

Nice to Matcha | President of Seventy Designate | Sylvester Ochieng

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Sylvester Ochieng, Community of Christ, Council of Presidents of 70, ordination, Kenya Mission Center, World Service Corps, calling and ordination.

SPEAKERS

Sylvester Ochieng, Blake Smith

Blake Smith 00:29

Hello and welcome to Nice to Matcha, a Project Zion Podcast series where we meet new people, leaders, movers and shakers. I'm your host, Blake Smith, and today I'm here with Sylvester Ochieng, who has been called to serve in Community of Christ Council of Presidents of 70. If that call is sustained by the quorums of 70 at the 2025 World Conference, Sylvester will be set apart at a worship gathering of the joint quorums of 70 at that same Conference Sylvester, it is so good to have you with us today. Welcome.

Sylvester Ochieng 01:06

Thank you very much. Brother Blake,

Blake Smith 01:10

One of the things we like to do here at Project Zion Sylvester is to let our guests tell our listeners a little about them. I know we're going to be spending the whole of this episode getting to know you. But if you could just give us a little what are some some interesting things about you? Maybe some interest, or whatever, where you're from, so that everybody gets to know who you are.

Sylvester Ochieng 01:35

Um, hello, brothers and sisters, good morning and good evening, depending on your time zones. My name is Sylvester [...] Ochieng, married to one wife called Henrietta Lucy Kivunga Cherera. I love Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. Sylvester hails from a family of 11 siblings, that is seven boys and four girls. Unfortunately, two brothers and two sisters passed on. I am the last born in our family. I am half orphaned because my dad transitioned to glory on 24th August, 2008, a date which I'll never forget. This death, really I'll never forget, owing to the great bond of love which had existed between my father and I before his demise. I am a professional school teacher who taught for eight years. I love Scout movements and the camping experiences, thus getting a prestigious award and recognition to serve as the assistant area camp. This is a Presidential Award for industrious leaders in the scout movement. Sylvester also served as the wildlife patron during my, my, during his teaching career, I served as a national youth leader. I also served as a secretary at the National Council of our, of our church from 2009 to date, it is about a period of a decade and six years now serving as a Kenya Mission Center

secretary. I've also served as Kisumu, as a pastor of a congregation at Kisumu from the year 2006 through 2013 I also served as a World Service Corp ambassador in DRC Congo in the year 2012 where I went to do ministry there for two and a half months. I also served as Nairobi missionary coordinator from the year 20, 2014 to the year 2017. I also served as a missionary coordinator for the West, East and South Africa Mission Field from the year 2021 to 2024 the field where apostle Catherine leads. Right now, I'm, I'm the President of 70 designate for the West, East and South African Mission Field, I think, in a nutshell, that is, what Sylvester is.

Blake Smith 05:10

That, that's a pretty big nutshell Sylvester. You have done so much already. What? What a love for Jesus you obviously have, right?

Sylvester Ochieng 05:22

Yep.

Blake Smith 05:23

So, you mentioned some things about the offices that you've served in. Can you tell us a little bit about your growing up story? Where did you grow up? What was like like for you and your family, etc, etc?

Sylvester Ochieng 05:38

Yes, absolutely. I'm happy to share my story about where I grew up. I wish to begin by saying that my parents hail from Kisumu County, near the Lake Victoria basin. Due to proximity to the lake, the area is prone to floods or into the conventional rainfall around the lake region. And as such, this situation compelled my parents to move to a different county by the name Taita Taveta, which was a suitable place to do agriculture. It is in Taita Taveta County, where I was born and bred at a very tiny village called Njokini. I did my my primary and secondary school education in Taita Taveta County, although I did my teacher's training in a different county, I got posted by the government to work in Taita Taveta County. In summary, I spent most of my life in Taita Taveta County.

Blake Smith 06:54

Can you tell me a little bit about the education? You mentioned your primary and secondary education, and so for our listeners, especially in the US who are used to a particular system, how is your schooling set up in primary and secondary?

Sylvester Ochieng 07:19

In Kenya, we go by the British system of education whereby the primary the primary school, starts from a standard one. We used to use the standard ones, but currently they are using grade one, standard one to class eight, and then from class eight, you proceed to the secondary school or the high school, from form one to form four. And once you have done with the fourth form, now you can, you can graduate to either go to the college and proceed to the college, or maybe you go to the university.

