

In the Shadow of the Twisted Spire - Taking Reverse Mission Seriously

One of my former students, who is originally from Malawi has written a wonderful book on the theme of reverse mission. Not only has Harvey (Kwiyani) written extensively on the topic,^[1] he has also gained a Ph.D in a related area and actually engaged in mission in at least three western nations. But such thoughtful practitioners are rare.

Of course there are thousands of pastors, evangelists, missionaries, self styled apostles, prophets, healers, exorcists and others from Asia, Africa and South America conducting ministry in various western lands, but mostly these are conducting ministries to their own culture, ethnicity and language group, living as part of the huge diaspora from other continents who have migrated to the west.

So, it was with great interest that I interviewed Pastor Toyin Taiwo from Nigeria:

As she explains, Toyin self consciously attempted to begin a multi-national congregation in Chesterfield, England. Although Chesterfield is near the huge industrial towns and cities of Sheffield, Derby, Leeds and Nottingham it isn't the kind of place where one would expect to find a large migrant community. The town is famous for the twisted spire on the main parish church in the town and it certainly feels more 'English' than many of the places where African majority congregations have sprung up.

Growth at Grace Chapel has not been spectacular or straightforward. After eight years of intensive effort the group has grown from Toyin's own small family to become around 80 adults and possibly 20 children with about two thirds present on any particular Sunday. The congregation is drawn from around twenty different nationalities, representing every inhabited continent on earth.

Although Toyin is a Nigerian and her congregation is part of a Nigerian denomination, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, interestingly the smallest national African group within the church is drawn from Nigeria. The white English community represents the single largest group. There are other white migrants present from various European nations and from commonwealth countries such as Australia. It's an intriguing and remarkable mix.

So how did someone who does not regard herself as a fully trained pastor, whose husband's occupation as a senior executive within a multi-national company, often takes him away from home, combine her responsibilities as a wife, a mother and a prayer warrior with the call to mission in a strange land?

Toyin's upbringing is significant. She describes her father as someone who was shaped culturally by the Anglican Church in Nigeria and was educated to MSc level in Leeds, England. He ensured that his daughter was given a wider appreciation of the world than the immediate Nigerian context in which she lived. That was partly accomplished by sending her to what is

called a 'unity' school – an institution that deliberately brought together a multiplicity of pupils from different regions and tribal groups within Nigeria. She describes herself as being de-tribalised both by the influence of her father and also by her educational experience.

Marriage to a senior executive in the business world meant immersion in a number of different cultures. While living in England their family chose to worship in a lively and largely white English, Baptist church in the commuter belt that serves London. That helped to convey a sense of what English church life in a contemporary English church might feel like.

Toyin's family moved to Chesterfield in order to provide a more settled base for a family whose father was required to travel a good deal. In that context she felt a call to begin a church. Because she was then worshipping in a congregation belonging to the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Sheffield, the idea of beginning a congregation near to where she lived was not unusual, except that she did not feel as if she had the necessary gifts or training to do such a thing. This was a call that she resisted for some time.

Eventually, towards the end of 2008, she accepted the call to church plant and out of a conversation with a Muslim woman from West Africa, she began a Bible study with that particular woman and with many of the friends of that same person. After three months of home studies they went public with a worship service. Toyin was determined that from the very beginning this would be a church that felt more English than African. The length of the service, the choice of worship songs, the refreshments, the style of the meetings were all shaped in such a way that it was more comfortable for English people than Nigerian. That was a courageous choice and crucial in shaping the future composition of the congregation.

Key features of the way the church has developed include these three convictions.

First, they prayed for the town and not just for the growth of the church. That included prayer for the economy of the town, its well being, for those with mental health problems, for the flourishing of the local university campus, and for the public life of the town.

Second, they worked actively with other churches and tried to serve their needs wherever possible. That helped to build an atmosphere of trust amongst the Christian leaders in the town so that it became easier for the churches to work on projects together.

Third, they have been responsive to calls for help from town council officials and other Christian organizations (for example Street Pastors and a Soup Kitchen in the town) for accommodation. This has led to the running of a soup kitchen on Tuesdays and Thursdays by volunteers drawn from different churches and one run on Sundays solely by Grace Chapel volunteers. The soup kitchen, I am told, is soon to be upgraded to a hub where the homeless can have their laundry done, hair cut and feet cared for by church volunteers.

A few years ago, the Community Safety Partnership office in the Council had noticed young people congregating by the bus station – near where homeless people slept. These young people tended to come from deprived parts of the town and some had been excluded from school or were taking 'legal highs'. Older people, using the bus station, were afraid of this

group of youngsters and the Council was concerned that the youth were being influenced by the homeless folk, many of whom had serious drug or alcohol problems. The local Street Pastors, Toyin and another local minister were invited to help. The Street Pastor would invite the youngsters to a Friday group at Grace Chapel but after four weeks they came by themselves. Toyin's team gave them sandwiches as well as tea and coffee. From this work has come a Friday night 'Roc Café'

While none of these things are entirely original activities, they are highly contextualized and flow from a concern for mission first with church being seen as a servant of the mission and not the other way round. As I interviewed Toyin, she and her team were moving into their new premises – a former bank in the main town square – right in the centre of the market area, with Chesterfield's famous crooked spire looking on.

The painting above is by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm, *Chesterfield Church in Derbyshire, 1773*. It currently is located in the British Library. It is made available through Wikimedia.

[1] Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).