

Interview with Deacon Bukky Olawoyin, one of the leaders of SALT, the civic awareness group of Jesus House (RCCG), London.

Venue: Jesus House, Brent Cross, London, 4 August 2010

Interviewer: Richard Burgess

Interviewer [RB]: Perhaps you could start by introducing yourself.

Interviewee [B]: My name is Bukky Olawoyin, a deacon in Jesus House. It so happens I am also a local councillor in Welwyn-Hatfield. I've been in Jesus House since 2001, actually October 2000 I've been in Jesus House. I have grown with the church and served with departments. I've been in the leadership for 4 or 5 years now.

RB: Did you come over from Nigeria at that time?

B: No. I came from Nigeria in 1993.

RB: So you've been here a long time.

B: Yes. As you might know there are two sets of people who came from Nigeria: there are the economic migrants, and some of us who came to study, because the school system, you know, our parents wanted more for us. So I was one of those who came when I was 19.

RB: You came for university?

B: Yes, I went to South Bank, and did my MBA from Cranfield as well. Luckily I was born here; it just helped the situation. Coming over, I felt a need to stay connected to the Nigerian community. And in UK the most organised communities are the churches. You find people you can relate to, where you find common cultural beliefs and value systems. Jesus House is one of the churches that is spearheading the move into public engagement, you know public life. And one of the things we have been opportune to do is actually to understand the fact that when a lot of us were coming to Nigeria, we were coming to study and go back. However, as time has gone on we've actually gotten married, started to buy houses, settle down, and the plan to go back quickly after you've studied, its actually influenced that plan. And a lot of us, myself included, I plan to go back in 7 years time when my son is in secondary school. There's always that plan to go back.

RB: Is that the case with many people?

B: A lot of people would always plan to go back, because there's a sense of growing old and dying in your country. And a lot of Nigerians hold that very high. Also a lot of Nigerians will tend to move back in their 40s, because by that time they've settled down, they've done their education, they've moved up in their career. And there's this Nigerian thing of going back home and putting something back and trying to do something for the country. So you're thinking all this wealth of experience that you've acquired, all these connections that you've got, it would be nice to help and do something back in Nigeria, while still

holding on to that link so that what you do is authentic and what you do has some kind of backing. And you will notice that a lot of Nigerians now having a first degree is not enough. A lot of us have professional qualifications, either in accountancy, law or move on to do a Masters. And that's to improve yourself and equip you better for when you go back home. However, the plan to go back home for some people will be 10 years, for others 20 years, and that's where the public life thing has come into play. Because whilst we're here, the leadership, and especially in Jesus House, identified the fact that yes you want to go back but whilst you are here impact the community which you are in, make a difference. It has been identified that there are some values that we have based on our background and experience that will be beneficial for the communities we find ourselves. Also by us being involved in the community it will help give our offspring a sense of identity, so they know yes possibly I was born in Britain, yes I have British citizenship, but I am also a Nigerian. And if I'm okay with being a Nigerian, it helps me to respect other people and to understand the way I have a need to be accepted by them, I also need to accept the other people. And also more importantly whilst we are here we can positively contribute to the community where we live. And that's why SALT ministry was birthed. And what we want to do is encourage people, educate people, on how they can go about influencing the community they are in. So the SALT ministry has five strands. You got the political side of things; you've got the jury service side of things; you've got the magistracy; you've got the volunteering service as well, things like being in the fire service, the social service, being a special constable. Because we feel that by being involved in those things we can actually bring a different flavour so that when certain decisions are being made we can actually ask certain questions. Some of these questions may look naive but it may actually point out an aspect of the policy or plan that has been neglected. Also it helps us to understand fully how the system works in this country, and so we are able to advise fellow Nigerians so that they are educated in whatever [ph], and they are able to get the most out of it while still contributing towards development of it. Some people have different interests. For example, we've got a team here that go to the prisons every Sunday. So that's one area of the voluntary service strand that we're giving back. We've got a scheme where we have a food-bank, the Manna Project. We've got the Novo Centre where we actually work in the community that we've adopted. So you've got those different areas. We've got some people who have become school governors, even without having children of their own. So for us being actively involved in the community has helped us to burst a lot of myths. You know, things like, 'you can't vote if you're not British'. No, you can vote if you are from the Commonwealth. So, for example, at the last election we did a 4-week drive where we helped people to register. What we did was we brought out the forms, we publicized it in the magazine, it was in the announcements, it was on the website. And for 4 weeks we had a table out there where the forms were. People filled it out and posted it to the Electoral Commission. People who couldn't do that posted it in a separate box. We sorted it out and posted it. I think in total we had about 440 forms filled. Things like students not knowing they could vote because someone has told them you can only vote where you live. So having this system in place, having the SALT ministry, helped to address some of the questions we had. Particularly we are trying to encourage people if they are so inclined to be active. And we've got this phrase that 'not everybody is a politician, but everybody is involved in politics'. Because you can either run for office and be a politician, or even if you don't run for office the decisions that are being made affect you on a daily basis. So we encourage people to follow and monitor the voting records of the MPs. And we encourage people to join the different forums.

