

ENOCH¹

As he walked into my office, I knew I'd seen him before – tall and lean with a chummy grin on his face. He saved me from embarrassment:

“You remember me, sir? Enoch, Enoch from Baissa.”

Yes, of course. Enoch. It had been a couple of years ago since we last met in Baissa, where my wife and I had spent four months studying Hausa. Enoch was a student then in the Christian Leadership Training school at Baissa. He was being trained to be an evangelist. Our paths did not cross again after we “graduated” from language training.

He gave me a letter.

“Please, sir, read it.”

It was one of those requests that are impossible to fulfill. He was applying for a teaching position in the Wukari Bible School. Apart from the fact that I am not on the staff of the school, he simply would not be acceptable to train evangelists: he was too young – nineteen or so. Furthermore, he had no experience in the work. I mentioned this to him. He burst out,

“How can I ever get experience? The church does not want me!”

He then gave me his life story. All his relatives are Muslims, including his parents and brothers and sisters. They sent him to elementary school for seven years. While there, he heard the Good News of Christ and became a Christian. After graduating from elementary school, he entered evangelism training at Baissa. There he studied for four years, in spite of the strong opposition of his family.

After graduation, he hoped to be appointed evangelist by the church. But the elders found him too young. He was told to have patience. What was he to do? No work, no income. His family all Muslims. Going back home would be almost impossible for him. They would try to draw him back into the Muslim religion. He began to wander from village to village in search of support till he finally found himself in Makurdi, the provincial capital, about two hundred miles away from Baissa. There he learned something about sign painting, but found no work to support himself.

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While in the provincial capital, he took an examination for entry into the police corps. He passed the examination, he told me, but was not accepted. To qualify for this training he would need seventy five dollars to bribe proper officials. This he did not have.

In desperation he made his way to our mission compound in Wukari, hoping that we could help him. After all, he knew English quite well and he had four years of Bible School. Perhaps we could use him as a teacher. That's when I told him he was too young and did not have the needed experience.

Perhaps I had some other work for him, he asked. I really didn't, but I told him I would keep my eyes open for him. I was eager to help him, for he was a valuable young man. He appeared intelligent, he had useful training and was eager to be of service. An idea occurred to me that perhaps he could be trained in first aid and then become an agent of mercy under one of two local congregations looking for just such a person. When I made enquiries, it turned out that one position was already filled, while the other congregation preferred a local man. They had experienced difficulties with "strangers;" that is, people from other villages.

I kept looking out for him, but with little hope. Enoch, in the meantime, was lodging at a relative's house, a Muslim. He was spending his time wandering about the town, doing nothing in particular. This worried me, for it would be so easy this way to fall in with the wrong crowd. From time to time, he would visit us, but I always had to tell him that nothing had turned up.

Then an idea occurred to me. Soon a new missionary family would move to our station and they would need help around the house. Since they could not speak any of the local languages, an English speaker would be required. I hesitated a bit at first, for a man with his training would really be wasting his time doing menial household chores, but it was better than nothing. I discussed this with Enoch and he appeared eager enough.

Suddenly it seemed as if the whole world opened up for him. News came that Takum Christian Hospital, a hospital run by our mission some fifty miles from Wukari, was looking for him. He had at one time filled in an application for ward helper. This would mean steady employment for him in a Christian environment. As if that was not enough, it turned out that we would be needing a new Christian Bookshop manager in Wukari after a few months. A person knowing four languages was absolutely necessary. And Enoch knew them all.

We were so happy for Enoch. Here were opportunities that few young men in Wukari would ever have, and that all at once! Two of them, at least, would give him genuine opportunity for Christian witness as well, and that is what he had been looking for. I called him to the compound and showed him how God suddenly had opened the way for him in such a marvelous way.

He did not commit himself immediately, though.

“I never make big decisions without prayer,” he explained. “Give me a day or so to think it over.” He promised to come back after a couple of days.

He did not return. The new missionaries came and they needed help. We looked for Enoch, but could not find him. We sensed that something was wrong. We worried that perhaps his host refused to release him for work with Christians.

We were not far wrong. When we did locate him after a few more days, he explained that he would not be taking any of the positions offered him.

“Why?” we asked him.

“Well,” he replied, “you probably won’t understand, for you are a European. If I take work from you, my host will think I have no confidence in him to find me something. I will insult him.”

That I am a European was no news to me, of course. I also knew that this sometimes makes it difficult for a missionary to understand the problems of his African brother. Yet, somehow, Enoch’s explanation did not satisfy me. Why did he ask me for help in the first place, if his explanation was real? I suspected that our earlier fears about his Muslim relative-host were true after all. But Enoch assured me that no one was preventing him.

Why did Enoch refuse all three offers? We soon left on furlough so that I had no opportunity to discuss this further with him. I am still wondering. Had his Muslim relative perhaps already dampened Enoch’s Christian spirit? It would be no surprise. That’s the kind of pressure young people like Enoch face when they have broken with their Muslim upbringing.

And that’s why our young Nigerian brothers and sisters need our prayers. Please, don’t forget them. Especially Enoch.