

## **An African Missionary on Tyneside. An interview with Pastor Joseph Omoragbon by Mary Publicover.**

I met Joseph over a meal at a Springdale College Summer School. I was immediately gripped by his stories from Tyneside- how could such an 'outsider' find connection in that challenging environment. Martin Robinson interviewed Pastor Joseph during *Inhabit UK*, and here I take my opportunity to capture the story of this South Shields newcomer. In fact his story hints that his outsider status has been a way in, especially coupled with his risky vulnerability in the new culture around him. His warm African confidence in a faithful God has helped- and of course his skill on the ball...

### **Pastor Joseph how did you come to move to England in the first place?**

We visited for a holiday in 2010, to Birmingham in fact. My friends asked me 'Why not move to the UK? You have children. It would be good for them to come here and learn.' But I told them that I don't do anything until God opens the door. I was busy in Nigeria, with a church and school ministry. But I did say that if God opens the door I'd come.

### **Something must have happened then to encourage you?**

My wife had already been offered a PhD place at Northumbria University and in October of that year her scholarship came through. But with four children a visa was going to be a big challenge for us all. We prayed and I did feel God's encouragement that we would be able to collect one. God is always faithful. Somebody heard of our testimony and she sponsored us here free of charge. Somebody in Nigeria gave us £20,000. So that for me was an amazing thing.

### **Where did you start in the UK?**

We spent 2011 in Newcastle with a pastor friend, preparing to be sent out as church planters. I realized that I needed to understand our new context because I knew I needed to be equipped. I got in touch with Martin Robinson from Springdale College and booked into Summer School, which was going to be the next month. When I got there it was a different experience. I really was blessed. I experienced the Spirit of God in that very community. I don't know what will happen. I don't know where Christ will take me to, but I know that something happened.

### **What was Newcastle like?**



I discovered that the people of this society like a lot of football so I began to volunteer as a football coach for the Hat Trick Football Project, and they sponsored me for training. I graduated and became a licensed football coach. Then after a year in Newcastle, in January 2012 the church sent us out as church planters- just myself, my wife and four children went to South Shields.

### **There probably aren't many Africans in South Shields?**

In my territory I was the only black man. In fact at first they were throwing eggs at us, at the

door, which is a sign 'We don't want you here'.

### **How do you begin to plant a church in that situation?**

I printed about 10,000 flyers, hoping that if I shared them with the people around I would see some people from the community on 'opening day'. I was shocked because nobody came. I went to the town, gave out flyers and you know, that's what we do in Nigeria- so I thought that would work here. So I did that. It didn't work. On that first day my wife and four children and I were in one of the big event venues there. Nobody came. But the Lord spoke to me and said 'Don't be discouraged because I began the earth with just Adam.' So I had that consolation. But my wife was worried, and the children were worried. They asked me 'Are we going to be completely alone today?' But to our amazement, after 30 minutes a couple came in all the way from Newcastle with their daughter. That was our first service.

### **You must have wondered how you were going to get anything started here.**

I like practicing what I'm taught. I had been told at Springdale that if you want to understand the culture you need to go to unusual places that you would not ordinarily want to go to. And so I said to my wife on that day 'I am going to the pub.' It was a big battle for us, for her. It took a while- she even needed to talk to my tutor. But I said 'I'm going on a cross-cultural assignment- we've been asked to go, and I must go.'

### **So how was your first visit to an all white pub in South Shields?**

They were surprised to see me. I bought a soft drink, and I was there, and they were wondering 'What is this guy doing here?' They sat far away from me. But there was going to be a football match on TV later and someone asked me 'Which team do you belong to?' So I said that I support Liverpool. 'Oh'. That drew them closer. They sat near me. And I said 'I'm not just a fan, I'm also a coach.' 'Really?!' So I brought out my ID card and I showed them. That collapsed all the walls. So they now believed that this guy is not a spy after all, so we can confide in him.

### **They wanted to confide in you?**

Yes! Things about my community that I didn't know before. I found that there were a lot of things I didn't know that I was privileged to learn on that day. They told me about a place where I could hold a service. There was a pub that was closing down and they wanted to know if I wanted to buy it. If I want to know anything about the community I need to go where they are. I was shocked. I was pleased. My wife was pleased I got home alive. It was really a great experience for me. I can't forget that day.

