

# Port Harcourt Conference

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ANYALEBECHI NUNUKWE, DAVE NYEKWERE, AND VICTOR NWEKE

Anyalebechi Nunukwe

Dave Nyekwere

Victor Nweke

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Port Harcourt Conference is an administrative unit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rivers state, Nigeria. Formerly Rivers Conference, it was reorganized and renamed in 2015. Port Harcourt Conference is part of Eastern Nigeria Union Conference in the West-Central Africa Division. It consists of the following local government areas of Rivers state: Akuku Toru, Asari Toru, Degema, Emuoha, Etche, Ikwerre, Obia-Akpor, Ogu-Bolo, Okirika, Omuma, and Port Harcourt. Its headquarters is in Port Harcourt, Rivers state, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

Statistics (June 30, 2018): churches, 85; membership, 20,577; population, 2,806,885<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Background

After Pastor David C. Babcock established the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ennumu, Western Nigeria (Yoruba land) in 1914 and in the Niger Delta area in 1916, he traveled from Port Harcourt to Bonny and Kalabari in an attempt to plant a church in those areas, but he was not successful. Before he left Nigeria for England in 1917, he distributed books containing Adventist doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Loving Good, a native of Otari in Abua, was the first to receive the Adventist message when he was in Gold Coast (now Ghana). This was through a contact with Jesse Clifford. In 1920 Loving Good returned to his home town Otari with the message. Through Loving Good the message spread in the Abua clan and in other neighboring villages. In 1921 the first baptism took place at the first camp meeting held in Otari, Abua.<sup>4</sup>

The commencement of Bible classes by Pastor Jesse Clifford and his family at Aba in 1923, and the coming of Pastor L. Edmonds in 1926 to evangelize the core Niger Delta area, resulted in the establishment of early Adventist sister churches in the Rivers province.<sup>5</sup>

Jesse Clifford who was the worker in the Eastern region of Nigeria, arrived from Port Harcourt to Abua in 1923 in search of Loving Good. When he found him, they worked together to open a church in the house of Chief Amiofori in Otari, Abua. From Abua, Clifford traveled to Aba to establish the work. Later in the same year he went to Elele where a church was planted.<sup>6</sup>

In 1924 Frank Dike, who had accepted the faith, went to his home town of Omoku, Ogba, and opened a church. From Omoku, Jesse Clifford spread the message to Obite where it was more warmly accepted than it was at Omoku. Obite then became the headquarters of the churches in Ogba. Because Frank Dike was a polygamist, he was not in good standing with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This led to the establishment of his own church called Seventh-day Native Church of Christ (SDNC). By 1935 all the Seventh-day Native Church of Christ members in Obagi, Ogba, joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church and it started to grow in the Ogba area.<sup>7</sup>

The result of the teamwork of Jesse Clifford and L. Edmund in 1927 was the spread of the message in Odiabidi and other areas in Ekpeye land. Prominent among the converts was Chief Victor Obuzor who remained faithful until his death in 1985. In 1928 through the efforts of the two missionaries, Jesse Clifford and L. Edmund, and with the assistance of native converts, the work opened in Ogoni areas. First the Mba people in Etche received the message. In 1929 it went to Nchia, Eleme, though firmly established through Benjamin Okereke, a tinker in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

Churches were established in "Abua, Degema, Ekpeye, Ogba, Ikwerre land," Etche, Eleme, Ogoniland, and other areas of Rivers province. Most of the churches were established through the outreach visits of Pastor Clifford and others.<sup>9</sup> One such visit was that of Pastor Clifford and his entourage to Chief Okpori Mgbeke Odum in May 1929 at Umuka Mba.<sup>10</sup> The visit led to the establishment of the Umuka Mba church (later transferred to Umukomoche Mba), the first church in Etche, which itself planted sister churches in Obite.<sup>11</sup>

By this time there were two mission fields operating in the Eastern region—one at Elele and the other at Aba. The building at Elele was built in 1930 and it is still in use. In 1932 the gospel was taken to Port Harcourt. The people of Degema received it in 1934 through Tom Sokoro, who was converted in 1923 at Abua. About this time a leader in the Apostolic Church in Bodo had a vision in which he was shown that some people, the Adventists, worship on Saturday. He sent for Pastor Clifford who met him and had Bible studies with him. Thereafter, the Apostolic Church members became Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>12</sup>

The first camp meeting was held in Etche in 1939. The second baptism was conducted in Degema in 1940, and one of the first converts to be baptized was Willie Limejuice. He became the second man from the Rivers area to be ordained to the gospel ministry. When the Rivers Mission was organized in 1971, he became the first indigenous president. B. Tikili, who was the first to be ordained from the Rivers area, later left the Seventh-day Adventist Church and established another church known as the Seventh-day Church of God (S.D.C.G.). This was in 1938 after the spiritual movement.<sup>13</sup>

In 1952 the people of Emago, Kugbo, received the gospel message. A clinic was built there in the 1960s and operated by Dr. Cyril G. Hartman. The medical work was interrupted by the civil war (1967-1970) and has since not been reactivated. That was the second time the Riverine area received the message, the third being in Andoni in 1954.<sup>14</sup>

