

Prof. Olusola Oyewole VC, Fed. Uni. of Agric, Abeokuta: Life as a locomotive driver's son

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By Moshood Adebayo

For Professor Olusola Oyewole, the fifth substantive Vice Chancellor of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB), growing up in a polygamous family of a locomotive engine driver was challenging. But it was nevertheless interesting. “Challenges are part of human beings, because they are necessary for one to become great in life,” he says. “As a mortal, one must face challenges, but when they come, as they must come, they must not be stumbling block. They should be seen as a phase in life that has come and must go. When challenges come, you learnt and move ahead. Challenges should not be a stumbling block to one’s prospects in life.

He was born in Kaduna on September 30, 1955 to a railway locomotive driver father. While his father hails from Abeokuta, Ogun State, his mother hails from Ogbomosho, Osun State. Oyewole read microbiology, but he is today a professor of Food Science and Technology, “because I have gone beyond what I learnt in schools; I have acquired some skills beyond that.” Today, if you are looking for Quality Assurance Specialists in Africa, his name will be among the best.

A one-time regional overseer of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry for West Africa, he says he had a sense of destiny. “I knew what God wanted me to do, even before graduating from the university. I knew I was going to be a lecturer. I have been a Christian for almost 40 years. I depend on God for all my actions and God has been faithful to me.”

As a person, the Vice Chancellor says nothing happens to him by accident. “Even the vice chancellorship got to me in 2010. On five different times, God had told me what He was going to do for me. It was not just playing games with one’s life. I have committed myself to God and He speaks to me on what to do at different times.”

Growing up

It may surprise you to hear that I got to university on my own, without depending on my parents. My father’s philosophy then was that after given his child secondary education, what addition he or she needed would have to depend on him or her. So, I have to work with an oil company for three years before I gained admission into the university.

I could see God’s grace and hands in the project, because every year, I was given the opportunity to return to the oil company for the three months vacation. Whatever I was able to get during the vacation was enough for me to get through the university for one year before I returned there for another vacation.

Things were working well in the country then. That was the period of indigenization for the oil company and we were supposed to be young trainees in the oil companies. I should confess that during that period, we were not really being trained. So, one was left with the choice of staying there and rot away or move ahead and be useful to oneself and mankind.

Right from my childhood, I have always had a sense of destiny; I knew what God wanted me to do, even before graduating from the university. I knew I was going to be a lecturer. I have been a Christian for almost 40 years and everytime, I depend on God for all my actions and God has been faithful making sure that I don’t take wrong steps or wrong decisions.

Education

I started from Kafanchan, Kaduna State and later moved to the Lagos Street

African Church Primary School. I later moved to Odo-Otin Grammar, Okuku (Osun State). After the secondary education, I worked with Halliburton in Port Harcourt as an oil well cementing trainee. I later moved over to the Federal School of Science in Lagos for one year before gaining

admission into the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University in 1977. I graduated in 1981 and did my NYSC at the Holy Rosary Hospital as a tutor in the Nursing school.

After my national service, I returned to Abeokuta to take up teaching appointment with the Rev. Kuti Memorial Grammar School for one year before moving to Ibadan.

My first degree was in Microbiology, while the second one was in Food Micro-biology. The PhD was also in Food Microbiology. I got into the university to read Biochemistry and by the end of the first year, I prayed to God to lead me aright. When He did, I just changed over and I thank God that I did not regret my choice of course, because it has blossomed me.

Joining FUNAAB

Shortly before my second degree, I got employment here (FUNAAB) in

1985 as an Assistant Lecturer when the university was then called College of Science and Technology. I became a professor in 2001. In January 2006 I took leave of absence and I moved to Accra, Ghana, to work with the Association of African Universities. While there, I was charged with the responsibilities of coordinating the activities of the World Bank Quality Assurance Project for African Higher Education systems. I did that for about two years before fate bestowed on me another responsibilities as a coordinator of the DFID-sponsored programme, through the British government for universities in Africa. The task was to encourage universities to do research that are relevant to development. It was noted then that African universities were too aloof in term of the MDGs and the government felt that African universities should be the drivers of development in their respective countries.

