



Let My People Cry

Fred Otieno's healing mission among African refugees

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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→ FRED OTIENO leans back in his seat, long legs crossed, and watches the verbal tennis match between two of his pupils play out before him. His expression is calm and focused, his eyes alert but patient. A man and a woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo are arguing in Bemba, their indigenous language, about the linguistic difference between “knowing” and “understanding.” After the debate settles and the room grows quiet, Fred stands up, his slender 6’2” frame towering above the semicircle of students in bright plastic chairs.

On a white flip chart in front of his makeshift classroom, Fred draws a stick figure with arrows pointing to its head, heart, and feet, to show three different modes of listening. He asks the group in Swahili, “How many of you have given money to a beggar?” A few of them raise their hand. “Why?” Fred asks. One man stands up to state the



SOUND TEACHING. Clockwise from top left: Fred Otieno demonstrates the Messenger during a trauma healing seminar; a person works on an assignment; Jacqueline Adalbert Ngelelo learns to use the device; the listening exercise is a crucial part of Otieno's sessions.

obvious—when a beggar’s hand is outstretched, he is expecting money. But like any good teacher, Fred challenges him. “You are listening to the beggar with your mind, not your heart,” Fred says. “Do you really think money is what this beggar needs?” This is Fred’s first day of teaching a week-long trauma healing program for church leaders who live in one of the largest refugee camps in the world.

RIGHT TOOL, RIGHT TIME

A 35-year-old native of Tanzania, Fred witnessed a disturbing phenomenon while working as an independent ministry consultant. He’d spent years developing programs to help local churches grow, yet he continued to watch congregations dwindle, with members who stayed showing little sign of spiritual life. Marriages and families were being torn apart by rampant domestic abuse, and pastors were not addressing the underlying issues. Fred soon realized that these churches were dying because their members—both men and women—were in need of healing. But apart from one-on-one counseling, Fred did not know how to meet these deep emotional needs of the larger community, and the traditional church, he has found, isn’t set up in a way that gets at the heart of the issue.

At a conference in 2012, Fred was presented with a model for Scripture-based healing care and for the first time recognized the way to revive these dying churches. But [Continued on pg 68](#)



when he and several other leaders approached the table to sign up as facilitators, the directors explained that there was no funding for the program—each of them would have to raise financial support. “Many dropped out,” Fred said. “But I took it on.” After traveling and teaching on his own for three years, Fred now works on contract with the Bible Society of Tanzania to train local churches across the nation.

In every seminar, Fred purposefully invites both men and women, knowing it may be their first time being treated as equals. Strong faith and countercultural values were instilled in him early on by the grandmother who raised him. A devout Catholic even as a young girl, she would take a boat from her island and then walk miles to the nearest church. Many years later, after her husband passed away, she refused to wed again, and like her, Fred viewed marriage and celibacy as equally good options. As he neared 30, however, people began to wonder why he was still single. Whenever someone asked who would clean his dishes and cook his meals, he’d come back with, “Are you saying that I need a servant?” But soon Fred met Leisha, an American working with a nonprofit, and within five years they were married and raising three beautiful children.

In Tanzania, there’s a saying: “When you are in bed and want to fall asleep, put a Bible before your eyes.” Written text doesn’t hold people’s interest because, as Fred points out, “we don’t write so much and we don’t read much, but we talk a

“We don’t write so much and we don’t read much, but we talk a lot,” Fred said. That made his discovery of the In Touch Messenger something of a victory.

lot.” That made his discovery of the In Touch Messenger something of a victory. By providing the Bible in audio form, he’s seen engagement with Scripture radically increase among those he serves. He has even integrated the device into a special listening exercise where everyone in the group is instructed to pair off with someone he or she trusts. As partners face each other in silence, eyes closed, they listen to the Messenger and then discuss what they heard and how it affected them.

Because the Messenger is simple, durable, and solar-powered, it is ideal for contexts like the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, where electricity is scarce. Uploaded to the device is an audio version of the trauma curriculum Fred uses, which, together with God’s Word and Dr. Stanley’s sermons, makes the Messenger a transformational tool in his ministry there. “I don’t have a pastoral calling,” says Fred. “But this is a way of using the Bible to bring healing and revive the church.”

