

Football player tackles expanding his communion business

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(RNS) Defensive lineman Israel Idonije was recently released from the Chicago Bears and, as a free agent, he isn't sure what the future holds. But when he's not on the gridiron, the Nigerian-born Idonije has another page in his playbook.

Idonije has a side business, Blessed Communion, that sells pre-filled communion cups to churches.

"It's not about how many people I tackle each day. It's not about how many hundreds of millions of cups we sell at the end of the day. It's about the platform," Idonije said. "With that platform, ultimately, what are we doing to make our world better? What are we doing to impact the communities that we live in?"

Blessed Communion sells individually sealed, pre-filled communion cups and wafers. Each cup is recyclable and contains 100 percent grape juice and an unleavened wafer. The product has a shelf life of 12 months and can be used in churches, prisons, mission trips, or visits to homebound seniors.

Idonije, 33, said the business was "on its last legs" when he purchased it in 2009. "I had, you know, my advisers, people, you know, telling me I shouldn't get involved," he said.

When he bought the company, the product didn't taste good and the cups leaked. But he said he had a feeling that revamping the company was the right thing to do.

Joey McBride is the buyer for church supplies and Bible studies at Family Christian Stores. He keeps Blessed Communion in stock, along with similar products from other companies, for customers looking for an easy and sanitary way to take communion.

“A lot of the people we serve are in smaller communities, and smaller churches who perhaps don’t have a formal way of baking their own bread or getting wine or have the communion products themselves to serve events,” McBride said. “So they want something that’s easy, something that’s usable, disposable, and easy to clean up.”

Idonije says there’s a bigger issue when taking communion: germs. “There’s such a large margin of error for contamination,” he said.

If anyone sneezes or coughs near the communion elements, from preparation to being passed out, the wine and bread could spread illnesses.

Human hands, however, don’t touch Blessed Communion’s product until the consumer opens it like a small medicine cup with a pull-tab, almost eliminating the risk of contamination.

That’s why McBride said he’s seen an increase in demand for pre-filled communion cups from customers.

Now McBride said Family Christian “sells enough (pre-sealed cups) to touch 5 million lives each year.” At Family Christian, a 100-count package of Blessed Communion cups with wafers sells for about \$36; a 500-cup box sells for \$110.

Blessed Communion offers multiple options, including pre-filled cups with or without wafers, and an option for white grape juice.

With the increase in business, Blessed Communion is looking to expand its products with a pre-filled wine option. Idonije said Blessed Communion is testing different wine options, both for taste and practicality.

McBride said Family Christian Stores won’t sell Blessed Communion’s wine option right away but will look for feedback from customers before deciding.

Idonije said football, grape juice, and wine are not what matter most.

“I believe that everyone that I engage with should realize or feel or understand, you know, that there’s something about Israel, there’s something different about him,” he said. “And that something is because of my relationship with God, my relationship with Christ.”