

Global Conversations on Discipleship: Senesie Rogers, young adult leader from Sierra Leone, West Africa Central Conference

Mighty Rasing: Welcome to this episode of the Global Conversations on Discipleship. My name is Mighty Rasing, I'm the Director of Central Conference Relationships at Discipleship Ministries.

In this episode, I'm going to talk with Senesie Timothy Aruna Rogers a young leader from the United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, which is in the West Africa Central Conference. We will talk about his growth as a young leader in the church and the many different ways that he is working with young people in Sierra Leone. Enjoy!

Senesie Timothy Aruna Rogers welcome to the podcast! Thank you so much for being available and being willing to join me in this call so that we can talk about your ministries, specifically with young people in Sierra Leone. So, can you tell us a bit about yourself, your country, where you're from, and the work that you do for the church?

Senesie Rogers: Yeah thanks for having me. I am Senesie Timothy Aruna Rogers I am a chairperson for the West Africa central conference on youth and young adult affairs. I am stationed- I am a resident in Sierra Leone but I work with the young people in West Africa.

MR: I would like to begin by asking you about your faith story. How did you get involved in the church and eventually how did you become a leader of the young people in Sierra Leone?

SR: It all started, well, I was born and bred in the church - The United Methodist Church I mean. But coming to work with the young people was a choice made by the young people. Being in the ministry particularly was to see how we could rally around the young people to get them together, to come and at least embrace and work with the episcopal decision.... so, that was how I got myself in active leadership for the young people.

So after that for my annual conference, the need for us to go and work at the WACC again arose and I was an automatic delegate because those were the provisions that all immediate presidents—national presidents, they are automatic delegates and there is a tradition as well that the WACC we met that it was Sierra Leone to take over the chairmanship because it was rotational. Liberia's just served in that capacity and it was Sierra Leone turn to serve in the chairmanship.

MR: Right. Before we talk about your role with the West Africa Central Conference youth and young adult, I'd like to ask you about your experience growing up in the UMC. You mentioned you are essentially born into the United Methodist Church, right? So, can you describe to me some of the ministries you went through? as a young boy and eventually as, a maybe, as a teenager? What are the kinds of ministries that you think helped you prepare you to become a leader in our church?

SR: As a boy, I was born in Bo the second capital of Sierra Leone, and our church, the traditional Methodist church, had a structure where you start from the Good News. The Good News is where you have the children growing up in the church; and, interestingly, we never were a part of the general congregation on Sundays. What we do is they take us to a classroom where we are taught the bible and we have to explain ourselves – what our understanding is about what we are taught and that was kind of the thing that prevailed in my days and it still continues today. So that was the culture: you start from the Good News, from the Good News you get to the youth organization, from the youth organization you go to the young adults organization, from the young adults organization you get to the men's and women's organizations as the case may be.

But that is it, it all starts with the Good News, and the Good News was our kind of formative stage and it's very vital in the life of each and every United Methodist in Sierra Leone. Because there you learn the biblical rhythms, rhymes, you know, and you get to know the Bible characters specifically. So, the interaction was good, we had fun we were kind of entertained in several respects at the Good News stage.

MR: So, this is like a – like a Sunday school – a gathering where there is a classroom there are several children learning together and there's a teacher sharing about the bible and about the faith that we have.

SR: That's it, but what we really didn't get to know at the Good News stage was what the United Methodist was all about. All we are taught there were the bible characters and their importance to life and the different celebrations of the religion.

MR: So, is this kind of children's ministry still ongoing in Sierra Leone?

SR: Yes, I suppose it is still ongoing. It is still ongoing but with time, you know, the names have changed. Just as you are saying.

MR: How about your youth ministry? What kinds of ministries are happening with youth? And you can also talk about the ministries that happen with young adults. Is there a similar gathering, like the Good News, but for youth or is there a different kind?