For four years, I was in Accra working for both the World Bank and the DFID projects. It was a big opportunity for me to interact with different African universities. If you talk of someone who has been to many universities in Africa, coordinating different projects, I have done that. After working there for four years, the African Union was also interested in development through higher education.

So, I was invited to be a senior officer in charge of Higher Education issues in Ghana between 2009 and 2010. After staying there for that long, I just felt compelled to return home to Abeokuta and within one and half years, the vacancy for the Vice Chancellor was opened up and after having prayed, I found myself here by the grace of God.

How I became the VC

I got it through the grace of God who had long destined me to be there. For your information, 18 of us competed for this position and I am not surprised that I was chosen because God has told me that I will make it. If I will not make it, God would have told me not to do it. That is why I told you I don't fail. I do not do things to fail. Anything I am committed to do, I depend on God and I will succeed. I know that I have a mission. That mission is to ensure that this university becomes a world-class university and produce world-class graduates.

Standard of education falling? Not at all

Having gone round different African universities, I will tell you that the standard of education has not gone down. What I think has happened is that we now have more people who are interested in higher education; there is a lot of challenge on higher institution to provide higher education for various citizenry. So, I will not say that the standard has gone down. But the resources need to be improved to improve the quality.

For example, as a university, it is not enough for someone to say that he has a degree in engineering, science or agriculture. What I think is important is your skills and competence that you have; that's your selling point. As a nation, it is not our natural resources that are important. We are now in a knowledge economy; what is important is what you know and what you can do with your degree and not what your degree can do for you. So, the rich nations of tomorrow will be those that have been able to harness their knowledge to solve their problems and meet their challenges.

We need more universities

We don't have enough university. For instance, 34,000 candidates have filed applications to this university and we can only offer admission to 3,500. Explaining why the university. This is to let you know that the country has not yet met the need of our young people. I quite believe that not everybody should go to the university. There are vocational studies that some of them are supposed to go into, but today I don't even know if you will like your own child not to acquire higher education degree. But our interpretation of higher education is university, which is not correct.

Whatever study you acquire, whatever skills or education you have acquired after your secondary school can be regarded as higher education. You can be great without even coming to the university. The only thing is know your environment, know where you are going to in life, decide on what you need to get there and focus on it.

Greatest challenge as a lecturer

I will not say there is a great challenge. Whatever I have achieved as a lecturer is not because of me, but by the grace of God. As a person, I don't wait until I have a challenge or what many called problem before I pray. It may interest you to know that I spend between two to three hours daily to pray.

The knowledge of God you have can determine the height that you can go in life. Praying and spending time with God will always assist one. Allow God to give you information that others may not have. I can tell you that you can conclude your day even before you start it. If you learn how to start your day early with God, you will find out that you will have a walkover over other challenges.

My concept of leadership

To me, leadership should be about integrity and skills. I am here to provide leadership with integrity and skills. My understanding of leadership is having a vision and making other people key into the vision that you have. To me, leadership should be knowing the road that will lead to success and moving your people to go to that road. My number two concept of leadership is skills. We need leadership skills to lead a large number of people as we have in this university. I tell you, you need God to lead you aright and I depend on Him everyday to guide and lead me aright.

My dream for FUNAAB

It is to be the best among others. We are already on the road to being the best. The second position of the university in the last web public ranking is not about our quality, but it is a reflection and appearance of the quality of accessibility on the web site. As a Quality Assurance expert, I can tell you that there are different modules. It is necessary that each university in the country should be relevant to their own people because the challenges here are quite different from the ones in the United Kingdom. For us at FUNAAB, we want to be world-class.

When I was coming on board as a VC, I committed myself to an agenda to ensure that this university becomes a world-class university. My concept of world-class university has to do with world-class environment, world-class classrooms, world-class teaching among others. As a university, we have a tripartite mandate of teaching, research and extension. By extension, I meant engaging the university with the community. We are building a university that does not just build human capacity for the nation, but we are also conscious of the fact that we are in a knowledge economy. We want to help the nation to use knowledge to advance this country.

