*Jason Byassee is a Methodist Minister from Vancouver who teaches preaching at Vancouver School of Theology. He is currently on sabbatical at Durham, and was invited to join the Archbishop of York’s team for the northern bishops’ Tell Serve Give mission in Liverpool. Jason blogged each day about his experiences on the mission, read about Thursday 7 March here:*

Archbishop John Sentamu loves questions. But take care when you ask him something. His answer may take you places you didn’t expect to go.

Our mission team visited a local college in Southport today, where we got to see the Archbishop in all his Yoda/Gandalf/Obi-Wan-like glory. His affect on the students and staff of King George V College seemed almost magic. For example, one group of older boys was being loud near our photo shoot, perhaps making fun of all the pomposity of us clergy in our collars and our several cameramen and our religious books to pass out. Sentamu sauntered into their midst and they quickly assembled themselves for selfies and gave him high fives. One went away yelling to his friends, “I just met the Archbishop of York!”

Sentamu met with Six Form classes on Law, Sociology, and Philosophy. In the last of those three, we quickly left off the topic of the day (epistemology) as a young girl of eastern European heritage asked the Archbishop whether he could do anything about clergy corruption in her home country. Shouldn’t Europe see to its own house before sending out missionaries to other continents?

What do you mean? Sentamu asked.

“Where I’m from, priests ask for money before they offer to hear people’s confessions.”

Sentamu explained that in Western Christendom we had similar abuses before the Reformation. “Stick with Jesus, who loves you and died for you freely.”

But she persisted. “Can’t you *do* something about this?”

What blessed insistence. Sentamu has power in the British House of Lords and is known throughout Christendom—couldn’t he put in some calls? The answer, of course, is no. For all our ecumenical progress, church leaders in one country can’t just phone up leaders in another and tell them what to do. If we tried, we’d rightly accused of meddling, even colonizing.

And this is precisely where I saw the Archbishop’s genius. “I’m going to get on my knees this Lent and pray for the church in your home country,” he said. ‘Will you join me? Here is a book about Lent.”

“I can’t read this,” she explained. Church leaders in her home country had warned her off Protestant and Catholic books, threatening that they might lead her to hell.

Sentamu leaped into action: “Young woman! Don’t you want to be free?” He was in her face now, smiling, but also pushing. This was a philosophy class after all—wouldn’t she want to follow the truth wherever it leads?

“Yes,” she said, with growing confidence now.

“Good! Hallelujah! Now read this, so we can pray together,” Sentamu said. “And if you go to hell, I’ll be there with you!”

This was only one of several interactions I watched between Sentamu and students in which he moved into their space, asked hard follow up questions, listened profoundly and met someone where they were. I’m betting those students will never forget those interactions. I know I won’t.