SR: Yeah well, the Good News had the general gathering where the United Methodist country-wide meets every year, it's called the youth camp – I mean the children's camp, sorry, that is where each and every Good News group from different districts meet yearly. There we go and learn about The Bible and our skills and talents are tested individually. Because we are placed by groups and houses when we get to the children's camp. So, that was a kind of gathering we met with various United Methodists country wide. And it was a gathering that really kind of was a bit emotional because I could remember when each and every person was on the verge of leaving the gathering with all kind of emotions and tears and all. So, the connectedness that the children's camp created I guess was the greatest and remains the greatest to date.

MR: How about for youth and young adults? What kind of events at maybe the national level or the district and the local church? What kind of events, programs, and ministries happens with young people?

SR: These are the structures in the youth's ministry that are very vital country wide. Because the moment you get into the youth organization, you begin to hear about the work of the fellowship, the organization. You begin to hear about district organizations. You begin to hear about national organizations. And at this stage people begin to hear about visions, people begin to make friends, people begin to make enemies at the same time. So, at this stage you know the idea of ... [what] they taught in the Bible is not as much as that we can get from the Good News, but only the important thing is that we get into scriptures particularly at local levels, because we have, from time to time, Bible classes that is based on... well the leadership at the time because, if you get an executive that is passionate about the things of the Bible those set of events, you know, that are not normally part of the structure for us to meet, right?

But if you're unfortunate to meet an executive that does not place a premium on having bible studies then you can just do it for yourself as the case may be. But we do have revivals. And most importantly, at this stage, just as what we have with children's camp at the Good News level there is a youth camp at this very stage and it's very important. And it is the most attended gathering that I have ever witnessed in Sierra Leone.

MR: So, when you say the youth camp does that happen in the local church setting, in the district, or at the national level?

SR: The youth camp happens at the national level.

MR: And how many young people attend that?

SR: Well you don't specify how many people because, normally it's based on the resources that are available.

So, let's say if the National [organization] has the ability is to have more delegates at the youth's camp but if you haven't got enough resources then you don't get, I mean, a huge number at the youth's camp. But the beauty – I mean the beauty of the youth's camp is the annual conference has always been passionate about the Youth camp. Because, I mean, as I told you from the Good News here you have people trying to have different attachments and the church is really curious, you know, to get the young people on the right path. Because if you miss the young people at this stage then it will be hard for you to them.

MR: Last year, how many people attend the youth camp?

SR: We had over around 500 to 600. But the point is again, it is a mandate.... But there are times we just don't get to have the youth camps. Sometimes you don't have youth camps. Just as I have said again, it all kind of depends on the executive and their effort in getting things

done. If you get a vibrant executive— I mean, a national executive, then it's obvious that you are bound to have a youth camp because they're supporting it with the director, with the directorate, the annual conference there. You get the activity executed, but if they lag along the line and the other activities that the directorate and the annual conference are bound to do, then there are cases where they defer their programs for the following year.

MR: Alright. I think you talk about sometimes the youth, well, the young people get involved with the organizational part of the youth organization and sometimes they go through some political stuff like 'This is my friend— I'm going to support him. That person is not my friend.'

And so, in terms of leadership development for young people, how is the youth and young adult organization helping develop young leaders and how is the church supporting those young leaders in Sierra Leone?

SR: Well the youth and young adults' organization – now I have to mention something because, there has been a division. Finally, yes, there has been a divorce between the youth and young adults: they operate separately. They operate separately at the moment.

So, you have the youth running their affairs separately, and the young adults running theirs separately as the case is. But the youth and young adults have been really kind of working together towards national development. Because, they are both a good representation at the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone. The Council of Churches in Sierra Leone is an organization that really works. I mean, denomination-wise to see how best, you know, they can salvage challenges in society, provide relief services when disasters in the country. So, there is this aspect of the youth desk, wherein, the youth represent the church and as a result the youths get involved in national development. And, as well, the youths have got some projects that they write. For instance, the youth fund. From time-to-time, you know, funds - I mean some projects that they put forward to them and engage implementation as well. You get to see that the young people, in this part of the world, get to impact society, in a way.

So, it – Yeah. And most importantly, there is this idea of ministering [through] school songs. You know music is a kind of ministry that the young people are passionate about. And the young people, I really have to say strongly that they are passionate about singing in this part of the world. As a result, they've been singing around the country and making an impact as well over the years.

