

# OpenTheo

## #72 Christianity in Africa - NT Wright meets Ugandan church leader Richmond Wandera

July 1, 2021



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Justin Brierley hosts a dialogue between NT Wright and Ugandan church leader Richmond Wandera on the challenges and opportunities facing the church in Africa. Richmond was able to escape poverty as a child because of Compassion International. Please sponsor a child: Text JUSTIN to 83393 (USA only) Or visit <http://www.compassion.com/justin> Every sponsor from the USA will receive a copy of Justin's book 'Unbelievable? Why, after ten years of talking with Christians, I'm still a Christian'. We hope to see 100 children sponsored through Compassion and the Ask NT Wright Anything Show.

### Transcript

The Ask NTY Anything podcast. Hello and welcome back to the show, it's Justin Bralier, your host for the program that brings you the thought and theology of renowned New Testament scholar, NTY, and a very special edition of the show today as we're bringing it to you in partnership with Compassion International. And today, alongside Tom, you'll be meeting Richmond Wandaria, a senior pastor of New Life Baptist Church in Campala, Uganda, will hear his story, his interaction with Tom, and about the way that Compassion changed his life as a young man and how you could help to change the lives of many young people today as well.

So thank you for listening to today's special edition of the Ask NTY Anything podcast. Well it's a real pleasure to be joined on this edition of the podcast by Richmond Wandaria. He's senior pastor of New Life Baptist Church in Campala, Uganda, and founder and director of the pastor's discipleship network.

It's a nonprofit that serves, equips, and trains thousands of pastors across East Africa. And he's joining Tom and myself on today's show to talk about his story and particularly about his part in compassion, who have an amazing child sponsorship program as well. But before we get to all of that, it's lovely to have you on the program today, Richmond.

Just I understand that you've just gone into a lockdown recently again in Uganda. Do you want to just tell us a little about that and what it means for you and your church community? Yes, for about 18 months we've seen what would call a period of grace where there's not many cases of COVID in Uganda. But for some reason those numbers have just gone up and spiraled up in a way that is shocking to everyone.

And so the president just under 48 hours ago required that everybody stay at home and effectively put a lockdown in place. And so there is a lot of fear because many people are still living with the impact of the previous lockdown. We lost thousands of jobs.

In fact, unemployment in Uganda went from being under 14% to the upward of 40%. And so we are really living in a difficult space right now. There's a lot of fear in our hearts because again, just looking back at the previous lockdown, it was very, very horrible.

When you think about unemployment, you think about household incomes, you think about how that impacted children, our education system was thrown off balance. And the charge meant lost a lot of spaces. I mean, most charges operate under rented spaces.

But after eight months, many churches couldn't pay their accumulated rent. And so we are kicked out. And so we have thousands of pastors right now that are operating without space.

And it's a very, very, very scary place for us to be right now. Yeah. So I guess you appreciate, I guess, Tom here in the UK, despite the hardships that COVID has brought in some ways, obviously, realizing that our situation is, we are so fortunate in so many ways compared to what regular Richmond have had to be dealing with.

Richmond, it's great to welcome you on to the podcast though. Prayers for your church, your community and Uganda as you face this new challenge of the new lockdown. We do want to talk about your own situation.

You've joined me before on my unbelievable show to talk about this. But there will be many people who haven't heard that interview, but who will listen to the Ask and T-Rite Anything podcast. Just off the bat, are you familiar with with Tom and his work? Oh, yes.

I don't know who's not familiar with Tom and his work. Tom is blushing right now for those who are watching the video. Well, so here's the thing.

For my doctoral work, we were required to explore Tom Wright's thoughts on his book After You Believe. And that was very, very interesting to me because I think Africa's biggest challenge has been discipleship has been a clear worldview of God's vision for his kingdom on earth. And that was my problem too.

My perspective was whenever people became Christians, the first thing I did as an

untrained pastor without theological background, I asked them what their gift was. And if they were good sports people, I told them, join the sports ministry. If they're good saying, I said, join the choir.