RB: What forums?

B: In each constituency the MPs normally run a forum where you can ask your MP questions. We encourage people to join those kinds of things. We've given them URLs where they can monitor how MPs have voted. We send out emails and post it on our websites when specific decisions are being made. Nothing has been done in this parliament but we had a couple of activities in the last parliament. One was the Bill for religious hatred incitement. We encouraged people to ask their MPs how they feel it would affect them as an individual and constituent. Sending emails to them, asking them questions. Because we wanted people to be active, and we wanted MPs to know that people do care. And every time we've had small gatherings and conversations towards specific issues in the community, we've encouraged people to ask their councillors, to ask their MPs questions. Because for us we feel strongly that the more involved we are in our community the more chances there are for us to contribute to it. So simple things like encouraging people to go litter-picking. Simple things like if there is a school fete, going and asking if they need a volunteer to help. We've educated people that as long you are not in close proximity to any child in particular, you don't need to be CRB checked and you can volunteer. And it's up to the head of the school where you can, because they would know when you would cross the line. All you're doing is offering your free service. So things like that, and it's irrespective of whether you have a child or don't have a child. At the onset it was looking like it would only be geared towards politics. But what we have been able to succeed in doing, and what we are very happy about, is the fact that we've had a 6 month run where we've written articles in the church magazine covering different areas in which people can be active. And we're quite happy when we get stopped and people ask us questions and ask 'so what next?'. We've got people who have signed up to become magistrates; we've got a couple of people who are training to become special constables. We've got people who have signed up to be school governors. In fact, the church has even got a budget set aside for people to attend the main party conferences. We've got money for people to attend, you know, the Labour conference, the Lib-Dems, the Conservative conference, so that they can be more aware, and then whatever information that they bring back, we collect it together and publish it in the magazine. Even though not everyone can go to the conferences, at least they can get a bite-size summary of what went on there. So those are the kind of areas we've been encouraging people to become involved and be active.

RB: When did the group start?

B: It started two years ago. It was officially recognized as a ministry last year, as a fully-fledged budget-carrying ministry.

RB: It has created a lot of interest in the church?

B: Yes. Though I must say there was more interest around the time of the last election. .. We try to affiliate with the Christian fellowships in the Labour party and Lib-Dems, but we've got more success with the Conservatives. We've got a very healthy relationship with them. We're trying to work with the other parties. Also because we are a church we cannot be affiliated with one party. So anything that we do we ensure that at the bare minimum we include the major three parties.

RB: I did notice that you're a Conservative councillor. Also there are two ladies in the Conservative Christian Fellowship. I was wondering whether there was a bias towards the Conservatives.

B: Obviously I'm a Conservative. But the leadership has said that we must not be seen as favouring one party. That's why every activity we do must be open to all parties. We've had more success with the

Conservative Party. I think the sole reason for that is that they've got a vibrant and structured Christian Fellowship. We don't have any affiliation with the Conservative Party. The only affiliation we have is with the Conservative Christian Fellowship, obviously it's because they are Christians and I'm a Conservative. But as regards the activities of the church, it's always unbiased. As a church you have to be seen as actively engaging all parties. ... So for example, we're having a 'civic talk' where we're going to invite people in Barnet, so we're going to be inviting all the political parties. We open it up to the public, so it's not just a Jesus House thing. Because we don't just see Jesus House as a church; we see Jesus House as a resource available to Barnet. You know a lot of stuff we do, we do in partnership with Barnet Council. There's that place when you have to be the salt and light of the world; and when you are salt and light of the world, you can't choose where to shine; you've got to shine anywhere. We want to be seen as a valued resource.

RB: If you are deciding what party to vote for, what are some of the issues that are important to you personally and to Jesus House?

B: Jesus House doesn't have a position. However, there are more people in the congregation that have strong feelings towards policies that affect family, policies that affect immigration, policies that affect education and taxation as well. Because all those inevitably affect your well-being. So those are the kind of policies. As a church, the policies that may be common to everyone are policies that might restrict how we are able to worship. Because we're all Christians, because we all belong to Jesus House, it's something that will affect everyone. Everyone will vote to protect our right to worship the way we want, the way we feel comfortable.

