

We had the ceremony in church, photos in the church garden, and then the couple and their friends and my wife and I went to the local pub for beer and sandwiches. The couple provided the sandwiches!

My dream, albeit for a relatively minor area of community ministry, is that such wedding arrangements could become part of any church's mission to its neighbourhood, customised obviously according to the desires of the couple and the context and 'persona' of the church itself. My guess is that such arrangements are already in operation in many churches and low-cost, high-quality weddings already happen in quiet and unpublicised ways. What I have in mind is a genuine non-profit-making service, which is also a great way of developing authentic relationships. Most important of all, the church can thus offer a Christian focus for the most important event in a young couple's life. Good dream?

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THE SEVENTH DAY - A NAMING CEREMONY

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One of the joys of my present ministry is that an increasing number of Africans are worshipping with us. As a result, all kinds of new opportunities are being presented to me. One of these new opportunities is leading a naming ceremony. Let me explain

The other day I rushed to the hospital to visit a new baby. If possible, I always like to pray with the mother and father within a few hours of the birth of their child. On this occasion the mother I was visiting was a Nigerian woman. After I had prayed, she said to me, "You will come on the seventh day". Not knowing what she had in mind, I duly agreed, and on my return to my church office phoned another of my Nigerian members to find out what this was all about. "It's a naming ceremony", she said. "You have to lead the naming ceremony: we sing songs, we read Scripture, the parents name the child, we thank God for the child, the child then experiences a variety of tastes, and then we bless the child".

Suitably forewarned, I turned up on the seventh evening to discover a houseful of guests - most of them Black Africans (the men in suits, and their wives in stunning African attire), but some native Europeans.

I prepared for the ceremony by drawing up and photocopying an 'order of service'. We began with three simple songs: 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases'; 'Father God I wonder how I managed to exist without the knowledge of your parenthood and your loving care'; and 'Praise, him, praise him everybody praise him, he is love, he is love' - the last song was chosen with the young children in mind.

For the Scripture reading I chose Matt 18.1-5: "The disciples came to Jesus, asking, 'Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?'. So Jesus called a child, made him stand in front of them, and said, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. The greatest in the Kingdom of heaven is the one who humbles himself and becomes like this child. And whoever welcomes in my name one such child as this welcomes me". This I duly read and then commented upon the need for us to exercise child-like trust in God .

We then all stood up for the actual naming of the child: "What name shall this child be?", I asked. The father replied: "His name shall be Joshua, Ife Oluwa, Omotayo". The father explained the significance of each of the names: Joshua - God is my salvation; Ife Oluwa - God is love; and Omotayo - A child is a source of joy. I then formally named the child: " In the presence of Almighty God we name this child Joshua, Ife Oluwa, Omotayo" (fortunately one of the Africans had written out the names for me - otherwise I would have been in difficulties!).

We prayed for the child. I prayed - but so too did a number of the guests.

Then came the 'ceremony of taste'. To my relief this was led by one of the Nigerian men, in which the new-born child was introduced to the tastes of salt, water, honey and sugar.

The service ended with the Aaronic Blessing: "May the Lord bless you and take care of you; may the Lord be kind and gracious to you; may the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace". (Num 6.26).