MR: That sounds like a lot of ministries going on with young people. And so, I would love to ask you about the faith and the formation of discipleship among young people. How do young people get to know Jesus and get deeper into their faith?

SR: Well, you know, the structure is not as systematic as one may be thinking. But the fact is baptism is one of the means through which the young people get some of the things of the church because each and every young person is expected to be baptized in the church. And you've got baptismal classes so with the baptismal classes you are taught the things that are

expected of you as a Christian and the beliefs of the church and how you should conduct yourself as a Christian and how should as well conduct yourself to the non-Christians and allow for people to see the light in you.

So, baptism is one key thing through which the young people get to embrace – get to practice the things of Christ. And secondly as I told you, at the Good News level, the different classes that you get on the daily – well, I mean, every Sunday is a kind of important contact again, because, when you get to the class the teachers are deliberate in their presentations they give you things that they think will really get you prepared for your faith. So, through the Good News stage as well you get to know Christ and you further get to embrace the things of God.

And, you know, getting to the young and – the youth and young adults there are fun-based tutorials. For instance, there is this quiz competition that we get from time-to-time as well as the youth level, you know. You are tested on questions from the Bible, events from the Bible, characters from the Bible. So, through the quiz competition the young people have been forced to go and read in a competitive manner, you know, to come and answer some of these questions that are – normally asked from the quiz competitions. So, it has been a fun way, but it has been impactful anyway.

And from time-to-time again some young people are given preaching assignments. They are given preaching assignments and with that, you know, we contact the Bible as well and we get to know things. And you know lately, the issue of the Book of Discipline and how it conflicts with scripture and being a contentious issue. And with that the young people have been forced as well, to go and read the Bible to really see how the Bible aligns with the things that are enshrined in the Book of Discipline. So, these are some of the ways which we've contacted the faith and, I mean, the values that are espoused in the church have been said here.

MR: Right. Thank you for sharing those, and I'm also interested in terms of young people growing in their faith. Part of that is they get to share their faith with their friends and maybe with their classmates or their neighbors. What are some of the ways that young people in Sierra Leone are engaging their community or maybe engaging others in sharing their faith?

SR: Yes. There have been various things—in sharing our faith in Sierra Leone as young people, particularly in society. Because, we've got different denominations and there has been a structure of campus ministries that has been a part of the youth and young adult function.

The campus ministries of course exist in all United Methodist schools, right? And they are always given delegate and observer rights when we get our national gatherings. So, whether you are United Methodist or not you always welcome to our national gatherings. So, from our point of having children from our schools, United Methodist schools, who influenced them in that way and they've been taught because, when they go around the city the things we do, the manner in which we interact, and the impact that you create into society; so influence them through the faith in that aspect. And there are other schools as well in which we've been

introduced – the campus ministries, in particular, in the universities that do not really have any dealings with our denomination.

For instance, you've got the campus ministries existing. These are doing well, as well, because, we get to have people who are not a part of our denomination to be a part of the campus ministries. We teach the doctrines of John Wesley and the doctrines of the Church of God -they are one and the same. And they get to know what United Methodism really stands for. Both doctrine wise and in our common practice in society. So, the influence of society begins in particular through the campus ministries, and it has been helpful.

And as I told you again, whenever we go out offering relief services during the Ebola we are out there encouraging people, you know, to take precautionary measures against the virus, disease, at the mudslide we are there as well offering relief services. We had a mudslide which was very disturbing, and we had several of the issues in which the church has been of help relief wise, and you know, the young people have championed because we are young and energetic. So, we have mostly championed these causes and whenever we go out, our conduct and the things we say have been helpful in, I mean, relaying the faith to non-United Methodists.

MR: Right. And I know that the church in Sierra Leone and also in Liberia and even in the Congo have been very active in providing relief and assistance to victims of Ebola and I think that's a really good testimony of the impact of the church in addressing the needs of the community.

SR: It is.

