

... to encourage and enable Christian theological leaders from the Majority World for the Global Church.



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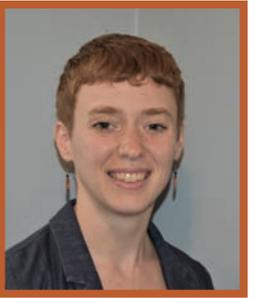
## “YOU ARE HUMAN WHEN YOU SERVE OTHERS”: A PROFILE OF DR. EMIOLA NIHINLOLA

Evelyn Reynolds



Dear Friends of SCHOLARLEADERS,

I'm delighted to introduce you to Emiola Nihinlola, who received the 2018 *ScholarLeader of the Year Award*. Emiola's decisiveness, intellectually grounded faith, and heart for strategic, long-term service have positioned him as a key leader in the Nigerian Church. He directs the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS), located in southwestern Nigeria.



SCHOLARLEADERS first met Emiola through the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative*, a program that helps the leaders of Majority World seminaries to clarify their mission and to develop plans for enduring growth tailored to their unique contexts.

Though most Westerners hear about Nigeria because of Islamist attacks on Christians in the north, such attacks are not as great a concern for Emiola and NBTS in the southwest. Rather, corruption is the chief problem that Emiola seeks to address. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and largest economy – but exploitation of power for private gain, bribery, tribalism, and materialism overshadow the country.

In this environment, Emiola emphasizes attentive leadership, intellectual development, and self-sacrificial service as ways to heal society. As you read, you might consider alongside Emiola:

- How does corruption manifest in our societies, and how might the Church respond to it?
- How might we as members of the Church continue to develop humility and courage in devotion to God?

With excitement for our work together,

Evelyn Reynolds, PhD  
Communications

## “YOU ARE HUMAN WHEN YOU SERVE OTHERS”: A PROFILE OF DR. EMIOLA NIHINLOLA



Photo credit: Scholarleaders

Dr. Emiola Nihinlola gives his inaugural lecture at NBTS.

### DECISIVE LEADERSHIP

In 2016, Emiola Nihinlola gathered the staff of Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS) in Ogbomosho, Nigeria. They had just finished months of planning alongside the *SCHOLARLEADERS Vital SustainAbility* team to create a strategy for strengthening NBTS. Just one facet of that strategy – a solar energy project – would take over two years to complete.

Emiola began, “Here’s what we’re going to do.” As he spoke, he pointed around the room to each of his colleagues. “And here are our deadlines,” he finished. He outlined the plan person-by-person and date-by-date, accounting for each person’s gifts and the realities of their situations.



Photo credits: Emiola Nihinlola

Emiola and his wife with some of the teen rally participants.

### COMMUNITY VERSUS CORRUPTION

Such attentive, decisive leadership is unusual anywhere, perhaps especially in Nigeria. The Nigerian Church and its leaders face an unpredictable political climate and limited resources. In this context, Emiola considers corruption – which he defines as cultural decay and intellectual and spiritual laziness, as well as bribery, greed, and graft – to be a particular danger, especially for leaders.

Why? In traditional African culture, Emiola says, “You are part of a community.... You were not considered to be a good person because you were wealthy.” Now, thanks to a toxic interplay between global materialism and African poverty, “It’s a very big challenge for us to find meaning in God before material possessions. We see the West, and we say, ‘Wow, why can’t we be like this?’” However, “We don’t care about how that wealth is acquired.”

This desire for wealth without a Christian work ethic contributes to corruption as people compete for power and wealth. It also leads to flashy pastors

proclaiming “Name it, claim it” gospels – not the Gospel of Christ – to huge audiences.

Because of this situation, Emiola says, “No one is talking about discipline, obedience, holiness.” Without a theological framework that sees material possessions as God’s gifts to be stewarded, Emiola warns, “The Church is carried away.”

### A LEGACY OF INTELLECTUALLY GROUNDED FAITH

Indeed, Emiola’s own school, NBTS, could be ripe for such missional drift – and even corruption – because of its age and size. Established in 1898, it has 60 faculty and a student body of 1,200, comparable to the largest American seminaries. NBTS’s original American Southern Baptist leaders left a generation ago.

