khelendende, the lead pastor of the large station church.¹

A portly man of medium height, Pastor Pierre had an innate gift for speaking. On the Sundays when it was his turn to preach in the station chapel, no one's attention drifted. His gift for oratory, his knowledge of scripture, and his firm grasp of the legends, proverbs, and idioms of his Pende people all made for sermons with an impact.

Beside Pastor Pierre stood a girl, his daughter, shyly looking down at the floor. She was dressed in a freshly ironed cotton print frock. Her skin shone from her early morning bath, and her hair was done up in neat little spikes. Her name was Léonie, the name she had adopted on the day of her baptism.

Invited into the missionary home, Pastor Pierre wasted no time in getting to the point. He explained that years ago he had met Jesus, and it had changed his whole life. He said that he and his wife had always longed for a son whom they could give back to the Lord for service in their beloved church. But the Lord had not seen fit to grant their request and had instead given them two daughters.

photo—Léonie Khelendende with her husband, Luadi Nari
1 See “A well-ordered pastor” (chapter 10).

Turning to the girl at his side, he said, “Léonie has never given us any trouble. She’s been obedient and has been a great help to her mother. She finished primary school here at Kandala last spring with good grades. I still want to give a child to the Lord to his work.” Pausing a moment, he continued: “Since I do not have a son, all I have to give is a daughter. Today I’m placing her in your hands. Treat her as you would your own child. Give her opportunity for further education and training. Let’s see how the Lord can use her in his work and in our church. This is why I’ve come to you this morning.”

A long moment of silence followed. While Léonie’s eyes were averted, Pastor Pierre’s gaze was fixed on the missionary, who was moved both by the deep yearning of the pastor and the audacity of his request. Girls and women had a low profile in the church. Their roles were still clearly defined: marriage, childbearing, and serving their families. Pastor Pierre’s request reflected a startling readiness to push the African cultural envelope as well as to trust God to accept and use his daughter.

In the providence of God, that very fall the director of the four-year secondary school at Nyanga station had decided that it was time to take a historic step and admit a few bright girls into the entering class. One girl from the Banga station area had already been accepted, and the director was looking for a second qualified girl to be her classmate. When Léonie’s school records were forwarded to him, the word soon came to Kandala that she had been accepted.

The first semester for the girls was not easy. Not only were studies at a challenging level, the girls were also teased by members of the overwhelming male majority of the class. “What are you doing here? Do you think girls are smart enough for this school? Didn’t you understand that these courses are taught in French? Why aren’t you married and doing what girls are supposed to do?”

The girls simply smiled, kept their peace, and studied hard.

Then came the first semester finals. When grades were made known, Léonie stood in the top 5 percent of the class. That put a stop to the boys’ heckling.

Léonie became the first woman to graduate from the four-year high school program. She was one of the first women to be named director of a church primary school. To the delight of her parents, she was sent to her home station at Kandala, where she met and married a fellow Christian teacher, Luadi Nari.

Léonie accompanied her husband to Kinshasa when he was given a scholarship to enroll in a post-secondary pastoral training school. However, her request for a scholarship to enroll in the women's section of the same school was denied. Church leaders expressed regret but said they could not grant two scarce scholarships to the same family. The AIMM Women's Auxiliary in the US heard about her problem and granted her the funds she needed for the study program.

During three grueling years she carried on her studies with distinction, while caring for her children and providing nourishing meals for her family through careful use of their student rations.

Upon graduation, Léonie's husband was ordained to the ministry, but the Congo church was not yet ready to grant women this role. Léonie did not make an issue of this policy but simply made herself available at her husband's side. Her winsome smile, caring heart, and love for the Lord won her a large place in the Mennonite community of Kinshasa. Though not called "Rev. Léonie," she was, in fact and practice, precisely that.

Léonie died suddenly on a Christmas day, as she was making her way in a crowded city bus to her appointed place of ministry. Pastor Pierre's query had been fully answered. The Lord had indeed used their daughter in his service.

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