RB: Was there a sense under the last government that there were going to be restrictions? It's not just worship; it's also being able to publicly confess your faith.

B: Yes. Especially when you're confessing your faith or sharing what you believe in could be seen as inciting hatred. That caused a bit of a worry. People were asking questions and they wanted to know what would constitute going against that bill, going against that legislation. Obviously anything that would stop us, or make us feel that we are being forced to change the way that we would normally live. You know, typical things like if we can't wear a cross, if at your place of work you can't put on a Christian verse on your screen. It builds you up; it reassures you as an individual. So those kinds of things will definitely cause concern.

RB: How did you become a councillor?

B: It was out of wanting to be relevant, out of wanting to be a role model. There was a time two years when there were a couple of publications about black children not having role models to look up to. And the only people they look up to are your rap stars, footballers, and fashion people, and all that. And there were discussions in the lobby, and it boiled down to the fact that this community doesn't seem to celebrate local heroes. The people that are celebrated seem to be international.

RB: So you're talking about the black community?

B: Yes. You've got to be international. Considering what has been happening in the black community, a black man who stays with his wife and children should be celebrated as a father, as a real man. It's not just having babies; you've got to be able to pay the bills, and actually be there for the children. It then

went down to the point where we thought that actually we don't have a lot of Nigerians that we can look up to realistically. I am one of those who when conversations like that go on I try to follow it up. So that's how I decided to be relevant. So the first thing I did was to speak to my daughter's school head and ask if I could be a school governor. I've been a school governor now for three years. . . . And then I started asking my MP questions. And then he asked if I would like to distribute leaflets for him, and I said yes. And then I got a call, 'there is a position for a councillor, would you like to run?' And I asked questions. What does it entail? I am a Christian; can I still run? I said, yes. I ran in 2008, didn't get in, missed it by 19 votes. Luckily I got in this last May. And it's been very satisfying and very interesting. I've just finished the training for councillor to serve on the different committees. The first case that I solved was very, very satisfying. It was a problem between students and non-student residents. And to be able to mediate between them and to actually to come to an agreement, its quite satisfying.

RB: Is this a paid position?

B: There's an allowance, but it's not very much. I wouldn't leave my day job for it. It's more an allowance for your time. On average it takes about three evenings a week, because I'm doing the training. After that it will be about two nights a week. And I've got a surgery once a month.

RB: How would you say civic engagement in this country for a Christian would differ from what happens in Nigeria?

B: Totally different. First of all, we don't run a parliamentary system in Nigeria. We run a presidential system in Nigeria. Secondly, the voting population is not educated politically. So it's almost non-existence for the constituents to challenge someone in office once they are in office. You get a few learned people who think 'what's this guy doing?' The political graph goes up and down until the next election. So there's a lot of noise, there's a lot of participation, a lot of excitement around election time, and then it just goes back. It's still a challenge in Nigeria currently for people in office to be held accountable. They feel accountable to the federal government but they don't feel accountable to the people putting them in. And there's always a joke going around that it's only in Nigeria that you know whose going to win before the election. Because a lot of the people are not politically mature to be able to make choices for themselves. And it dates back to – it's down to culture. Because in Nigeria, irrespective of the region you are in, it's not acceptable to challenge adults and to challenge authority. So in the UK you can find a household, Dad and Mum and two children, and none of them vote for the same party because they believe in different things. The children, one of them may vote for the Green Party, the Dad for Conservatives, the Mum for Labour. The other child could vote for Lib-Dems. But in Nigeria, the system and the culture tends towards families being united even in who they vote for. So Daddy decides who to vote for, and everybody in the family votes for the person. And Daddy probably gets it from the local chief. Because the local chief has endorsed a specific party or specific person. Nobody wants to be seen as negating what the chief has endorsed. So in terms of being educated and individual in voting patterns, we've still got a long way to go. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and recent developments have been encouraging. Right now we've got three states where the governors are proactive, being seen to be delivering. They are trying to leave a positive legacy. Some would say it's because after being a governor they want to be a senator. Whatever their motivation, the fact that they are being seen to deliver. My parents live in Lagos, and where we live is in the suburbs. And the last time I went earlier this year, to see a traffic light, working traffic light in that area, I tell you brought a smile to

my face. I mean the road that leads to where I live, on average during rush hour it will take you three hours to cross a five mile stretch. By the time we drove home and were already home, I had to say to my brother where did the traffic go. The traffic lights were working because they were not connected to the mains. They were solar powered. So they were working. So that made a difference. It's just having a governor in a state that's decided to do something.