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

Afternoon sun streams in through the open windows, past a handful of curious children peering outside. Fred paces quietly while his students are hunched over their tables, writing—35 men and women in brightly printed tunics and head wraps, and sandals touched by red dust. Around them, the bare concrete walls of the church rise high beneath a metal roof supported by thin wooden branches. For one long hour, the room is silent but for the sound of pens on paper. Some students seem to form their words slowly and deliberately, while others write with a focused intensity. These refugee church leaders are writing a lament to God—an honest account of their grief and anger over traumas they have faced.

The Nyarugusu Refugee Camp is home to more than 150,000 refugees who were displaced by bloody wars in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And although *Continued on pg 70*



I'm listening.
—God

START A NEW CONVERSATION.

[INTOUCH.ORG/PRAY](https://intouch.org/pray)



Fred is often on the road, traveling between local churches hundreds of miles apart—lugging around his portable classroom and a box of Messengers.

they're provided food and water, they are left suffering from deep wounds no medicine can treat. Many have seen family and friends cut down by machetes or shot before their eyes. They are haunted by images of the homes they fled and loved ones they left behind. Even here, many continue to face incidents of violence or sexual assault—along with a daily struggle for sufficient resources. “These are very, very traumatized people,” Fred says.

But when Fred first came to the camp, he discovered that believers, even pastors, were showing up to Sunday's service concealing their pain behind a facade. Fred's vision is to equip and commission ministry leaders to facilitate healing groups in their own churches and villages—but before they can help others, they must first be cured themselves.

“Remember, you're taking your pain to the cross,” Fred tells the group, leaning forward for emphasis. “So the owner of the result is Christ Himself, not you.” His calm voice grows warm with a preacher's passion: “Don't be a wiper of tears. Let the tears

flow. Let the sorrow manifest. And once you have shed all your tears,” Fred says—his hand outstretched and eyes scanning each face—“there is Someone coming to wipe them [away] and make you start your life anew.”

At the end of the conference, Fred invites each participant by name to come forward and receive a certificate of completion—along with three Messengers to help facilitate their healing groups. Some are ready to lead groups of their own, while others are still learning to entrust their pain to the One who was Himself a man of sorrows.

After the last session, Fred asks if someone will lead a final song of worship. Three women rise from their seats, moving forward to the center of the room and, as if by an unspoken cue, open their arms wide and begin to clap in unison. Two men stand up to join them, and then the rest of the room follows suit, bodies swaying to the beat. Together, with voices rising in volume and intensity, these men and women from different nations sing and repeat a single chorus: “In unity

is power—so let's come together and build the church.”

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

For every hour of teaching, Fred spends two in the back of a bouncing jeep, at the mercy of its driver. Many of the roads in Tanzania are unpaved, making travel to rural villages a slow and strategic navigation between dust and ditch. Yet these are the fields in which Fred has been called to work. And just like the travel, the harvest takes time.

Healing happens over months or years, not days—but Fred is patient. As of today, he's hosted trauma healing seminars in five districts, from which more than 500 healing groups have already been formed. Fred plans to reach the other 169 districts, so whenever he's not spending quality time with his wife and kids at home, he can be found on the road, traveling between local churches hundreds of miles apart—lugging around his portable classroom and a box of Messengers.

“I don't see anything I can do apart from this,” Fred said, “as long as we're alive and as long as there is need.” Though he finds raising money a constant struggle, misses his family, and deals with an aching back after every long journey, Fred will be ready to climb into the car and head on to the next village, and the next after that. He's determined to keep going until his work is done. ☉



See more of the Lord's work in Tanzania at intouch.org/tanzania.

“Several years ago, I was driving down a mountain, weeping over the divorce papers my wife had just sent me, when I encountered some black ice on a hairpin curve with no guardrail. As I was sliding straight for the edge of the cliff, I shouted, “Jesus, Jesus, save me!” I hit a dry patch of pavement feet from the edge of the cliff and regained control. I thanked God and asked Him how I was to know what to do next in my life. I turned on the radio, and the first thing I heard was Dr. Stanley saying, “Today, we are going to talk about how to know what God wants us to do.” I couldn't believe it! It was exactly the message I needed to hear during that time of turmoil. This ministry has been a blessing to me every week since then, and now I listen to one of your podcasts every night as I go to sleep.”

—Mark Ornat