And God would take care of you there. I didn't quite view people as Tom Wright rightly put said as a holy priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart by God. And for me, it was an escape.

It was almost escapism. I'm moving away from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. And so for me, it was both literal as well as figurative in a way that it's like a lip, a hoop that you just have to jump over and it's done.

And it's sorted. And I didn't quite view our time as Christians in this world as mission. I thought, look, we're here and I'm glad I'm in.

I've joined the bus and there we go. And then I began to open the pages and I began to read. I began to wonder, wow, so this holy priesthood, this holy nation of people set apart by God.

And I began to reflect on it and you should have seen me in my room alone in my own study. I'm messing up and just not just wrestling with Thomas, his writing as I'm reading through. And I began to realize that actually I represent probably 99% of pastors in our space in Sub-Saharan Africa.

And I realized that we are all asking the question, what do we do within your believers? What are we to teach them? How are they to see themselves? And so after exploring that for classwork, I began to explore that for utility in my own nation. So when I returned and I had founded the pastors discipleship network, guess what the first book that was for discussion for us after you believe? And so for two years, it became the foundation of text and discussion resource for our conferences to help again demystify as well as confront the idea that the church in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep. And there were reasons for that.

But that was our conceptualization of what the kingdom of God is and our time on earth as holy praise. Tom, what do you make of that? That's news to you obviously that I'm delighted. But I just drop in the footnote that the book which Richmond is referring to, the American title is After You Believe.

The English title was Vertoure born, which is actually, I prefer that title, but the American publisher said we can't call it that because nobody in America buys books with the word Vertou in the title. And so it was his choice to call it After You Believe, where you come to faith and then so what. But just in case anyone in England listening to this, things funny, I haven't heard of that book.

It's the same book. But I'm naturally, I'm delighted and indeed flattered. And Richmond,

thank you for that affirmation.

That book happened almost by accident. I was working on some other things and I started to think about Vertoure and the development of Christian character and started to note it down and do some lectures on it. And it turned quite quickly into that book.

I guess that was 2010. I was writing that. But these things come up.

Maybe that's how God works sometimes you just turn a corner in the road and you've got to say this stuff. Anyway, I'm very glad it's had that effect. Just before Richmond comes back with some more of his experience, Tom, what's been your experience? Have you had an opportunity to visit churches in Africa before? Not much, alas.

Maggie and I went to Southern Africa a long, long time ago back in the mid 70s and had a very interesting time both in South Africa and in what was then called Radisha. I still remember all sorts of things about that. I've subsequently been to Kenya a couple of times for conferences and meetings and so on.

But I haven't had a chance to really to get into the sort of things that are going on in churches there. My sister worked as a volunteer in Rwanda for two years. So just over the border from Uganda and I learned a lot.

I actually ran a prayer group supporting her while she was doing that. I learned a lot about Southern Uganda and Rwanda and Burundi during that time. That's been about it.

I've been along the North African coast a couple of times. I'm into Egypt and so on. But Sub-Saharan Africa, sadly, very little and I'm all ears waiting to hear what's going on.

Tom, while you're still all ears, let me put the seed into your heart. The time is right for Africa right now to engage. Not just in the themes that we have known for in the past.

Oftentimes when people think of Africa, they think in terms of animism. They think in terms of witchcraft, child sacrifice, spirituality and that time is slowly going past. I think we, in a conference recently, we're reflecting on how is the church in Africa under attack.

When we realized that from the North, we're having an Islamic invasion and the North is becoming more and more Islamic. While within us, we still have our deep African roots in animism and witchcraft and ancestral worship and that form of spirituality. But then from the South, we're seeing a very new form of attack to the church and that is intellectualism and not to say anything wrong about it.

