

III. Embracing Tradition

GIFT IYOKU AND OLUWAKEMISOLA ADEUSI Interview

WELCOMED: You both have worked together in higher education and institution-building for a long time. Tell us about your respective backgrounds and how you came to Stanford.

Gift Iyioku: My name is Gift Iyioku. I am from Nigeria, and I am a PhD student in German Studies at Stanford. Kemi and I have been friends for about a decade, and we came to Stanford on a very similar path.

Oluwakemisola “Kemi” Adeusi: I’m Oluwakemisola Adeusi, also from Nigeria, also in German Studies at Stanford. Gift and I met as undergraduates at the University of Ibadan, and we’ve stayed in each other’s lives ever since, pursuing our master’s at the University of Alabama and then our PhDs at Stanford. I grew up in an apostolic Christian tradition. My father was a pastor, so the church shaped the structure of our home and our daily life. There was a great deal of prayer, from daily morning devotions to weekly and monthly prayer vigils. It was also an intensely non-private way of life, since our lives were intertwined with those of our church community. We grew up constantly surrounded by people, and at times our three-bedroom house sheltered as many as fifteen people. Looking back now, I honestly don’t know how we managed it. As the pastor’s children, we were the flagbearers of modest living and compassion, since any flaws in us would reflect poorly on our parents’ ministries. For example, we were not allowed to wear pants, makeup, or revealing clothes. We had to be present and punctual at all church meetings and participate in various church departments. I was active in at least four departments in the church.

Gift Iyioku: I grew up in a conservative Christian denomination. In Nigeria, Christianity is very denominational, and those categories matter socially. Part of the reason is historical. From the nineteenth century onward, different missionary societies established churches in different regions, each bringing distinct structures and practices, and those early patterns still shape what people inherit today. Over time, indigenous churches also formed as Nigerians adapted Christianity to local cultural contexts, and later Pentecostal and charismatic movements expanded rapidly, adding another layer of diversity. On the ground, denominational identity can map onto region, ethnicity, and social networks. In some places there is a dominant tradition that feels like the default, while in others there is visible competition among churches for followers and influence. That competition can involve members and resources, and it can create rivalries or distance between groups. You can also feel it in worship itself. Some communities prefer traditional liturgical structure, while others embrace charismatic or Pentecostal expression, and people sometimes judge one another’s style as more or less authentic.

My background would be described as evangelical, specifically conservative evangelical. It was strict in practice. There were rules, and the rules shaped community life. It provided discipline, but it also meant there was little flexibility. For example, we had to go to church three days a week and participate in other programs held in the church, which created strong community but also left us feeling isolated from people outside the denomination. Kemi's background is more traditional and apostolic. Mine was conservative evangelical, with a very rigid structure. There was a central authority, and there were clear boundaries for what was acceptable, including everyday things like dress and self-expression. People often knew immediately what kind of Christian you were, and those boundaries could be visible and sometimes defended. Even Sunday services were conducted very differently depending on your denomination.

Kemi Adeusi: Even when the labels differ, both of our environments were serious about practice. Faith was both a belief system and a set of habits and expectations.

Gift Iyioku: While navigating the rules proved challenging, I loved my community, and the best part was its density and diversity. Faith was embedded in my week. There were gatherings, fellowship, and people checking on me. I was surrounded by a shared language and shared routine.

Kemi Adeusi: For me, it was also the steadiness, the rhythm. Even when life was uncertain, there was structure. You knew where you belonged, and your people were always there for you. Growing up in a pastor's home, you learn early that faith is accountable and jointly lived. It's not casual. It's a serious standard you're expected to live out.

WELCOMED: What happened when you went to college?

Gift Iyioku: We met in our first year at the University of Ibadan. Since the university was so impacted, neither of us could join the political science, law, or communications tracks we had sought. So German Studies offered us a new context for policy, culture, and language. We both chose it without knowing each other and met while learning German. Our professor suggested we work in groups. Kemi and I became partners, then roommates, then best friends, and we kept working together.

College disrupted the dominant role of faith. When you grow up surrounded by it, practice can feel built in. In university, you have to choose it. It was also where I began distancing myself from the rigidity I grew up with. I had already started questioning things, and I became hesitant to join another denomination because denominational boundaries were so strong. For a period, I went less and less. I wanted faith to be less about boundaries and more about lived relationships and character. I later attended a church near campus, but since it felt similar to my home church, I stopped attending and stopped looking for new churches altogether, instead seeking to grow personally in my faith. That one-year gap was the longest I ever stayed out of church, and it was

rewarding, since I replaced it with personal Bible study and sometimes shared with friends both on and off the Stanford campus.