### **The football connection brought down all the barriers?**

Yes and that was connected with something the Lord said to me when I first arrived in Newcastle. He said: 'There is something more than football.' It is a statement. I was wondering- they like football, but can we let them know that there's something more than

football? We prayed about it for two years. So we were travelling one day on the train and my wife and I were praying 'How could we translate this common ground into a project?' Then God gave us the idea that we could hold a football tournament.

### **That's a large scale project for newcomers?**

We kept praying about it. The idea was to bring children together so they could play, and we would award trophies and create a mediating space for parents, children and coaches to interact and to give them a different impression of church. We began to plan it together during a class at Springdale College. We called it Football Extra Tournament and I printed flyers and went out to schools. I went to Community Volunteer Services in our borough and was interviewed by three people who questioned me. They could see that I was involved in a charity, the church, and that I belong to local groups. They liked the tournament idea but still they wouldn't trust me alone. 'Go back to the community and raise a board from local people.'

### **Recruiting a board must have been a challenge in itself?**

There were members of the church but that wasn't enough. I needed to connect with the wider community. Lisa from Birmingham was the first British member of the church, and she lives in the community. Lisa has never served on any board- but she came on to this one. And because I was already a volunteer coach in my children's school their head teacher was willing to join. He's not a Christian but he became the board secretary for the tournament, and we used the school as a meeting place. I didn't want to be on the board- just the coordinator. I'd paid all expenses out of my own pocket at first but then our denomination, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, stepped in to provide the finance.

### **How did you connect with the children's teams.**

I went to see the South Tyneside Football Trust that coordinates the leagues. I told them I wanted it to be purely free. We had finance from our denomination by that stage and we are a charity. Children can come free, play free, eat free and get medals free. By the end of the day they were willing to work with us. So the stadium was hired. They helped us communicate with the teams. They had fun, and some control and they saw that this was an idea from the church and it blew their mind. They could not believe it. It shocked everyone.

### **I'm guessing people came to this event?**

We invited eight teams, about 80 players with their parents and coaches. We hired an entire stadium and they all came. The coaches were surprised that they were at an event organized by a pastor. They were wondering: 'Is he really a missionary from Africa? What is this man?' Of course they were suspicious, but at the end of the day they were impressed by the whole package. Before the event we had prayed 'Lord this event is for you. It's meant to connect the church and to bring your kingdom to them. We'll bring them their trophies and medals and we want you to touch people's lives.'

### **Did you take the opportunity to pray or speak to people?**

I was very cautious at that first meeting- not to impose anything on them. I knew the people I was working with are not as close to God as I am. And I was not on the board- I was coordinator. The power was not with me. But I was happy that God was doing something- even the children were affected. They played really peacefully and there were no injuries. Alan, the man who coordinates sports for the borough, noticed that. He said 'Joseph I can see the church influence in this event. I am going to start coming to church! I didn't think an event like this would work.' He also asked me what I thought of atheists. I said 'I just love them. I have nothing against them.' That may have endeared me to him. We have become very close friends, and he invited me to another tournament to hand out the trophies.

**It sounds as though that first tournament changed your place in the community?**

That tournament did open bigger doors. Now when there's an event in the town the organizers call me and say 'Pastor Joseph will you please come and pray for us?' That is what God does. It's amazing. Shortly after our tournament I was invited to an event organized by a local coach, an Asian man. He's not a Christian but he asked me, 'Could you please come over and pray. I know that you would have loved to pray at your own event, but you couldn't. This is my programme. Come over and pray.' So I went to his tournament on a Sunday before our service and found about 100 children and their parents and coaches. I was introduced. They said: 'This is our friend, Joseph. We know that many of you don't believe in God but some do believe in God. The organizer asked if I would sing a song so I sang 'This little light of mine.' That song drew them close immediately, they sang along, and I blessed them.

**And what's next for your ministry Pastor Joseph?**

The Football Extra Tournament can move to its next level. An Indoor Gala Night will help people who have never experienced God's presence to get a feel of God's presence. It's more than football. I can see God giving us a voice in our community and transformations- in families, organisations and society.

**And you have only been there two and a half years- such a short time, and you have achieved so much... But it has been a struggle sometimes?**

It has been a struggle. But the greatest lesson I have learnt from South Shields is found in Isaiah 1:19 'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.' It is about putting God's Kingdom first. And I've learned that God is always at work in every culture- so I've needed to learn here how to do ministry here. So that is what I have started to do.

**Joseph we are grateful for you.**