Blake Smith 08:03

Okay, well, speaking of the school system, and you said you were a teacher for eight years, what grade did you teach, or what subjects did you teach?

Sylvester Ochieng 08:18

I used to teach languages, that is English, Swahili, and my favorite was Christian religious education. So during the time when I was teaching Christian religious education, my students used to pass a lot because of they used to like that subject, and my teaching methodology was good to them.

Blake Smith 08:46

That's great. So how many languages do you speak?

Sylvester Ochieng 08:55

Right now, I can say, I can say, I can competently speak four languages. That is my native language, which is the Lua, Swahili, which is a national language for all the Kenyans. Of course, I do speak English. And there is also another language which I speak, because I was brought up among the Canva people in Taita Taveta and particularly the people who live there, mostly are Canvas. And so I had an opportunity to learn the language so I can competently speak four languages.

Blake Smith 09:43

That's amazing. That's amazing. Well, how about, how about God? Where? What role did God play in your life in those early years while you were in primary and secondary school?

Sylvester Ochieng 09:58

As a young boy, Uh, brother, Blake, I was lucky to come from a staunch Christian family with a rich Christian background. I can strongly assert that the greatest investment which my parents put in me was having a crystal clear knowledge about God in my life as as good as good Christian mentors, they passionately instilled in me about the fear of God far above everything. In other words, they instilled in me how to revere God. They taught me the culture of prayer and giving thanks in everything. For example, they will remind me to pray before eating very early in the morning. They will always insist that you should, you should, you should pray before you begin, before you begin your day to day activities. At night, when I was just about to retire to bed, they will insist on, they will remind me of offering a prayer, if not maybe loudly, but they will just encourage me just to mumble a prayer. So, at a very tender age, they trained me on how to worship and fear God, and also they taught me the importance of worshiping God at the church. And every Sunday I will go to church to worship God. [That's...] I am today, what I am I am today, what I am because of the foundation which they laid in me.

Blake Smith 11:52

That's wonderful. And you telling the stories about your praying in the morning and at meals and at night, sounds very much like my upbringing as well. I was kind of laughing a little because I'm not sure that I learned to fear God through that. I feared my dad if I didn't pray. No, actually, my dad was very loving, but that was a very important part of our family life as well. So, I completely understand and relate to that. So, you say you have a you mentioned that you had a very strong Christian background. Have you been a member or part of the Community of Christ all of your life?

Sylvester Ochieng 12:41

Yes, I will say yes, yeah, because at a very tender age when I was still in standard two, [okay] I joined, I joined Community of Christ. I joined Community of Christ in the year 1987 and but in 1983 I was in grade two. That is a standard two by then. So I was still very young. But officially I joined Community of Christ in the year 1986 so at a very tender age, too.

Blake Smith 13:21

Wonderful. So, you, it's certainly been a significant part of your life as well.

Sylvester Ochieng 13:26

Yes, sir.

Blake Smith 13:29

Well, how about your journey in ordained ministry? You've talked about just the great number of things that you've done in the roles that you've held, some of the positions and the missionary coordinator and World Service Corps. When, when were you ordained? Tell us a little bit about your path in ordination.

Sylvester Ochieng 13:51

Okay, thank you very much, Blake, once again. I was first ordained to the office of elder in the year 2007, and in order to tell you about my pathway in my ordained ministry, I'll say the following, that I'm a person who has always shown dedication and passion to the service of men and God. Like I had, I served as a professional teacher as well as a national youth leader at our church for a number of years. I also served, and still serving as a Mission Center secretary from 2009 to date. If I were to boast, then I will boast about having, if I were to boast, then I will boast about having a vast experience in this field as a leader. But little did I know that God's call required something more than merely being a professional or a [...] in other fields. It all began by receiving the message from the then leader of our church, who is known as brother, Robert Wenga. He asked me if I could accept to serve as a pastor in our church, Community of Christ. It was difficult for me, for sure, to abandon my salaried and pensionable job from the government as it offered security for me. I thought that was a joke of the year, being told to leave a promising job and work as a congregation pastor without stipend. This one really, really shocked me. So, that's why I said that it was a joke of the year, as far as I was concerned by then. So personally, I did not tell him no when he requested me if I could serve as a pastor. I didn't tell him no straight away, but instead I told him to give me time in order to reflect upon that matter. That is when I began to pray and I discern about the so called the strange call. Yes, I viewed it as a strange call, as far as I was concerned. It took me about two years pondering about the call, and after consulting with God, I felt a deep compelling zeal to serve the Lord, and at that time, I gave it a nod and told Reverend Robert Wenga that I was now ready to join a theological seminary in the year 2004 like many difficult prophets, I initially expressed hesitation or doubt when called by God, I will cite feeling, citing feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy, as seen in the cases of Moses, Jonah and Jeremiah. So, to say I was not exceptional. I was like them. Immediately after finishing my fourth year degree at the seminary in the year 2000 and seven, I returned to Kisumu, where I began serving God as a pastor. I was later ordained to the office of elder in the year 2007. That very day when I graduated from the seminary. My sacred Yes, my sacred Yes, to serve in the office of an elder really shaped my perspective of viewing the things of God. I found the life in Christ so refreshing. I learned never to lose focus from God, even when passing through tempestuous situations. He taught me how to trust in God

