

## TRIED BY FIRE

As its name suggests, Ministerial Training Centre (MTC) the National Bible School in Nigeria, is dedicated to training ministers. Recruiting students is always a challenge, but recruiting students that will eventually bear fruit in the ministry is an even greater challenge. In 2008 four students enrolled from a remote village area in Jatoaka, Benue State. They were unexceptional in that they were not highly educated neither were they particularly gifted with what one would consider ministerial talents. Still they were humble, sincere, hard working, and cooperative. As time passed they began to distinguish themselves from many of their classmates because they were all soul winners.

In 2010 four more students enrolled from Jatoaka replacing the 4 students who had come in 2008 and had now graduated. Amazingly these 8 students were all products of the same United Pentecostal Church. The senior pastor, Barnabas Itoikyaa, enrolled with the second wave of Jatoaka students. Barnabas was so impressed by the instruction his junior pastors had received, he felt it necessary to partake of the classroom experience himself.

In 2011 three more students enrolled from Jatoaka. A pattern was emerging. These people believed in Bible school education. Not only did they believe in it, but upon graduation they put the principles they learned into practice. In most cases these students didn't even wait for graduation to practice what they preached. It was not uncommon to have them testify after a term break that they had baptized many new converts and prayed them through to the Holy Spirit. Some of the numbers were staggering. One baptized 16 and another 22 during a 4 week term break.

The mother church has given birth to four daughter works. Pastor Barnabas Itoikyaa has placed at least one Bible school graduate in each station and has emphasized the critical importance of preaching the new birth and holiness. Barnabas opened the first work in 2006. The five churches now boast a membership of just over 1,000 members. In this case we are talking about baptized in Jesus' Name, Holy Spirit filled members! In six years Barnabas has orchestrated a revival that has touched all of the surrounding villages in his local government area (county). His vision is that the work of the Jatoaka brethren would continue to expand to every village in Nigeria and spill over into the bordering nations.

Barnabas Itoikyaa has an incredible testimony. He is the ninth of ten children. Barnabas' formative years were anything but easy. His mother was paralyzed from the waist down when he was only 7 years old and his father died 4 years later. These family tragedies put Barnabas in a situation where he learned at a very young age to fend for himself. His self reliance served him well as he became a very hard and driven worker. It also propelled him through successful completion of primary and secondary school and a two year associate degree from a local college in Personnel Management. Most children in the village never complete primary school. Barnabas excelled in the educational arena.

Upon his graduation in 2002 Barnabas struggled to get a job. Barnabas was attending a Protestant Church at this time, but he had no compelling reason to serve the Lord. Church is what he did on Sunday, but the remainder of the week was consumed with the business of life. Barnabas had set himself on a path to become a police officer. He enrolled in a training program to become an "inspector cadet," the preparatory step to becoming a police officer. He passed all of the requirements with commendation, but on the last day of the exercises the school demanded a fee of 10,000 naira (about \$80). Simply put, this was an amount of money that was out of the reach for Barnabas or his family members. He was unceremoniously sent away from the training program without the certification he needed to become an inspector cadet. He was humiliated and devastated.

Barnabas was so overwhelmed by the sting of failure that he vowed to never suffer such shameful indignity again. His solution was simple and ready for immediate implementation. He quickly made a plan to commit suicide. Walking along a busy highway he fully intended to step into the path of a moving vehicle.

As he began his descent from the curb to enter the speedily moving rush hour traffic he heard an audible voice commanding him, "Do not kill your self." Startled, he looked around to see who was speaking to him. More importantly and at least a little fearfully, he wondered who could actually read his mind and know about his suicidal ideation? Quickly shifting his glance to all points of the compass he discovered that no one was there. Thinking he was only imagining things he made a second attempt to walk into moving traffic. The same voice he had just heard boomed even more authoritatively, "Do not kill your self!" Barnabas began to tremble and slumped to the ground. His strength drained. It took him at least 20 minutes to gather himself enough to be able to stand up and walk. There was a realization that he had heard from God. It frightened him.

Frustrated, but alive, Barnabas returned home and turned his attention and energy into farming. He raised yam, rice, and peanuts. He resumed attending the Protestant church in his village. In 2004 Barnabas married and it seemed to him that his life's work was set, farming the land of his ancestors and raising a family. Still he could not escape the fact that he wanted something more from life. A friend suggested to him that he travel to Ilorim, Kwara State where there was an opening for a position in a bank that might suit him. Barnabas traveled to Ilorim but only met disappointment. In fact not only did he not get the job, his "friend," in order to recover the expenses incurred on the unsuccessful trip, sold Barnabas into slavery to a Yoruba man! The price, \$80.