MR: Now, how about in terms of relating with other faiths. You've talked about inviting young people from other denominations in working together, how about with other faiths? Can you talk about the composition of the society in Sierra Leone? Are there other faiths there and how is that dynamic? How's the relationship between the faiths in your country?

SR: Well, the faith of the United Methodist Church and its provision for the ecumenical practice has been going on well.... And as I told you earlier, we are a part of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone is a composition of different denominations. So, when you get there at different denomination level. We talk the things of the society – troubling and disturbing things and how we can be of help to society, so you get to have different denominations working towards development and Sierra Leone has been of immense help in that aspect. And currently our Bishop serves as the head of that organization and I have been working as well on the legislative committee....

They're asking us to work on a working document. So, I am heading the legislative committee and we have the bylaws together already so we'll be getting that shared right around the country. Wherein, we can have things going on from different denominations so that if a thing happens and Sierra Leone would want – I mean, let's say for instance, United Methodists would want to be of help. We would just channel our issue to the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, and we all go meet and see whether it was— really was a concern of faith. This church is really

worth it, and that we are all good forces together and the most important part of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone is that we are not only accustomed to working with Christian denomination, but we work as well with Muslim organizations and Muslim based institutions. So, I mean that has really kind of established a kind of tolerant religious practice in Sierra Leone as well, and Sierra Leone has been playing a vital part in getting that done.

MR: Alright. In terms of your work with young people in Sierra Leone, what do you see are the challenges for young people? Not just for young people in the church but for young people in Sierra Leone in general?

SR: Well, there are lapses. There are lapses, basically because the young people, I mean, from time-to-time encounter challenges here. But I mean the faith of the young people is not as wavering as it was some 5-10 years back. You know, we are strong in faith. I mean, we conduct ourselves well, because, you know, we learnt a huge lesson from the civil war that had in Sierra Leone some 20 years or more back. So, with that, each and every person learnt their lessons and the idea of being a part of faith that guides your conduct has been commonplace, and, you know, the Sierra Leone annual conference outreach has been of immense help, as well in attracting young people. As I told you the Campus Ministries has been that tool that we've used in getting the young people to the United Methodist home. And were also attracting non-United Methodists and have enrolled in other ecumenical institutions, you know, have really helped us as well as young people greatly.

So, so far so good. We've got successes as young people because of faith. Although, it wavers at times. I mean it's a gradual thing to be along that journey.

MR: Right, and it's not just young people; sometimes even older people with their faith will waiver depending on some circumstances in life, or challenges that they face right?

SR: of course, of course. You know here, that the interesting part of it is that, you get people to get closer to their faith particularly when there is a kind of disaster in the country. I can remember people fasting nationally when we had the Ebola because the government dedicated days of fasting, in the country. So, people looked up to their faiths more than I think the government then and was due to situation where you have the church— the United Methodist Church— sending text messages of encouragement and hope to both United Methodists and non-United Methodists. So, it was really... it was of help, generally. So, I mean, the faith was sold in that kind of light and to date we're held in high esteem.

But as I told you, as the disaster and floods and things get better people begin to get a little off from the things of the faith but at the back of each and every person's mind there's the fact that there is a faith I hold onto and at least it connects me with my God.

So, the commitment, may not be immense as it should be but, even the casual way of doing it is there, and it's unquestionable, because it is that which really encourages you to continue to evangelize to people, because they are not completely opposed to the things of the faith. You

just get them, off the things of the faith based on their engagement but, I mean, with evangelism you get them back from time to time.

MR: Right, speaking of evangelism; how does evangelism work in the church in Sierra Leone especially for young people? Do people- you mentioned the revival services and are there other ways that evangelism happens?

SR: Yes, evangelism happens in various ways in Sierra Leone. There are groups in churches particularly with the young people we've got home cells, from time to time, but each and every organization has their own way of doing it. But in our church, we call it 'home cell'.

MR: Home cell? How does that work?

