

FORWARD TOGETHER: HOPE-FILLED STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH

A PODCAST SERIES BY WORLD RELIEF: EPISODE 1

Matthew: Hello, everyone. My name is Matthew Soerens. I'm the U.S. Director of Church Mobilization and Advocacy at World Relief, and I'm joined today by Isoken Aiwerioba. Isoken is the Operations Manager* for one of our offices at World Relief Chicagoland. She's also the director of administration for her region of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which is a global denomination with more than a million members all over the world, including many here in the United States. I just know that she has some good things for us today. Hello, Isoken. Thanks for being here with us.

(*Isoken has since been named Director of Operations at World Relief Chicagoland)

Isoken: Thank you so much, Matt. I'm very happy and honored to be here.

Matthew: How did you get to where you are today, and what's been the role of the local church in your life story?

Isoken: Growing up in Benin, Nigeria, my family, my father did what a lot of Benin men do, and which is they practice a little bit of Christianity and a little bit of African traditional religion. I grew up knowing both. One time in my early 20s, I had a series of misfortunes. Each year someone was dying and I was scared and I had a choice. It was either go fully the way of African traditional religion or Christianity. I chose Christianity.

After that I gave my life to Christ. I started serving in a church, which is the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the denomination I still worship at. From then on I went to be a missionary for two years in Zambia and I came to the U.S.

Matthew: Can you tell me a little bit what brought you to the U.S.?

Isoken: You would not believe it. After being a missionary, my father was expecting me to come home and take up the normal life. He said I was too involved in church and I should come and be a normal person and go and work somewhere. I was going to come to the U.S. just to relax before going to get back into things. The day I was going to the embassy to get my visa, I heard the Lord say clearly that I do a new thing. I was like, "Okay, what is it?" I came to U.S. and he was like, "This is where you're going to be." The rest is history.

Matthew: Wow. I know you've been such a blessing to us for many years now at World Relief, working with lots of local churches here in the United States and lots of different backgrounds. I wonder if you could tell me, having seen the church in lots of different cultural contexts, within Africa and then in the United States, what would you say are some of the differences between the church and the U.S. and other congregations that you've been a part of, and then what are the similarities?

Isoken: I'll start with the differences. I see the American church as grace and the African church as law, right? With the American church, especially the White American church, I've actually had more experiences with them, I see this love of God that I never truly knew about before coming to the us.

There is this way, when you hear songs *you're a good, good Father*, you just hear that love for God that comes out. Now, the African church or the Nigerian church is different. We are more of a warrior church and we are big on rules and regulations. You don't see so much of the love of God the way you would see in the American Church. Those are some of the differences.

Now, those things do have their problems because with the American church, I have seen so much of grace that sometimes you wonder if there is no adherence to law, like in the reading of the Bible. It's assumed in the Nigerian church, that as you become a Christian and you rise up in the ranks of ministry or churches that you would know the Bible a lot, because we believe, like I said, we're a warring war nation, so we believe that the Word of God is our sword, our weapon,, so how can you go to battle without having that?

It's always a surprise to me that in the American church, I have seen more of love and not enough rules, and in the African church more of rules and not enough love. Similarities, we serve the same God, it's the same Jesus that we believe in. We believe in the Holy Spirit. Some people might not believe in speaking in tongues, but we see the love of God, we see the love of people through outreaches. Those are some of the similarities I've seen.

Matthew: Isoken, what value do you see in having different expressions of the church globally, and what might we learn from each other? You already suggested a few things there but maybe expand on that a little bit.

Isoken: I tell people that if you don't like people of other races, how are you going to cope in heaven because we're all going to be there? What are you going to do and we don't need visas to get there? Are you going to ask God to ask them to please leave? No, they are going to be in heaven together. If God loves all of us, then we should love one another. There is no one that is useless. Everyone has something you can learn from them.

The Bible gives examples like, look at the ant, so small yet it's so organized. It prepares its food for the winter. The Bible is saying to us that everything has use, everything is precious in the eyes of God, not on top of people. I think we have things to learn, for instance, in the way we praise. God loves hip hop, God loves hymns. God loves country music. If God can love all those things, why can't we? There's so much to learn from one another. Like in any family, we have differences but we are one family under God.

Matthew: Can you think of a time in your life when maybe you've doubted God or doubted the work He was doing through the church? If you're comfortable, can you tell us about a time like that?

Isoken: Yes. Anyone who has been a Christian for a long time will have what we call wilderness experiences, times when you call and God seems silent. You try your best. I've had that happen in my life at various stages. Like the final stage of my documentation in the US, just simple mistake and it was awful.

I went through that experience. Don't be worried, I'm documented now, and I've been for many years. There was just a time it just seemed like God wasn't listening, like God wasn't paying attention. I used up all my savings but when it was over, God brought it back 1,000 times more. He said I wanted you to learn different lessons from that. I learned that through it all, regardless of my feelings, God definitely is always there. He doesn't leave us.

Had there been times when I felt like God failed to the church? No, I've seen when the church failed God. One of my biggest, and I don't know if I can say this or not, but one of my biggest disappointments, not disappointment as much as pain, January 6th. I saw a side that was so not good. I've been seeing that in the American church for a while where we're becoming-- I think I read in [your book](#), Matt, about just bringing politics into church. My heart broke because the American church believes that-- not believes because I can't use that for all the American church, but you see this flavoring of the American church with politics.