It was an incomprehensible nightmare and a situation that was absolutely untenable to him. Barnabas vociferously protested this arrangement. Because he was so upset he reverted to his native language, Tiv, to plead his case even though he was not in Tiv country. When a passing pedestrian recognized the tongue as that of his own, he was drawn into the confrontation. When Solomon Igbaya, also a Tiv, heard Barnabas speaking Tiv, he felt compelled to come to his assistance. To settle the issue Pastor Solomon paid the Yoruba man enough money to redeem Barnabas. Barnabas was a free man because of the kindness of a complete stranger.

Shaken by the experience, Barnabas was invited to Pastor Solomon's home for a rest before traveling home. Pastor Solomon used this opportunity to witness to Barnabas. Barnabas, remembering the voice from the suicide attempt, now heard the same voice directing him to obey God's Word. Solomon baptized Barnabas in Jesus' Name and Barnabas was filled with the Holy Spirit. Barnabas chose to spend some time with Pastor Solomon and Solomon used the time to disciple him and ground him in the faith and truth of God's Word.

One evening while in prayer Barnabas received a vision from the Lord. In the vision he saw a church being raised up in his home village and he was standing behind the pulpit. Barnabas acknowledged that this was his call to the ministry. He departed Ilorim with Pastor Solomon's blessing and returned home to pioneer a United Pentecostal Church in Jatoaka, Benue State. The year was 2006.

Being accustomed to hard work and being equally resourceful, Barnabas secured a plot of land and erected a thatched roof batcher – a make shift "building" – not unlike the brush arbors of old time Pentecostals in America. People were immediately drawn to the church by the Word of God and the signs and wonders that were manifested in the services at Salvation Chapel United Pentecostal Church. Within one year Barnabas was preaching to over 200 members. Revival had come to Jatoaka.

The first notable miracle to take place in the church occurred soon after Barnabas began preaching. While in prayer one evening God revealed to Barnabas that if he prayed for his mother she would be healed of her paralysis. On a hot and muggy morning Barnabas entered his mother's home anointed her with oil and prayed the prayer of faith. True to His Word, Barnabas' mother was up and walking in two days. Jesus delivered as promised. It was an advertisement for the church that far surpassed the use of signboards or handbills. Everyone was interested in hearing about a God who could heal this woman.

Like the early Church leaders in the Book of Acts Barnabas, even with the miracle, faced fierce persecution. His members were routinely discouraged from going to church and they were often threatened if they did not comply. Since Barnabas had left the Protestant church, at that time the only church in the village, he was accused of being part of a cult. In 2006 when all “peaceful” efforts failed to curb church attendance the enemies of the church burned the thatched roof batcher to the ground.

While his face was black with soot, streaked and smeared by tears, Barnabas set out to rebuild the church. But like the Israelites while in Egyptian bondage, the more this band of believers was afflicted the more they grew. Not only did they rebuild the thatched roof batcher on its original site, but Barnabas started a branch work. Then he planted second, third, and fourth branch works. Membership was exploding. Over the next two years hundreds of people were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what prompted Barnabas to begin sending students to the Bible school. He needed trained men to pastor these churches.

Further angered by the revival that was flourishing in these 4 neighboring villages the enemies of God once again torched the mother church and burned it to the ground. Only one short year after the first fire Barnabas was faced with the arduous task of rebuilding the church again. But how can you rebuild your church with any confidence when you know that your building is only a match strike away from destruction? God intervened by moving on the heart of the Jatoaka Village Chief.

The Chief called Barnabas and queried him about the fires and then further about the mission of the church. Satisfied with Barnabas’ answers the Chief issued a decree that no one in the village should bring any harm to the fledging United Pentecostal Church or its members. By finding favor with the Chief the harassment and destruction of property abruptly stopped. The Chief would later testify that he felt compelled to intervene on behalf of the church because Barnabas never spoke against the villagers that were wreaking havoc on the work of God and neither did he or his members retaliate in any way. When a man’s ways please the Lord he will make even his enemies to be at peace with him (Proverbs 16:7).

Today there is a thriving United Pentecostal Church in Jatoaka. The thatched roof batcher has been replaced by a mud block, zinc roofed building that will accommodate about 300 people. The members, like their pastor, are soul winners. The birth of new works in the surrounding villages remains the number one priority for these saints and their pastor.

Barnabas Ityoikyaa graduated from Ministerial Training Centre in 2012. While at the Bible school he was an extraordinary example to his classmates and rightly served as the Senior Prefect (Student Body President) during his last year of school. He has since returned to Jatoaka to further advance the work that God has set before him.