for provision, and above all, it challenged me to redefine and embrace the spiritual concept of Zion, a place appointed by God where his followers can live and serve Him, a city of holiness and a city of refuge, where the Lord protects his people from the evils in the world, a place where God's justice, peace, reconciliation and healing of body, mind and spirit abound. Just to tell you about my call to to 70. I had served in the office of elder for seven, for seven years before I was called to the office of, before I was called to the office of 70. I made sure that I executed my roles as an elder with faithfulness, with the humility, diligence, with the highest diligence. In two, in 2012 of the Kenya Mission Center senior leaders saw competences, skills and the potential in me, and they enrolled me in the World Service Corp exchange program, where I was sent to do ministry in DRC Congo. I have already said that, and while in Congo, DRC, I continued serving God with a great passion and diligence. The gospel, I preached with my colleague, Pastor Zakaria, who has since left to to another church at the moment, brought a new dawn of spiritual revival in in those congregation in Congo, DRC. As a result of that, there was a increase in in membership, and also people gave their lives to Christ. It was in the year 2013 when I received the good news about God calling me to serve in the office of 70. This time, I was not shocked too much, even though I had many questions within myself, but I wasn't shocked much. Um, because the only, the only shock, which, which I had, was what, what the office of 70 entailed in terms of the role, that is what had shocked me. Yeah, but generally speaking, ministerially, I've gotten used to, I've gotten used to do ministry. I've gotten used to to preach. I've gotten used to to encourage people and invite people to Christ. But now, when I heard that I was being called to serve to the office of 70, oh, hey, that's the time now when I began to get shocked a bit, yeah, because I didn't know what that office entailed. So, after undergoing some 70 training, which was being facilitated by none other than the President of 70 by then, that is Brother Urban Mbenga from from DRC Congo. He traveled all the way from Kenshasa just to come to Kenya under offer some trainings for me. He trained, he trained me using the 70 resources so that I could know my role as as a 70. So after, after finishing the training, I felt much energized and encouraged to serve God in that capacity, because it really emphasized to me that 70s are the forerunners of Christ peace. And that one, he will you will repeat it over and over, yeah, because he wanted me to to know my role, that we are the forerunners of Christ peace, and that we are the special ministers of evangelism, ah, witnessing, invitation and church planting. This was a surely a familiar territory for me. Hence I embrace it with gladness. And so what ensued was my ordination in the year 20, 2014 Can I talk about my calling to the president of to be the president of the 70s?

Blake Smith 23:40

Yeah, and just Just one second, I just want to say, Sylvester, how much I appreciate the diligence with which you approach ministry in general, but also hearing you talk about the two year period of time when you were called to elder and to pastor, and taking that time to discern and be with God, that just shows an incredible depth of conviction. And I just, I just am touched by that. I really just so appreciate it, and I can sense that in the passion with which you're sharing. So, you know, thank you for that. [Thank you.] I think that lays the perfect groundwork for you to then talk about now your call to the president of 70 because obviously the passion is there. So go ahead.