But I think at first, when we thought of reaching the African, we thought of speaking in terms of again, animism and witchcraft and those expressions, Ubuntu culture and those kinds of thought philosophies. But now the African is more educated than he was before and so many pastors are now beginning to feel irrelevant because a new generation is

rising. That is asking very deep intellectual questions and they want truth and they are engaging with the world.

Globalization is shifting things on the African, both physical, social and spiritual landscape and people watching things on YouTube and they're talking in terms of apologetics. So pastors are beginning to increasingly begin to feel irrelevant. In fact, there's a story of one pastor just down the street from me who rebuked young people for gathering and asking him questions that he couldn't respond to.

And then when he came away, he actually said that was his escape. But he could not stand the intellectual smartness of what was before him. And so we are at that time now when the world is becoming increasingly one space or a global village where questions that are being asked in the US and in the UK and in Australia, in Asia are also being asked by the younger generation in Africa.

And so the time of just praying questions away is gone. It's over. And now have to confront these questions.

And few pastors are actually waking up to this idea of loving God with all your mind. And so we need you, Tom. And again, I lead a ministry of 6,000 pastors that are gathering frequently whether it's online or physically to engage with these discussions that I'm leading.

So that's why your book and your resources have been extremely important to at least give me those thoughts and resources and the articulation that is needed to engage some of these difficult conversations. Wow. Wow.

That's a really challenging moment, my goodness. And of course, it happens in microcosm in different towns and villages in the UK and in America where a small town pastor who has been a pastor for a long time will face exactly the same thing, where young people go off to college and they come back and they say, "What about this? I can see how that's very interesting that the way you describe it as come up in Africa is quite different from the way it's come up here. But in a sense, it's the same thing.

It's the challenge of the enlightenment and the enlightenment rationalism, which is washing up on your shores as it's been with us for ages. So God bless you. I hope that what I and lots of others have done will be of some help in this.

I was going to ask as well, Richmond, when it comes to, you referenced already that the way Tom's thought and theology impacted you and helped to break open a bigger picture of what it means to be a Christian in the world. It's not just about getting on the salvation bus and your ticket to heaven and whatever. This idea that we are this royal priesthood in all grating the kingdom of God.

What does that look like practically for you in your situation, the specific place that you

live and minister and work? Thank you, Justin. I serve at a church that's located in one of the most broken communities in Uganda. If you put a pin at the church that I passed a new life, I've fucked his church and go and do it to my radius around the church.

Justin, you'll find over 200 brothels. The average age of the young girls that are working in these brothels is 15. Many of them have dropped out of school.

They come from the countryside into the city looking for jobs and they end up in bars and from there thrown into this lifestyle. But that's not our only problem. We have a lot of people that have been given into risky lifestyles.

A lot of drug addiction, a lot of abuse. In fact, we call it the triangle of death because in one corner, we have prostitution. In the other corner, we have drug abuse.

That's the highest level. In one other corner, we have gambling. We have so many energetic young people who have no jobs, wake up and they just sit on the side of the road and they're playing with cards or playing with drougts and all kinds of things.

It's very, very idle. Then covering all of that is this is a highly Muslim community. And so surrounded by all this poverty that's eating up at people's hope, the kingdom of God for us is being revealed through some of the practices and actions of the church.

More recently, during the pandemic lockdown, two things happened that ended up persuading many of the love of God. One was something that we called temporary adoption. There were so many women whose children were dying and who knew that if the rest of the children who were under their roof kept staying with them, they would not survive because many had lost jobs, many couldn't afford food and the government was doing nothing to provide food.

Well, members in the church who could take in one or two or three children opened up their homes temporarily. But we saw this exodus of children moving from one place to another, one place of difficulty to a place of safety. And all this was being supervised by the church.

We produced all the rules and the requirements that were needed to be in place for the safety of the children. And five months later, these children were now going back to their homes. And I can say to you, Justin, and Tom, that not just the community, but the entire regional government body acknowledged the charge and its efforts, saying the charge has been part of the solution that has kept many children alive.

