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Column: St. Joe pastor's bridge to Africa now extends into Aurora



The Rev. Godwin Nsikan-Ubom Asquo, who became pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Aurora last year, founded ImaBridge Africa in 2008 and hopes to expand this global nonprofit that helps the needy by also serving those closer to home. (Denise Crosby / The Beacon-News)



By **DENISE CROSBY**

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The (fairly) new pastor at St. Joseph Church in Aurora has quite a name.

"You can call me Father Godwin," the priest declared, extending a hand while flashing a mega-watt smile I'm guessing could disarm the devil himself.

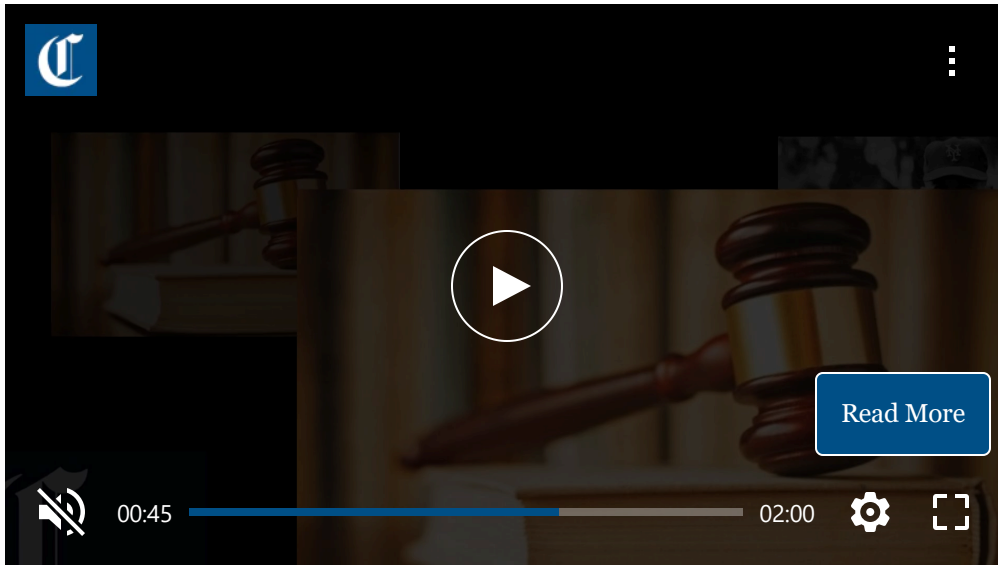
Which can also come in handy when running a Catholic parish, or any church, these days.

So can a sense of humor, and that thing called "charisma," which the Rev. Godwin Nsikan-Uborn Asquo seems to have in abundance.



When the 53-year-old priest found out I was a "practicing" Catholic (you have to add that adjective these days) he offered up one of those huge smiles, breathed a sigh of relief and announced, "Good, I can relax!" as he loosened his white clerical collar and shrugged off his black jacket.

I was visiting Asquo at his office in the St. Joe's Parish Center, right off Illinois Avenue at the corner of High Street, because I had heard about this incredible organization he founded in 2008 when he was associate pastor of the student Newman Center at Northern Illinois University.



And it all started because Asquo, who loves to share stories, food and culture from his homeland, offered to prepare an authentic Nigerian meal for a small group, which turned into a gathering of over 350 students and faculty that raised \$6,000 in donations he did not expect or was not sure how to use.

That question was solved when five NIU students traveled with Asquo on his next trip to Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, and awarded 30 university students with tuition scholarships. Those who made that trip were so touched by the gratitude and joy of the people they saw, ImaBridge Africa was formed (“Ima” means love in Asquo’s native dialect).



ImaBridge Africa, founded in 2008 by the Rev. Godwin Nsikan-Ubom Asquo, now pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Aurora, has installed 12 wells in villages in Nigeria that otherwise would not have safe drinking water. (ImaBridge Africa)

Sixteen years later, it's still going strong. This faith-based organization has not only helped more than 500 students get university degrees, it is responsible for building 12 wells in villages where young children had to walk for miles every morning to fetch 10-gallon buckets of water from the nearest river or stream, often coming down with malaria or other diseases.