Sylvester Ochieng 24:37

Oh. Thank you very much, Brother Blake, the call to to be the president of 70 for sure, in every assignment that I was given to do, I did it with the humility, passion and the diligence. And I've always

been. Uh, embracing the principles, the principle that has been driving me to doing ministry is the principle of passion, being passionate, the principle of being diligent in the service of God, and also the aspect of humility. These are some of the principles that actually guided me wherever and whenever I was assigned to do ministry before I was called to serve as the president of 70, allow me to tell you that I served as a field missionary coordinator in apostle Catherine's field, that is a west, south and east African mission field from the year 2021 to the year 2024 I used to coordinate the missionary activities at the field level and helping apostle Catherine realize the set global vision for the mission of God. The field missionary coordination came with a package of more responsibility, but nonetheless, God gave me the grace to fulfill those responsibilities. About the call to serve as the president of 70, I can kindly say that I never thought that I would one day become the president of 70s in Africa mission field as a whole, because there were people who had more vast experience in the ministry than I had. There were people who are who had a greater and better education than what I had. If the call was about oratory prowess, then there were people who are more eloquent than I am. But what has continued to shock me was why God selected or appointed me, out of the many in order to serve in this capacity. That was the question, the big question which was lingering in my mind. Out of this, out of this, elites, out of these people who had credentials, very big credentials, and people who are eloquent, people who are, you know, who are very, very smart in the areas of, in the areas of assignments, but yet God picked me out of them. So, this was a question, the major question, which I had to grapple with, yeah. So, that question was very, very crucial, crucial for me. So whenever I asked myself that question, I will always find myself shedding tears, even going on my knees, seeking God to give me wisdom. I will seek God to give me not only wisdom, but also direction and love and humility, to serve Him and His people without fear or favor.

Blake Smith 28:27

Obviously I have just met you today, Sylvester, but I am impressed with the presence of the Holy Spirit for your call, and deeply impressed by the humility with which you receive the call and walk with God. That is an inspirational and encouraging to me, and I know it will be also to our listeners. [Thank you.] So thank you for your Yes, and I don't know. I mean, I know some of the names that you've mentioned, I know they are some great ministers. Wow, that's surely big shoes to fill. But, you know, as people have told me throughout the years, God knows what our capacity is. And remember God called David from the midst of his very strong brothers, because that is who God wanted. So, I know that that you will be blessed, and that we will be blessed to have you in that role as well. I'm looking forward to being able to meet you in person at Conference and when we gather as the quorums of 70. I want to ask you a little bit about the future. As you move into this role, what are your hopes for Community of Christ as we move into the future?

Sylvester Ochieng 29:59

I'll be, Begin by saying that despite the social, economic, political, scientific and religious systems that have attempted to halt and see for God's vision, as a president of 70, I am very, very optimistic that the future is full of hope. I strongly believe that God is really calling us to go into the whole world and make disciples of Jesus Christ. This is an inevitable task which has been squarely put on our shoulder as especial ministers of evangelism, witnessing, invitation and church planting. It is a task, it is a task to be

the forerunners of Christ peace in, in the world which has been mad with chaos and turbulence. It is calling us to rethink our relationship with God people and our surrounding. It is a call for living in harmony with all the creatures in the world. Blake, I strongly believe that God is sending us to go beyond the imaginable frontiers and the limit to preach the emancipating gospel in line with the salvific and the redemptive agenda of God. The continent of Africa has 55 countries, and out of the 55 countries, our church finds presence in only 13 countries. I pray that as we move forward, God will give us wisdom, direction and the requisite resources in order to reach out to more nations with the gospel and planned new congregation in my prioritize and potential areas like Tanzania, which is just neighboring Kenya, like Uganda, along the frontiers of Malawi and Mozambique and along the frontiers of Zambia and the DRC Congo. These are the areas of my priority which have, I've prepared, that as I pray that God will open the avenues for the resources, then we'll be able to go there and outreach those people and even plant our churches there. We want our presence also to be felt in Tanzania, our presence as community members of Community of Christ, to be felt in Uganda, along the borders of Mozambique and Malawi, and also along the borders of DRC Congo and and Zambia. With the sacred and encouraging words of the mission prayer, I surely believe that God's Spirit will always lead and help us to be fully awake and be ready to respond. It is my honest prayer that God will give us the courage to risk something new, become a blessing of his love to all and sundry, irrespective of the race, tribe, country, social status and even religion, these words of prayer, of mission have also been echoed in our enduring principle of worth of all persons. Risking something new will require us to ask God to grant us the the direction, wisdom, strength, confidence and courage to do the mission of God, we shall be required to absolutely trust in the Lord for success of God's mission, risking something new will catapult us to unusual territories. It will call us to move out of our comfort zones. The best example is when we will be assigned to do mission in a totally different context, where things are done differently, yet we have that obligation to fulfill the mission of God. I look forward. I look forward to a brilliant future which is full of hope and enabling environment to respond positively to the Great Commission as written in the Gospel According to Matthew chapter 28 from verse 20 from verse 18-20 which I read from the NRSV by Bible version, "and Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make the disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age." This is a call to do the Great Commission. And this is what what I am up to do. I am prepared to do as a president of 70.