## Birth of Rivers Mission

The sister churches in Rivers province developed and gave birth to other sister churches, thus increasing the number of churches in the area. Additional churches were also established through direct evangelism outreach programs of the East Nigeria Mission with the headquarters at Aba.<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, there was a need to create another mission out of the East Nigeria Mission, hence the birth of Rivers Mission in 1970. Pastor K. F. Mueller was the coordinator. In 1971 the Rivers Mission, with 132 churches and companies, was formally organized under the leadership of Pastor W. Limejuice and Robinson W. Nwuzor, now Pastor Robinson W. Nwuzor, as president and secretary/treasurer respectively. It was organized under the name Rivers/South East Mission because the churches in the South Eastern state of Nigeria were merged with those in Rivers state. The headquarters was in Port Harcourt. The mission began at No. 10 Nzerimo Road and later moved to No. 17 Hospital Road, Port Harcourt. In 1974 the Rivers Mission headquarters was transferred to its present site at No. 466/468 Ikwerre Road, Rumuokwuta, Port Harcourt.<sup>16</sup>

As the years passed by, the workers in the South East felt the need to be detached from Rivers and join the East Nigeria Mission with headquarters at Aba. This was granted them in 1973, thereby changing the name from Rivers/South East Mission to Rivers Mission.<sup>17</sup>

## Conference Status

The steady growth and expansion of the mission in membership, manpower, finance, and infrastructure, resulted in the attainment of conference status in 1993, two years earlier than the time projected. Eighteen years after attaining conference status, between 2012 and 2013, Rivers Conference reorganized into four administrative entities, namely: Rivers Conference, Rivers West Conference, Rivers East Conference, and Bayelsa Mission. The mother conference, Rivers Conference, was renamed Port Harcourt Conference on January 1, 2015.<sup>18</sup>

## Leadership

Presidents: W. Limejuice (1971-1977); S. Thordarson (1978-1981); A. E. Friss (October-December 1982); J. E. Obot (1983-1987); S. J. Okochi (1988-1996); R. E. Eti (1996-2001); R. W. Nwuzor (2002-2004); M. O. Okai (2005-2010); D. M. Nyekwere (2011-2015); Anyalebechi Nnunuzwe (2015-present).<sup>19</sup>

Secretaries: R. W. Nwuzor, Secretary/Treasurer (1971-1977); S. A. T. Amukele, (Part-Time) Secretary/Treasurer (1977-1978); S. J. Okochi, Secretary/Treasurer (1978-1981); S. J. Okochi (1981-1985); I. N. Uhumabe, Secretary/Treasurer (1985-1990); R. W. Nwuzor, secretary/treasurer (1991-1993); R. E. Eti (1993-1995); S. W. Amadi (1996-1998); M. O. Okai (1999-2001); S. B. Kara (2002-2004); G. O. Kakiri (2005-2007); A. Nnunuzwe (2008-2010); U. L. Ahiamadu (2011-2012); C. J. Goodhead (2013-2014); A. Nnunuzwe (February-August 2015); Nation

Amadi Nation (2015-present).<sup>20</sup>

Treasurers: W. Nwuzor, Secretary/Treasurer (1971-1977); S. A. T. Amukele, Part-Time Secretary/Treasurer (1977-1978); S. J. Okochi, Secretary/Treasurer (1978-1981); I. N. Uhumabe (1981-1985); I. N. Uhumabe, Secretary/Treasurer (1985-1990); R. W. Nwuzor, Secretary/Treasurer (1991-1993); E. G. Esukpa (1993-1996); E. G. Manilla, Associate Treasurer (1996-2000); Isaac O. Aseki, Associate Treasurer (2001-2002); Vincent C. Marcus (2002-2004); I. Uhumabe (2005-2007); O. P. Egbunkeonye (2008-2010); F. T. Otuya (2011-2012); I. Amah, Associate Treasurer (2011-2012); E. C. Njoku (2012-2015); Emmanuel C. Njoku (2015-present)<sup>21</sup>

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## NOTES

1. "Port Harcourt Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019), 394.
2. Ibid.
3. *Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria, 90 years of Adventism in Nigeria 1914-2004: A Compendium* (Lagos: Communication/Pearl Department Church in Nigeria, 2004), 34.
4. Dave M. Nyekwere. *Medical Institutions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Nigeria: An Instrument of Evangelization 1940-2000* (Lagos: Natural Prints Ltd., 2004), 62.
5. "Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria, Eastern Nigeria Union Conference," dedication of Port Harcourt Conference Secretariat; May 3, 2015, 22. (Port Harcourt Conference archives, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria). On the place, "Rivers Province" of the Southern

Protectorates of the British colonial rule. The provinces existed from 1906 until about 1951. For details on the Eastern and Central Delta provinces under the British rule, see A. E. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces under Colonial Rule" in Obaro Ikime (editor), *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: HEBEN Publishers Plc., 1980) 414-415, 423.

6. *Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria*, 34.

7. Ibid.

8. Nyekwere, note 2.

9. Ikechi Nwogu, et al *History of Etche* (Owerri Springfield Publishers, 2003), 97.

10. Ibid., 98.

11. Victor Nweke, *History of Education in Obite Etche* (Owerri: Springfield Publishers, 2003), 44.

12. Nyekwere, note 4.

13. Nyekwere, 64.

14. Ibid.

15. "90 years of Adventism in Nigeria," 101.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. *Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria*, 22.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

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