Kemi Adeusi: We didn't grow up in the same church, but we immediately shared values about seriousness, discipline, and community. That mattered as we navigated school and life. I was really glad to meet Gift, along with all the new people and experiences. As I encountered different approaches to life, faith, and everyday values, I was glad to have a friend who confirmed some of my own impressions of college life. For both of us, we began to see things differently, understand competing interpretations, and distinguish what is essential from what is inherited habit. We both found that we could no longer rely on the structure of childhood faith to carry us automatically. For me, it became the desire to own faith as an adult. I wanted a Christianity that could withstand questions and a new community. I did not stop attending church, and I joined another branch of my church in my university town, where I already knew many people from national church conferences and conventions. However, being away from family eased the moral weight I had long carried. With that distance, I began to redefine my own moral boundaries and sense of responsibility. I also found myself with more time: fewer weekly church meetings meant more time for study, reflection, and deeper engagement with a wider range of Christian perspectives. Gift and I, as roommates, would pray and study together. It was important to us to reflect our faith through excellent academic work and good behavior.

Our religious backgrounds played a strong role in our sense of discipline, work ethic, and desire to build institutions, not necessarily religious ones, but communities of learning. We noticed that people outside the university kept asking us to teach them German, so we started helping beginners. Over time, it grew through referrals, and we started an informal school together with a curriculum, milestones, and goals for our students.

Gift Iyoku: Eventually, we decided our school should become more structured, beyond informal tutoring. We registered it with the local government, secured a physical space, hired more teachers, paid them, and ran it like a real organization. Church life teaches you how communities hold together: routine, responsibility, consistency, and people showing up for each other. Even if your beliefs evolve, those habits train you to organize people and sustain something over time.

Kemi Adeusi: And it trained us in interpretation and seriousness: taking texts seriously, thinking about meaning, and building shared practices. That connects naturally to education and institution-building, because institutions are made of shared commitments carried out consistently. We ran it until we came to the U.S. for our master's, at which point others took over and built their own institution.

WELCOMED: What religious community have you found at Stanford and in the Bay Area?

Gift Iyioku: It took time. At first, American churches here felt very different and even more diverse than we remembered growing up, where differences were largely socioeconomic, with different African communities. Churches here offer a global diversity of ethnicities and backgrounds. The style and the social cues were different. But I eventually found a community that felt sincere and grounding. Now I go to church on Sundays, often with people connected to Stanford, and consistency matters.

Kemi Adeusi: We looked for a church that was welcoming but also substantive, a place that could hold difference without becoming defensive. Stanford is diverse, and we wanted a faith life that could exist inside that diversity and bring us into contact with many new people. I had been attending a Nigerian church in San Jose, but I know church to be one of the primary settings for integrating into the American community and challenging my long-held beliefs. So I left and joined Gift in her church, which I find very multicultural and multigenerational.

WELCOMED: What advice would you give to other Christian Africans coming to Stanford?

Gift Iyioku: Give yourself time. Don't worry if it doesn't feel like home immediately. You will meet sincere believers who practice differently. Find a community that makes you more humble, more patient, and more honest. Faith is a way of seeing and building community. At Stanford, I have focused on the parts of faith—belief in G-d and values that are life-giving, including consistency, service, and accountability—without worrying about practicing faith perfectly. And I have learned that community is not something you stumble into by accident. You build it week by week by choosing people and practices that are meaningful to yourself and others.

Kemi Adeusi: Yes, you may hold onto your practice, but let it mature. Your faith should not keep you avoidant or isolated, and engagement with others is the best way to test the values of your faith. Stanford will challenge you and the habits that form you, and communities will give you structure and seriousness. Stanford taught me that faith must also be chosen, interpreted, and lived in my adult life. I hope anyone of faith feels permission to bring their values and perspectives to campus while respecting the values of others. I see people at all different stages of faith. Some are new to it, and others are redefining it. For anyone who wants to build faith here, keep praying, learning, questioning, and building. Belonging requires finding communities where your presence helps others belong too.