RB: Is that all over Lagos, its changing?

B: Most of it, yes. Where my parents live, they don't have electricity everyday but they have it on specific days and it's constant. That's an achievement. They have it two days on, and one day off, to reduce the load on the transformer. My Mum now has air conditioner at home. She has her own borehole for water. Her freezer works. That is some kind of development. Although it's only in three states – Lagos, Ogun, and a state in the southeast. Even the late President, when he was a governor, he started a trend – he declared his assets. He was transparent in everything. When he became President he declared his assets. And something that's also encouraging is the fact that we have been able to transfer the power twice, albeit cloudily, but to a democratically elected person. And for us to have that, it's an achievement. We still have a long way to go, but I feel strongly we are on an upward trend.

RB: Do you think the churches, like RCCG, are educating their members?

B: They are educating the members. However, I'm not sure, I can't comment on the depth of information. I know definitely that prayer is going on every time there is a major political event. But with regards to, when you say education, I'm not well-positioned to say that it would be to the level we would expect here.

RB: it may be partly, because it must be very frustrating that your vote doesn't really count.

B: That's still so. Another thing, President Obasanjo was known for inviting religious leaders. Not just to pray with them but to actually dialogue on certain issues. I mean no leader has ever done that. He seemed to see the importance and see how they can impact the community. Now whether he respects that or not, I believe the action should go quite a way [ph]. The future's very encouraging. It might be slow, but very encouraging. And with the advent of a lot of Nigerians moving back. Because you've got a wave of Nigerian now who are established here that are seeking greener pastures but not necessarily immigrating to the UK. They've got businesses running here, and they will work to the point where they don't need to be here physically. But what they are then doing is that they are taking that model and trying to replicate it in Nigeria. Now, the more of those we have, the more people we will have who are politically educated that will be there. And if they could influence a few people around them, then that would also help the situation.

RB: Would many of these be church people?

B: Yes. Most of the people I know are church people. The only concern is the fact that I get the feeling that the Nigerian church seems not to want anything to do with politics. They wouldn't mind praying for a good outcome, praying for the success of whoever has been elected. But for church people to be actively involved in terms of running for office in Nigeria, it would be frowned upon.

RB: Also you would need money.

B: I was going to say, it's different from here. You need a lot of money to even be nominated.

RB: I was in Lagos 3 years ago and there were posters of Christ Okotie. Presumably he has a lot of money.

B: Even to be nominated. That's why some of them when they get in, they've got to recoup what they've spent. So once they are in, even if they are well-minded, they will seek to give contracts to the people that will pay them back. Things like that. Sometimes they will fix the prices. I'm very optimistic. It's not just because I like to think positively. You know, some of the things that we read, they actually shock us because we don't expect them. I believe there's still a lot of work to be done in the African churches in the UK and in Nigeria as well. Understanding the integration that's required between the church and the public, and seeing it beyond just pastoral care.

RB: Would you say that what you're doing here with the civic awareness group is not really representative of the other churches?

B: I wouldn't say that at all. Because there is Pastor Nims; he's a friend of Jesus House. He's not a Redeemed pastor. Jesus House, we've got a very strong link with Holy Trinity Brompton. We've got those links, and we sort of feed off each other. So we see what they are doing, that it's nice, we take it over. They see some of the things we're doing, they take it over. I'm not sure if we're going to have a programme next year but in JH we have a programme called the Heart and Soul, where we open up all the departments to all churches to come and learn, to come and ask questions, how do you do that? So that's one of the things that we do. Groups from the church go out to other churches to learn from them and also teach them. We are always seeking to be affiliated to like-minded churches, especially anyone that has heart for London in their programme. So I would say that a lot of smaller churches – it so happens that JH is like a flagship of RCCG – so a lot of other churches do enquire to replicate some of the things that we do, be it in a smaller container. Another thing that is very good – because a lot of the congregation of JH does not live in Barnet; we come from all over the place – so there's that opportunity to come to one place and soak up all these new ideas and then go and replicate it in different areas. And that's what we want. Another way that the church does that is by our small groups that are all over London and outside of London. The main person that sets it up obviously comes from Jesus House, but it's open up to anybody in that neighbourhood.

RB: So only a small minority would live in this area?

B: I don't have the figure to hand, but I would say that definitely more than half don't live here in Barnet.

RB: Well thank you very much.