But the second thing that happened is that even among the poor, we saw generosity like we have not seen before. It's like what Paul describes when he says, "Out of their poverty, they gave beyond their ability." And I think that's what we saw. Our pulpit was not filled with Bible.

Our pulpit was filled with one pound of rice and a pound of cassava and one pound of matoke. And everyone was bringing in whatever they could so that we could then redistribute them these items to those who even the poor in Uganda called poor. And that generosity from the church led to an amazing response.

And I think an opening in the minds, on the hearts of God's people to this idea of the kingdom of God and the work of the church in the world. And the beautiful thing that happened again was our partnership with compassion. So compassion came alongside that and took the donations that they had received from very generous partners who partner with Compassion International.

And they allocated part of those resources to our community. Over 2,000 families received food that would sustain them for over three months. And I can tell you just in, when the governments saw that, their hearts were one to the church like never before.

And it's crazy what's happened. Our church has nearly doubled during this COVID. Nearly doubled because of these acts of love.

And I think that Christians must open their eyes to the opportunity that some of these challenges present. Because people are always asking who truly cares. Where is love? Where do I find hope? And if hope can be manifested to them in any way, shape or form, they are easily warmed up to listen more and to understand this hope that's presented to them.

And I think that Christians every single day have these opportunities if we could only lean in and look closer. So many response today? Well, it's a heartwarming story in all sorts of ways. When I was working in the northeast of England where there is serious poverty and child poverty and serious alcohol abuse and all sorts of things.

It was wonderful to see in a small way, not as dramatically as you've just described, Richmond, but again, the church being able to be there with the poorest of the poor and to have the local government officials say, actually, you're the ones on the ground who seem to know what's going on. Can we work with you rather than the other way around? Sadly, that doesn't happen all across the UK. But it's brilliant because what you describe is exactly why in the first two or three centuries the church spread, even though the Roman Empire was trying to stamp it out because the church was doing precisely what you say, caring for the poor and the sick and the needy.

And so what if Caesar didn't like it, people saw this was a different way to be human and it shines out. So thank you for that. And I will carry that with me through these next days as a sense, because so many people in my world think that Christianity has had its day and it's all very top heavy and there's so many sexual scandals and there's the church has failed and this and that and the other.

And the church is just part of the problem. But as you say, the church being the church is shining light to the solution. Hello, do you? Thank you very much.

I'm going to give the details of how people can get involved, people who are listening or watching with compassion who we're partnering with on today's program. But do tell us, Richman, just briefly your own story of the way in which being a compassion child impacted your own life. Thank you, Justin.

When I was eight years old, my father was murdered and he was murdered in the presence of my mother. So on that same day, I lost both my father and mother, my father physically, but my mother emotionally and psychologically, she was not the same again. And so our eye and five of my siblings and my mother just began to see what darkness feels like and what how deep and sharp poverty can bind.

Because hardly three months later, we were kicked out of our house and we ended up in Nagur Islam. Justin and Tom Nagur Islam shouldn't exist in this world because it's the place where dreams are killed, where lives are ended for kids in ways that are atrocious. And that is where I ended up.

I was told I couldn't no longer go to school. You got this education is private. So if your parents can afford way to go to school, good on you.

If they can't afford and there's no one helping you, stay home, no matter how gifted you are. And so I spent a lot of time on the street and a lot of time being idle as a child, wondering what would become of me. And Justin, by the time I was 10 years old, I had suffered from malaria over 10 times, coming to near death many, many times.

But about the time in my childhood, my mother reached out for help and she learned of Compassion International. She went and shared our story. And even though we were not Christians and not believers, they took us in and I was connected to a 15 year old girl called Heather from the UK who sponsored me and my life changed dramatically.

By the time I was 14, I met a decision to follow Christ. I was the first person in my family to make a decision to follow Christ. By the time I was 16, I had seen all five of my brothers and sisters come to the Lord.