SR: Well, we just get each and every person in the organization to choose to a date that you prefer for us to go and visit you in your home to pray with you, to share the word of God and, maybe after that have fun, it happens like that. So, there is almost like a timetable for the home cell in every youth and young adult organization, in every local church. Wherein, you get to visit the homes, and most of the time you can use this means of home cell to raise funds as well for the organization. We get to your house, tell you the challenge of the church all the local fellowship and things you want to embark on, you pray, right, and get ideas to how you can raise funds for the church as well. It happens that way as well. So that is one way here we can – well, I mean, go about evangelism, one of the ways we go about evangelism.

MR: Alright. Yeah. Home cell, I think that's an interesting way of doing it to. Visiting people in their houses or by inviting them over and I think that a way to show them that the members of the church care for them.

SR: That is it. That is it.

MR: So, I want to go back to your role with the west Africa central conference youth and young adult organization. So, I know you were elected– I think it was 2016 or even before that. So, can you talk about your role there and what you do and some of the ministries that happen through that?

SR: Yeah well, I was elected in 2017, in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire), yeah. You know when we took over as an executive of the W.A.C.C. we had a kind of structure– a mandate that we were to go by, but again, we saw the need of adding up to that to which we met. So, it really had to do with first establishing a good communication because you know we only meet once after every four years. So, all of our—I mean the things of the W.A.C.C. are done online. But if we can just source the fund, we can visit the nearest country, but it has always been online meetings and online planning. So, we had us an agenda at W.A.C.C. level that we are all to channel our challenges to the executive and see how best we can raise funds in ministry, I mean, the things of the church because, you know, the church stands for so many things, you know, injustices and seeing that you know, we navigate a whole lot of — mishaps in society.

So, first that we agreed on was that we know in West Africa, particularly, we still fight war. Sierra Leone has been through that, Liberia has been through that. So, looking at that, we know the tendency of war comes up whenever there's elections. So, as W.A.C.C. we decided that, I mean, to help as a church we were to embark on rallying. Wherein, we get peace pact messages, we rally around the main... violence hot spots in the countries with peace message encouraging the young people to go to the polls and vote and get back to their places without causing any harm to each other. Because, we believe, most of the violence really happens because the young people are not properly oriented, so, orienting the young people in our various countries was one thing that we took up as an executive. And it's exciting implementing that.

We did that for Sierra Leone last elections; the regional missionary, Auntie Finda [Quiwa] through the women's initiative program, funded one of our proposals. So, we embarked on peace rally in the country, particularly in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Because Freetown is the most populated city in Sierra Leone and the tendency for violence is always rife; so we embarked on a peace rally right round the city, dishing out placards, handbills with messages of peace and how Christ loves them and how they should still vote. And that we are to belong to the various colors and the various affiliations but only that you are cementing peace after elections.

So, we engaged the media as well, and we went to radio stations with ads and messages as well. We had jingles playing country-wide and it was important, yeah, we did that and it was successful, because we went through the elections and there was nothing, even though we had some bits of violence but it was not as grave as it used to be. So, that was an important project that the W.A.C.C. embarked on and it went a long way. Truly went a long way.

We had the same plans for Nigeria, Nigeria happens to be a bigger country. We put plans in place, but we could not get the right funding. And Auntie Finda [Quiwa] as usual that she did for Sierra Leone, did her bit, she gave what she had but, I mean, the church in the annual conference in Nigeria could not work up to their part, so, we could not embark on theirs but we have got that as a policy. Whether Senesie is there as chairperson or not, it's now policy that whenever any of these countries are to have elections, we are to have peace rallies in order to help alleviate violence. That is, one success that was called so far in ministry.

MR: Yes, I'm also curious Senesie, you are a layperson correct?

SR: Yeah, I am.

MR: And how do you manage your commitments with the church do you have a work outside the church? Are you doing this as a full-time volunteer, so how are you able to do this on a sustainable basis?

SR: Well, I don't have a work outside specifically, there is nothing engaging me as a vocation as it is. I mean, it's just the fact is when you take up duty you have to be committed to it. I think at that basis and alongside really the act of working with the young people. I am a student currently, so I have been, I mean – multitasking you know like, being in school and doing the job here.