Blake Smith 35:56

Preach brother! I, Well, it sounds like you have got an incredible plan, a whole lot of work ahead. But if everybody that you reach out to as is as inspired as I am by hearing you speak today, then that work will be a great work. So thank you. That's that's very exciting. I, as I said before, I'm really looking forward to getting to be with you in person and meet you in person at conference, and I just acknowledge the presence of the Spirit in your in your spirit. And so is there anything else that you want to mention or talk about that I haven't asked?

Speaker 1 36:45

I wanted to bring to your attention about my family background. What was my what was a life like for my family and my community. [yeah] I think it's very, very important also to talk about my experience as I was being brought up in my family, what I went through, and, you know, the challenges and the you

know, the challenges and the successes that I got. I would say that, since my parents were peasant farmers, they were preoccupied with small scale farming activities at the rural setting. In other words, I do come from a typical rural setup. I was not brought up in a in the town or urban, urban center. I was brought up in the typical rural setup in a remote, very remote area. It was difficult to raise enough food to sustain our our large family. It was hard. It was very hard, to meet the overwhelming needs of the family because, because they were poor, we lived a life of a hand to mouth and to cater for the family needs both my parents would go to look for casual labor, and when they got the wage, that was what will be divided into portions in order to buy food, clothes and to pay my school fees. The worst and the harrowing situation will come when they, when they didn't get their daily wage. We will sleep hungry, and that is the blatant truth. We will sleep angry. Lack of food and other basic human needs will compel us to wear the cloth of shame and embarrassment by begging our neighbors to support us with the much required human needs. Just in a nutshell, that is a kind of the family that I came from. It is sad that I came from a very poor family, but one thing that I want to tell you brother Blake, is that God knew the reason as to why I passed through those challenges in my life, I thank you.

Blake Smith 39:46

Thank you so much Sylvester for sharing that story with us. I think that's important for everybody to hear and to understand. Can you tell me again how many were in your family?

Sylvester Ochieng 39:58

We were 11. Four died, two boys died and two girls died in our family. So we are remaining seven, seven boys. No, we are remaining five boys and two girls that are remaining in our family. So my dad passed on in the year 2008 so I'm half orphaned. My mom is still alive. She's she's around 90 something years. [Wow] I'm the last born. Yes, I'm the last born in in my family.

Blake Smith 40:41

You are the baby.

Sylvester Ochieng 40:43

I'm the baby. I'm the baby.

Blake Smith 40:46

Are you a spoiled baby?

Sylvester Ochieng 40:48

No, no, no, no, no, I'm not a spoiled baby. Yeah? With that, with that rich Christian background, I could not afford to to get spoiled.

Blake Smith 41:00

Right, No, absolutely not. Did, if you don't mind me asking, your siblings that passed, was that because of disease or as circumstances from from your living conditions? Yeah,

Speaker 1 41:15

Yeah, some actually were, were circumstances from our living condition? Because, if most of them were were sick and you know, they could not get better medical care, better health care, so some of them just passed on, because of incapacit incapacitated, because we were incapacitated, to raise money to pay for medical fees.

Blake Smith 41:51

Well Sylvester, thank you so much for making the time to be with us. I know it's late where you are, but [thank you] so much appreciated here at Project Zion Podcast, and thank you for sharing your personal story with us here.

Sylvester Ochieng 42:07

I'm very much humbled, my friend.

Blake Smith 42:12

Well, I want to give a special thanks to all our listeners for being with us today in this Nice to Matcha episode on Project Zion. If you'd like to meet other leaders who are taking on new leadership roles at Community of Christ 2025 World Conference, check out our Nice to Matcha series at Project Zion podcast.org you can find the link in the show notes for this episode. s always, a very special thanks to all of you Our listeners for joining us here at Project Zion. This is your host, Blake Smith, and you're listening to Project Zion Podcast. Have a blessed day.