Because access to health care is so limited in this country, ImaBridge Africa has also opened a 50-bed state-of-the-art hospital that provides inpatient and outpatient, surgical services and emergency care. And once a year a group of 16 lay volunteers joins a medical crew of about 70 doctors, nurses and health technicians who spend at least two weeks in Nigeria conducting free medical missions that, last year alone, served more than 5,200 people, including 100 who needed surgeries.

Poverty, limited medical care and unclean water are the leading causes of disease and death in Nigeria. But that also points to the group's goal of helping to foster small businesses and entrepreneurial opportunities so native Nigerians can support themselves, said Asquo, the youngest of seven children whose father was a school teacher in the village of Owot Uta.

To that end, ImaBridge Africa not only focuses on teaching leadership and vocational skills, it opened a factory in 2016 that processes palm oil and cassava flour to be sold at market. The organization also provides tools, sewing machines, school uniforms, desks and bicycles so kids don't have to make those four- to five-mile walks on dirt roads to school each day.



Nearly three years ago ImaBridge Africa, which was founded in 2008 by the Rev. Godwin Nsikan-Ubom Asquo, now pastor at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Aurora, opened the ImaBridge Medical Center in Nigeria, which provides health care in Ibesikpo Asutan and surrounding areas. (ImaBridge Africa)

And the organization has big plans for the future, which include building a "college for medical sciences" on property it owns next to the hospital, and a school on land it owns next to the only airport near the city of Uyo.

Asquo also mentioned a program facilitated by ImaBridge Africa that fed an

Much closer to home, he pointed to several local outreaches – computers for needy students in Maple Park, where he served for a year; scholarship money for McHenry area children – that he hopes to grow in other communities.

While our conversation was filled with far too many compelling details to list here, I encourage you to visit www.ImaBridge.org to find out more about this organization that truly is about building bridges between the haves and the have-nots.

Asquo credits NIU students and faculty for the seeds that started ImaBridge Africa, but much of the synergy this group now enjoys came after his transfer by the Rockford Diocese to St. Patrick Catholic Church in McHenry, where in his 12 years as pastor he inspired a group of dedicated parishioners to get involved, including Cecilia Adams, a music teacher who is president of its board of directors.



The Rev. Godwin Nsikan-Uborn Asquo, who became pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Aurora last year, sits in his office as he talks with Cecilia Adams, president of the board of directors for ImaBridge Africa, a nonprofit Asquo founded in 2008 after a mission trip to Nigeria with a handful of Northern Illinois University students. (Denise Crosby / The Beacon-News)

Sitting across the pastor's desk in his St. Joe's office – he arrived in Aurora in 2023 – Adams' enthusiasm for this nonprofit was as evident as the founder's as she shared more information, including the fact 98% of all funding goes directly to its programs.

As much as McHenry hated to see him go, Adams told me, they see the possibilities in expanding this bridge to Aurora.

"We are always looking for volunteers and team members to join us in our

Asquo has certainly received a warm reception at his new home, including from Aurora Mayor Richard Irvin who attended "Aurora's First Taste of Africa Cultural Event" July 28 at St. Joseph Catholic Church that drew a crowd of hundreds.



"Aurora is very fortunate to have Father Godwin as a strong thread in our interfaith tapestry. He has a heart full of love that extends from Aurora to Africa," said Irvin. "I am inspired by his ImaBridge Africa program.

"As we launch Aurora's Sister-Cities Commission and continue to enhance our city's equity and inclusion initiative, I look forward to collaborating with Father Godwin to build and strengthen cultural and business connections with cities and countries on the continent of Africa," the mayor continued. "And of course, as the city works with our Aurora InterFaith Alliance, Father Godwin will continue to be instrumental in serving the people of Aurora."

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Building what he describes as “transformational relationships,” of course, makes Asquo’s face light up even more. While his smile might be contagious, however, it’s nothing compared to the passion he exudes to help the less fortunate.

Even an hour sitting across the desk from this man of the cloth makes you want to roll up your sleeves and ask “How can I help?”

To which he would reply: “There are a lot of things we can do together to bridge the love between Africa and the United States and the rest of the world.”

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