MR: That sounds good, I know there are a lot of young people from around the world, too, who do this on the side whether they're working or they're students or and sometimes they're also people like you who are almost full time in the work that they do for the church, but they're not paid staff. Which, I know that in countries – in developing or underdeveloped countries it's difficult for the church to pay staff. Is that your experience in Sierra Leone?

SR: It is very difficult. It's a troubling thing and that is the main reason why we almost lost the young people's business running in Senegal; which, I was going to make mention of Senegal. They had that as a serious case as well. And we were there before we went to Liberia you know the young people's business was almost crumbling in Senegal. They could not participate with us in correspondences and more so, we had to visit them, and we found out that it was because there was no existing youth and young adult directors as we have in Sierra Leone, like we have Cameroon, and Ivory Coast. So, we encouraged Bernard, who is, I mean, currently chipping in as the case may be because he cannot just leave his work to just handle the youth and young adult business full-time. So, we encouraged him to, from time to time, to see how best he can call the young people to attention and enough for them to be able to sustain the things of the young people.

Although what we did was, we, as well, mobilized support with the young women – I mean, the women's initiative regional missionary's desk with Auntie Finda [Quiwa] and we left a thousand dollars with them, which was not too much. But we really had to get something started. So we asked them that – funds are not forthcoming but the fact that to put out the things of the young people's business and the region was of immense importance so we told them that we are to put that money to some use, to embark on some entrepreneurship scheme in order for them to multiply that and get the young people's business running.

Because, I mean, as I told you, others may be grappling but theirs was tearing. Theirs was terrible. You have to really pay some attention to them and we had to get them back on their feet and they're cooperating and some even called me that they have applied for the regional – global youth fellow mission program (a program of GBGM) that is ongoing now so I mean it tells us that I mean that they are back on their feet. And they are now connected with things youth and young adult business global wise.

MR: My final question for you Senesie is: given all the challenges, all your experiences serving and working with young people in the UMC in Sierra Leone what are your hopes and dreams for the young people and the church in Sierra Leone?

SR: Well. We hope for the very best because, at the moment you know, there are threats of division and people are confused, people are hopeless and, I mean, we hope that whatever the outcome of whatever decision that is to be reached does not affect young people's business because so much work has been put into the work we've got now. So, we hope that decisions from wherever – from wherever or whatever person to not affect that which we have worked for over the years. That is one thing, and I hope and pray that we will work and network in a way wherein we don't allow our emotions as young people to overwhelm that which would get us or hold us together as a church. So, it is our prayer that we stick together without allowing our indifferences to affect the youth ministry. Both west Africa and Sierra Leone because it's important wherever – if it affects Sierra Leone, it affects all of West Africa. If it affects anywhere in West Africa, it affects wherever in the world it affects Sierra Leone. But it is our hope and prayer that we stay together because I mean – you started hearing of mandate changing institutions not functioning as they used to be and some funds that will not be forthcoming. I mean, if these happen it will stifle the zest of the young people or the zeal of the young people as the case may be.

MR: Right. Thank you for sharing your dream, Senesie. And I know that something big is coming for you as well in this coming General Conference of 2020 you are going to be one of those who will deliver the young people's address, right? So that's something to look forward to.

If people want to connect with you and learn more about the ministries that you do in Sierra Leone and in West Africa where is the best place for people to find you?

SR: Well I am in Sierra Leone.

MR: Okay. [laughs] How about online?

SR: [laughs] I am in Sierra Leone. You can find me in Sierra Leone always always.

MR: [laughs] But airfares would be expensive so how about online?

SR: Except that is it only online. Yeah, that is it I'm online– always online.

SR: Yeah, I think that would be the best place – that is the best place. If it is not in bodily presence then, it has to be online.

MR: So, is that going to be on Facebook? They just look for Senesie Timothy Rogers?

SR: Yes. Just Senesie Rogers.

MR: Again, thank you so much Senesie, it's been a pleasure hearing about your journey and the many, many ministries you are doing with the young people in Sierra Leone and in west Africa. So, blessings on your studies and your ministries.

SR: Thanks so much.