Challenges of funding

I can tell you the secret of prudent management of resources here is because of the type of leadership that we have. It is a selfless leadership that is aimed at improving the lots of the university system, students as well as the entire members of staff, whether academic or non-academic. Whatever you have, no matter how little, you must use it to do something. I think that is the secret of life. For example, in this university we put in some guidelines that the vice-chancellor should be committed to total life. For instance, we commit all our acceptance fees to the improvement of the lives of our students. That is why every year, you see new buses. They are procured with acceptance fees. Also, we've committed ourselves that no matter the amount of Internal Generated Fund we have, 40 per cent will be committed to capital project; that is why no matter what, you find new buildings coming up in this university.

We are blessed in this university in that, from the world go, the first vice chancellor, Professor Nurudeen Adedipe, was a great leader. All of us are just following his footsteps. I am not here to steal money. One of the things I told myself is that I'm not in this position to make a single kobo.

It is sad that people out there use the activities of a few bad Nigerians to judge all of us. There are still great Nigerians, people who will not steal a kobo in their lives. You will still find them.

Life as a pastor

I must also let you know that I am a pastor. Even though I don't put that as part of my names, I have been a pastor for the past seven years. First, I was with the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFMM) for 13 years. I was Pastor for Abeokuta and later the Regional Overseer for the whole of Ogun State; and when I moved to Ghana, I became the Regional Overseer for the whole of West Africa. While I was there, God told me to move out of the church and I led a group of people who started a church called "Divine Heights Bible Church". Let me stress the importance of God that He will never fail those who call on Him. I am a typical example of someone who always rely on God to do things in life and I have never had any regret. God is real. He is alive. He is not dead, as many unbelievers would want to say. God is not an abstract, you can relate with him. He can guide you, you can ask Him questions and He will give you genuine answers.

Stopping religious crisis

We can achieve this through good leadership. The real problem of Nigeria is not about natural resources; we are highly blessed. The real problem of the country is our inability to have good leader that will help harness our various resources for the good of mankind in various communities and the country at large. Prayer is good, because the world is a battlefield. We are with forces of wickedness who will not want things to progress well. Quite often, you can't fight them by your own power; you need the assistance of God and this you can achieve through prayers. While praying, whatever He tells you to do, obey Him.

How I unwind?

I will tell you that my life is from the university to the church and back to the university. I unwind by reading books. I read a lot of books on leadership and everyday I read the Bible. I read multiple books at the same time. For example, I am currently reading Christian books that are relevant to development. I am reading Covenant steps to greatness, Success Secrets among several others. I am interested in Christian books. While still young, in the secondary school, I made sure that I read at least one book a week.

Greatest Book I have read

To me there is no book anywhere in the world that is greater than the Bible. It is a book of life; a book that God used holy men to produce. It is a book of success; it has records successes and challenges, records of battles; it is a book that guides one. It is a book that tells you about people that have failed in life and how to avoid their failure. Anybody that wants to succeed in life, I will recommend the Bible to him or her.

Memorable scripts/students

There are so many memorable students and scripts. One of them is marking a script and the student instead of answering the question, wrote: "Dear Prof, I pray that I pass this course," when he or she knows that he has not done enough to pass.

Memorable day as a student

I don't have a special day because as a Christian, everyday is special to me because I don't own any day. I am alive by His Grace and I thank Him on daily basis for making me see the day. Whatever a day brings, I rely on God to face the challenge and make success of it. I am not a failure and I can't fail. I don't do anything to failure. Ask people around; I can't do things without seeking the face of God.

Lessons from my parents

I decided to be different from the two of them. I am myself, but I learnt a lot of humility, respect, commitment, hardwork and others. They brought me to this world, but I have learnt not to do things they have done wrong; and that's why I am unique. I am not following the pattern of my parents, but the pattern of God

My wife

I prayed to God to give me a wife and He answered me with her. There are some very important decisions of life- who to marry, which work to do, where to settle and your profession. If you can depend on God in taking those decisions, you will not fail in life. We met as a secondary school leaver when I worked with an oil company.