By the time I was 19, I saw my mother who hated God for taking away my father Stephen, make a decision to follow Christ. By the time I was 22, I was invited to become the Associate Pastor and the church that I was going to, the church that hosted the Compassion program. Well, just a few years later, here I am, I am the senior pastor of the church today, now receiving children who are coming in to receive help.

It's an amazing story and just a transformation and redemption story as well that just illustrates the way God can just work through people and circumstances even in the midst of a broken world. So thank you for sharing it, Richmond. Now, if you're listening to



this podcast right now or perhaps watching, we've decided to do something unique through the Ask, Enty, Write, Anything podcast this season and that's to partner with Compassion International to find more sponsors for children who were much like Richmond.

We have a partnership with Compassion because we trust the way they work. When you invest in the life of a child every month, you can know that 80% of that is being spent specifically for the development of the little boy or girl you sponsor. Compassion doesn't just give money directly to children because they know that just handing out money isn't going to make a long-term impact.

But spending that money wisely for nutrition and healthcare and education, teaching boys and girls to grow up and escape poverty, that does make a huge difference. And Compassion does it all through local churches like Richmond's around the world. So we have a goal of finding new sponsors for at least 100 children with this podcast in the rest of this year.

Can we do that? Can we sponsor a whole village of children through the Ask, Enty, Write, Anything podcast? Now, we made it really simple for you. You've got two options. The first is that right now, even as you're listening, you can open up a text and send my name Justin to 83393.

Now that works only if you live in the US. You're going to get a text back with a picture of a child and a link. Click that link and follow the steps to start sponsoring.

It's super simple. So that's a text to 83393 and send my name Justin. Again, that's to 83393.

Now the second option is also very easy and will work from the US or anywhere. If you go to [compassion.com/justin](https://compassion.com/justin), you can choose exactly which boy or girl you're going to sponsor. Now we really want to make this easy for you and we've worked with compassion so that you'll also get a free gift when you start sponsoring.

Again, this offer is only in the US because of some of the logistics involved. But we're going to send you a copy of my book *Unbelievable* just to say thank you. And if you already have the book, it might make a nice gift for someone else.

So again, in the US, you can text 83393 and send the name Justin and you'll get a link to follow and start sponsoring. Or from the US or anywhere else, go to the website [compassion.com/justin](https://compassion.com/justin) and you can choose a boy or girl to sponsor from 25 different countries. And as said, if you're sponsoring from the US, you'll receive my book *Unbelievable*, why after 10 years of talking with atheists, I'm still a Christian.

You can find the links that you need with today's show info too. Tom, as we just start to draw this episode to a close, which is very different to the usual episodes you and I

record. Any final thoughts? And I wonder also whether you could both pray for each other just as we close out today's episode.

Perhaps I'll start with you, Tom. Yeah, absolutely. It's lovely to hear stories like that.

And just because though I know for myself and for many people with whom I minister or to whom I minister, God moves in mysterious ways. But that sense of being absolutely at rock bottom, to a place where there is no human possibility. So often in the Bible, God does a new thing at the point where human possibilities have completely run out.

And that's what we often pray for when people are sick or suffering or whatever. So to have this vivid story, that's wonderful. Richard, I'm not sure where did you do your PhD? Doncaster Bible College and Capital Seminary in Pennsylvania, USA.

Laxter Pennsylvania. Okay, right, right. I've not been there, but I know of it.

Yes, yes, well, well. Because that too is a wonderful thing. The way in which now we are in a global village and we can help one another across traditional boundaries and so on.

We in the UK have so much to learn from the rich African experience. And I know that ever since my sister was in Rwanda, but hearing it from you as well, it's remarkable. And I don't know if you know, when I was Dean of Lichfield, I worked with then Bishop, who was Keith Sutton.

And Keith had been the principal of the Anglican Theological College in Kampala when he was quite a young man. And so he always had Africa and especially Uganda on his heart. So I have had a kind of a second hand relationship with your country ever since then.