Yet Emiola serves in a long line of faithful, independent Nigerian Baptist school presidents. Thanks to these executives, NBTS remains centered on the Gospel. (To learn more, see Emiola’s article in the June 2017 *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education*.)

Emiola’s personal story demonstrates how intellectually grounded faith can sustain integrity despite corruption. He was raised in a Christian home, and his parents played different roles in his spiritual growth. Emiola’s father learned English as a child by reading the Bible. In high school, Emiola was fascinated by science textbooks – “But my father would say, ‘Emiola, read the Bible. It is the Word of God’.” From his father, Emiola learned to root all of his thinking in the Bible.

Emiola’s mother, he says, “was a very courageous woman, but she was shy.” His leadership style imitates his mother’s “paradox of humility or shyness along with courage and dedication to God.” In addition to his parents, he calls a handful of missionaries his “American mothers.” He jokes, “When God created American missionaries, he sent the best to Nigeria!”

Emiola came to Christ in Ogbomosho’s Baptist church in 1969. He laughs, “That was at the very, very ripe age of 11.” After college, he taught high school biochemistry and math for three years before enrolling in NBTS’s Bachelor of Theology program. He later earned a Master’s and a PhD.

During his PhD studies, Emiola concluded that “to be human is to be relational.” He believes that this is particularly true in Africa, where “We need to be spiritual in terms of obedience to God, and we also need to be human in terms of serving people.”

### SERVICE FOR THE FUTURE

Now, Emiola holds executive positions in Nigeria’s Baptist Convention – the nation’s largest denomination – and in African accrediting agencies, as well as at NBTS. These roles give him a bird’s-eye view of the consequences of corruption, which corrodes society by making relationships purely transactional.

As a seminary head charged with training future Church leaders, Emiola has an especially strategic opportunity to transform Nigeria long-term. Nigeria has the world’s third largest youth population (after India and China). NBTS faculty tell their many young students, “Look at the Word of God, look at the life of Christ, look at the history of Christianity, be committed to the heritage of Christian life.”

Yet this encouragement stands against what culture – and even churches – tell young people. Emiola crystallizes their dilemma: “Should they be committed to us, who are seen to be poor? Or should they go with those flamboyant preachers who appear to be more successful?” He sees seminary education as critical for “such a time as this.” Through NBTS, young people learn to build communities where serving others trumps wealth.

Emiola believes so passionately in the synergy of theology and relationships that he used his 2018 *ScholarLeader of the Year Award* to organize a teen rally inspired by Psalm 68:11: “The Lord gave the word – great was the company of those who proclaimed it.” The rally brought 230 people to NBTS. 111 teens committed to read the Bible cover-to-cover – continuing Emiola’s father’s legacy in a new generation. Emiola hopes that, as they read the Bible, these teens will grow to serve others with true Gospel love.

In September 2019, Emiola continues his *ScholarLeader of the Year* work by traveling to Asian Theological Seminary in the Philippines. He will lead conversations about contextual theology and faculty/staff mentoring.

As he reflects on his career, Emiola exclaims, “What a good God that I serve! What a loving God that I serve!” He challenges himself – and the global Church – to respond to that love with love: “You are human when you serve people. You are human when you touch others. You are human when you bless lives.”

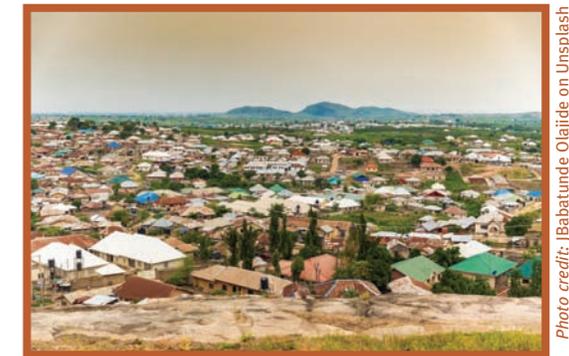


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Nigeria is Africa’s most populous country.