

Time With My Neighbors

Church-to-church relationships, pastor-to-pastor friendships *Interview by Diane J. McDougall*

It starts with a personal relationship. And it continues and spills over to others, all because of a growing friendship.

We're talking about church partnerships—those “come-alongside” links with another congregation and pastor that sharpen the iron of your own ministry and help the body of Christ move forward.

When Jason and Kividi met, they couldn't have been more different, yet also similar—similar in the things that count most. Meet them here and listen for the respect and camaraderie and, yes, laughter, that drives their relationship and is making a difference in their ministries and their worlds.

Kividi Kikama is pastor of New Community Church in Evanston, Ill.—a 4-year-old church plant. Jason Lancaster is the pastor of 19-year-old Evanston Bible Fellowship.



Jason Lancaster and Kividi Kikama

Tell us how your church partnership evolved.

Jason: I checked out the Great Lakes District Web site and learned there was another EFCA church on our street, and so I called Kividi. He didn't know who I was and—

Kividi: (interrupting) I didn't know his church existed!

Jason: One day we decided to get together. We couldn't believe we were actually that close.

Kividi: Our churches are about two blocks apart, but the people are far, far apart.

In what way?

Kividi: The core group that has been attending New Community regularly is 40 and 50 people, but on special occasions we have 100-150. The largest number of them are from Congo, where I used to plant churches; and the second-largest number are from Angola. We also have some people from the Ivory Coast. So I use two languages on most Sundays: French and Lingala, and English if we have visitors. Almost every day I use three Bibles—

Jason: (laughingly interrupts) He preaches for three hours.

Kividi: People don't complain if I go 40 minutes for a sermon, because they know I'm shifting from language to language. Ushers will tell me, “We have someone visiting; he is English-speaking, so be aware of that.” I don't know any other churches in our area that use French.

Jason: Our church is 350-400, with about half being college students. People from all over the world are here because of the universities—mostly Northwestern, but also Trinity, Moody, North Park and several others. Both of our churches are urban, although not inner-city urban.

In what ways are you alike?

Jason: We both want people to know the Lord—that's a big deal for both of us; we both are Word-centered, gospel-centered. Kividi's an awesome teacher; he teaches at Moody Bible Institute as a part-time, visiting professor. Our church has wanted to grow in its church-planting focus, and so we're meeting with Kividi [to help his church], rather than thinking only about ways to plant others of our own.

Kividi: Jason is very relational. The first time I met him, it was as if we'd known each other for many years. I can relate to that in my personality. We share vision, we share passion, yes—we have a lot of things in common. But I see our relationship as

being the key in any effort to bring our two churches together. You don't *bypass* cultural differences, but culture should not be a problem if you relate person-to-person.

Jason's church is evangelistic; their young people are very passionate. So I shared my passion of launching outreaches, to help me spread the news about our church. We hadn't done much publicity [up to that point], because we were focusing on the core group. I told Jason, and he was ready to help me, to give me his wonderful people.

Jason: He spoke at our church this spring and got the ball rolling. We talked about three different outreaches: one, passing out fliers at apartment complexes, grocery stores, barber shops—we were helping them invite people to their fourth anniversary; the next was a time of intercessory prayer for the outreach ministry; the third was a soccer tournament.

Kividi: The tournament was against a Muslim team from Guinea. Some of Jason's young people joined our team—an organized Congolese team that invites other African nations to play against us. We use those games as chances to share our faith since many, including the captain, are members of our church. Even though [the opposing players] were Muslim, they were interested to let us start the game with prayer. And then we had a potluck meal. It was a good, good beginning, and we're trying to follow up, to build more relationships with them.

Tell us more about your partnership, in addition to the outreaches.

Kividi: One day I asked Jason if he had a layman who would come to our church to share about how laypeople can participate in the growth and development of the church. Jason said, "I think that person could be Gary." I called Gary, and he came in December to conduct two seminars. In Congolese churches, the tendency is to think the pastors want to do everything and the laity can be passive—especially when I have people without a history of belonging to a church. They expect me and my wife to do everything.

Jason: We talk a lot about that.



Kividi and Jason look forward to seeing the friendships between their two congregations develop to be as strong as their personal friendship.

Kividi: Jason is good at asking questions that force me to tell him what is happening. He also helps me think through things. At the beginning, I was a bit dogmatic about choosing elders. Some of my members have what we call, in Congo, a civil marriage—not marriage in a church. They are good people; they are learning and growing, but because they didn't marry in the church, are they qualified to be elders? We discussed that.

Jason: I said go for it; it doesn't matter! [both laugh]

Kividi: He said the first wedding wasn't in a church; it was in a garden! [laughter continues] He really challenged my way of thinking, especially in a church plant at this stage. If I'm too dogmatic, I'm not going to have people to serve.

Jason: He's helped me more than I've helped him. This guy, you don't understand—He drives an hour to get to his church; he has 5 kids, he has a Ph.D. and he's struggling to make ends meet. It blows me away how he loves these people and is willing to struggle financially. It humbles me and makes me never want to complain about what I have or don't have.

For me, ministry is not just about having a bunch of white people in church and white people in heaven; it's about reaching out to the nations and not living in our own bubble. These are brothers and sisters in Christ, and we're going to do this forever in eternity together, so we want to bring the kingdom to earth now. ■