Thank you. And I love to hear these stories and honor them. And would you perhaps finish by praying for Richmond, for his church and for Uganda, Tom.

And then I'll ask you to pray for us as well, Richmond. Thank you. How did that? Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you are the Lord of heaven and earth and that your son Jesus is at your right hand ruling over the whole of our world and the whole of time.

And thank you for Uganda and for all the extraordinary ways, both in the last hundred years and in the last half a dozen years where you have been working to bring this message of healing and compassion and new life to birth. Father, I pray for Richmond. I pray for those 6,000 people in his organization and for all those who attend his church.

And I pray for those young people who are in that place of darkness right now and need others to reach out in compassion. And I pray that you will watch over Richmond and his colleagues, protect them against the temptations that come with their job against sickness and danger and sudden attack of whatever sort and build them up in faith and

hope and love and enable them to be indeed the royal priesthood who will shine as lights in the world to your glory. So we pray in faith and hope but with deep gratitude for all that you've done in Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Richmond, go ahead. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a good God.

We thank you that in the midst of difficulty there is always hope. I was in a place where I couldn't reason, I couldn't see what to do with new believers. And indeed what was said of books, that good books are a great mercy to the world.

Good books are a great mercy to the world. That became my experience because this book after you believe became great mercy to me and allowed me to finally see and understand that which you required of us to understand so that we could serve well. So I thank you so much for people like Tom and Justin who are bringing knowledge and light into our hearts so that we can serve you people well.

And I also pray right now for so many children who are very desperate right now, having been part of compassion and seeing the devastation right now. I know that there's never been a time that's more critical than now for a child to belong to a safety net like compassion. I pray Lord that you will provide for these children, connect these children to sponsors, those who will come and fight for them.

Be a voice for those who cannot speak out or be a voice for themselves. So Lord thank you for you are good and you are kind. When I ask you in the name of Jesus that your kingdom continue to go forth, your kingdom come and your will be done.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Thank you so much. Bless you.

You've been a real blessing to us today, Richmond. Thank you so much. And even though I've spoken to you before about your story, I just so enjoyed hearing it again and just we'll be praying and thinking of you and your work there.

So God bless you. Thanks for listening and watching the show today. One of the reasons that we've decided to partner with compassion right now, why we believe it's so important, is that COVID-19 is having this devastating effect all around the world.

And we know how much that's radically changed lives in the UK and US. But in so many countries where people live in deep poverty, what we're seeing is thousands more children being forced to the point of starvation because families can't work. Jobs go away.

Schools are being closed. And the World Health Organization is actually saying that COVID is setting international poverty development efforts back at least 10 years.

Parents who are already struggling to survive now can't even afford food.

And if a family member does get sick, there's no way for them to pay for a doctor, let alone medicine and parents desperate for work are losing their homes because they can't pay rent as we were hearing from Richmond. But the good news is when a boy or girl is sponsored through compassion, then compassion centres provide food, grocery vouchers for families who can no longer afford food and compassion staff from the local church help families get medical care and cover the costs of treatment and so on. And compassion is even helping cover to rent payments for families who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19.

There's so much that your sponsorship does for a child and for their community. So here's again a quick reminder on how to sponsor. We'd love you to get involved.

In the US, you can text 83393 and send the name Justin and you'll get a link to follow and start sponsoring. Or from the US or anywhere else in the world, go to [compassion.com/justin](https://compassion.com/justin) online and you can choose a boy or a girl to sponsor from 25 different countries. And again, if you're sponsoring from the US, you'll receive my book Unbelievable.

Why after 10 years of talking with atheist, I'm still a Christian as a thank you for your sponsorship. So you can find the links you need with today's show info to God bless you. Thank you for being with us today.

And let's see if the Ask NT right anything listeners can sponsor 100 children. Wouldn't that be amazing to see a whole village of children sponsored through compassion because of this podcast. God bless you.

See you next time.

[MUSIC]

[MUSIC]