You see us laying down the Bible and bringing up what is the order of the day, what is the prevailing thing of the day. Bible says that in those days men what was right in their own eyes because the Word of God was scarce, but the Word of God is not scarce. People were doing what is right in their own eyes. You just see that politicizing. God is not a Republican. God is not a Democrat. God is God. How people can take the church and color it with politics, I was very pained about that.

People would just see people and assume they're Christians. No. By their fruits, you shall know them. It's by your fruits you can tell if you're a Christian or not. That's the painful thing about the church and what it's doing to this generation.

Matthew: I appreciate you sharing that. I think the American church so desperately needs that perspective. Not that the whole American church is necessarily in that spot, but there are certainly elements of it that I think would be a blind spot that sisters and brothers and other parts of the world can help us to see.

Another question as we think about the church, I think there's a lot of people in the US and maybe elsewhere in the world who are feeling a little discouraged with the church, maybe even ready to give up on the church. We probably all know some people in that boat. What would you say to them?

Isoken: For a lot of people that are disappointed in the church, I want to appeal to them not to be disappointed in God. The church is just people, human beings walking out their own salvation with fear and trembling. They're walking out. They don't have anything to do with the God that we serve. I would like to encourage them to please have a heart of grace, to extend grace to the church, to remove their eyes from the

church and be like Jesus, who set His focus on God, and learn to know God for yourself. You find out that when you begin to know God for yourself, not for the religion of going to church or going through the motions, He gives you an understanding of situations of people. He helps you to extend grace because He loves everybody. "For God so loved the whole world."

I'd like to encourage you to turn your eyes to God. How do you do this practically? Read the Bible. Just read the Book of Mark or the Book of John. I tell you, just read it. Before you read it, just say to God, "I want to read it and I want to meet you." It works, and talk to God like you and I are talking right now, Matt. Just talk to him. If you are real, I want to see you. If you are real, I want to know you. Show yourself to me.

Matthew: I feel like every time we talk the scripture just comes out of you. It's clear that you're someone who has spent a lot of time in God's word and that is such a blessing to be guiding us. At World Relief, we've been talking a lot about what it means to move forward together as one body. Like the church globally, we're a very diverse organization with lots of different Christian expressions rolled into one. It feels really important for us to explore that question. My question for you is how can the church as a unified body move forward together?

Isoken: If there's one thing I tell you, I tell everybody all the time that World Relief taught me to love other Christians, and I've been a pastor for years! Let me unpack this a little bit. I loved everyone in a, oh, Jesus love you, kind of way, but World Relief really, really, really opened my heart to the extent that even one of my young ones came and said, "Oh, I want to marry someone from another denomination." I said, "Sure." Before I'll be like, "Let's sit down and talk about it." So, what is what Relief doing that I wish the church will learn? At least I can't speak for the entire World Relief, but I can speak for Chicagoland. It's that coming together in the things that unite us, because what unite us, what makes us united? What makes us not uniform, the united is at accepting our commonalities.

There are basic tenets of Christianity that we should focus on more than dogma because it's dogma that separates us. What binds us together is much more than what separates us. The fact that Jesus came, he died for our sins, he rose from the dead, he went back to heaven, he makes intercessions for us, he sent the Holy Spirit to come and comfort us. Those are commonalities that cannot be shaken by dogma.

I believe that the church should put down the weapon of I'm better than you, I'm different from you, I'm serving a different God from you because that's what it sounds like. Put down that weapon and come together in unity.

Matthew: Last question for you, Isoken, do you believe the church can change the world and if so, how?

Isoken: Can the church change the world? Yes. Let's just practice what we preach. It's not easy. I'm not there yet. I'm nowhere near there, but I'm on my way. I agree with the

Bible. I don't fight the Bible. People say to me all the time, "There's so many churches in Nigeria and there is no change. There's so much corruption." I say to them, "Imagine how bad it will have been if the church wasn't there."

Can the church, oh yes, because that's God's desire. We're His hands and feet and God loves the world so much He placed us here to do everything that Jesus was doing and more, so, yes. Let's stop fighting, let's start practicing, let's know the Bible is our guideline and the church can definitely change the world.

Matthew: Well, thank you so much, Isoken. As we end our time here, I wondered if you would mind saying a prayer over our time and overall who are listening today.

Isoken: Of course, I'll be happy to. You are good and your mercy is forever. Hallelujah. You are good and your mercy is forever. Hallelujah. Father, I pray for everyone that will have a chance to listen to this podcast. My heart just cries out because I know your heart cries out for the church, your heart cries out for the world, your heart cries out for this world that you have created.

Lord, I pray that for everyone that hears this discussion that Matt and I have had, anyone that is in pain, that Father you will show yourself strong to them. Everyone that is confused, that Father you will give them direction. Everyone that doesn't even know what it is that they're looking for, Father you'll reveal yourself to them oh God. Lord, I pray for the people out there that are discouraged. They have looked and they do not see good examples. Father, I pray that you will reveal yourself to them because you are perfect. You're perfect, oh God. Nothing can be taken from you or nothing added.

I pray for the church in America and around the world, oh God, that you continue to show yourself to them, that you make all of us pause and listen to you, oh God. Father, I pray Almighty Father, for World Relief that I love so much that you continue to take us from glory to glory in the name of Jesus because I know that once you're with us, once we can follow you, Lord, we can never fail because your gifts they're perfect and they have nothing to be added to them.

Father, I pray for this world in general that, Lord, your knowledge will spread over the world even as the waters cover the sea. Thank you, Father, Lord God, because I declare that no one that listens to this talk, no one's life will be left the same. They will have a touch from heaven in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

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