

Achilihu, Johnson O. (1930–2010)

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Johnson O. Achilihu was the president of the East Nigeria Conference from 1988 to 1997.

Early Life and Conversion

Johnson Achilihu was born on March 20, 1930, into the family of Mr. and Mrs. Ikodiya Achilihu Ozurumba, of Umuohia, Osokwa ancient kingdom in Osisioma Ngwa Legal Government Area, Nigeria. His was a polygamous family in which children were left to fend for themselves at a very tender age. Hence, his childhood years were marked with intense struggle for survival amidst hardship and want. He was the sixth son of his father and the third son of his mother. His family was not Adventist. The family worshipped idols, and as a child, he had his own idol that he worshipped and gave food every morning.¹

When he was 10 years old, a group of Adventist Church members conducted evangelistic meetings, and he was attending the meetings secretly. One night, one Elder Mark preached Christ Jesus. That night he dreamt seeing Jesus crucified on the cross. He did not understand it, so early that morning, he decided to meet Elder Mark to explain all that he saw in the dream. But at a junction on his way, he met a man and told him what he saw in the dream, and that he was on his way to tell Elder Mark about it.²

The man asked him what he could do in return for “the man at the cross.” Johnson told him that he will worship him with all his might, preach his gospel anywhere he goes, and tell people to love him and obey his word. The man asked him to kneel down, and he placed his hands on Johnson’s head and prayed for him, saying, “Today I ordain you to preach the word.” By the time Johnson said amen and stood up, the man was gone. Fear gripped him, such that instead of walking to Elder Mark’s house, he ran to his house and narrated the story of his experience on the way.³

When Johnson later told Elder Mark what happened at the junction, the elder explained to him that the man at the cross was Jesus Christ, that He died for our sins. Further, the elder told him that he had met an angel, and the angel ordained him. Elder Mark prayed for him also. Then Johnson went home and destroyed the idols in his home, including those of the whole family.⁴

The family elders decided to kill him, but the mother came up with a nice suggestion. She told them that since it was a spiritual matter, they should allow the gods to fight for themselves. They accepted and gave a mandate of 10 days for the gods to strike him dead. But Johnson told them that nothing would happen to him because the idols don't move. After 10 days, nothing happened to him, so the villagers called him a spirit⁵ This was the biblical story of Gideon when God chose him to be judge in Israel re-enacted. The first thing Gideon did was to go home and destroy all the idols of his father's house. The result was the same in both cases (see Judges 6:11-35).

Consequently, his trials of life started. He was denied food most times by his elder brother who was taking care of him because their father died when he was six years old. But the mother would always find a solution. The family disowned him and stopped paying his school fees, but his mother continued paying as much as she could until she could not pay anymore. His uncle sent him to high school. Some years passed, and then Johnson saw Elder Mark and told him his story. Elder Mark took the case to the church, and the church sent Johnson to school to study theology at Andrews University.⁶

Education, Marriage, and Ministry

In 1951 Achilihu attended the Adventist evangelist course to prepare him for the work in the gospel mission. After the one-year course, he was employed by Pastor W. J. Newman, then the president of the East Nigerian Mission. His first station was Aguinyima Adventist Church in Ugulangu District, now in Ebonyi State, where he reported for service on March 17, 1952. He worked at other stations, including Mgbom and Uburu, still in Ugulangu District.⁷

In 1959, he was sent to the seminary in Bekwai, Ghana, for further evangelistic training. He spent three years at the seminary school and was very proactive in the groundwork that led to the building of a degree-awarding institution in Nigeria for young West African ministers. The new college, located at Ilishan-Remo, was named the Adventist College of West Africa (ACWA). He was transferred to the college in 1961 and completed his Preparatory Certificate in 1962.⁸

In 1964, Pastor Johnson Achilihu married Beatrice Ihiemekwa of Ovungwu in Isiala Ngwa South. Their marriage was blessed with five children: four females and one male.

In 1966, Achilihu, having completed his coursework at the college for a four-year ministerial diploma⁹ and a bachelor of arts degree in theology (awarded in absentia on May 28, 1967¹⁰). The same year, he was posted to Uyo in the then Ikot Ekpene District. On the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967, he went to serve at his home church, Akpa I, which was then in the Umuocha District.

Having been fully equipped for the ministry, Achilihu was ordained as a pastor on April 11, 1970¹¹ and was posted to the Okigwe district in 1971. Later, he was transferred to Aba township district. In 1974 he was posted

to the East Nigerian Mission office as the director of the Voice of Prophecy department. In 1977, he was elected as the conference evangelist for the newly formed East Nigeria Conference.¹² In 1978, he was sent to head the Enugu district, and he moved to Onitsha district in 1980. In 1983, he was called to the East Nigerian Conference as the director of the Stewardship department.

In 1986, he was posted to the Nigeria Union Mission at Maryland, Ikeja, Lagos, and was charged with the work of evangelism. This assignment he took to heart as he preached across the country. He stayed four weeks in Borokiri, Port Harcourt; four weeks in Jos; four weeks in Uromi, in what was then Bendel State; and another four weeks in Etiti Mbanjo. His evangelistic work helped immensely in winning new converts as many more people embraced the Adventist message.

In 1988 he became the president of the East Nigerian Conference. Under his leadership as the president of the conference, the Adventist Secondary Technical College (ASTECC) was conceived and established in 1993. It is memorable that Pastor Achilihu was personally clearing the site at Owerinta, pushing the wheelbarrow, while packing blocks and other building materials. He felt gladdened and fulfilled that ASTECC later became a high school of excellence in learning and in reputation.¹³

Altogether, Achilihu put in 45 years of denominational service (from 1952 to 1997):¹⁴

1952-1956	Aguinyima, Ugulangu District
1956-1957	Mgbom, Ugulangu District
1957-1958	Uburu, Ugulangu District
1959-1960	Seminary student, Bekwai, Ghana
1961-1966	Student, Adventist College of West Africa
1966-1967	Uyo, Ikot Ekpene District
1967-1970	Akpa I, Umuocha District (War time)
1970-1971	Pastor, Okigwe District
1971-1973	Pastor, Aba Township
1974-1976	Director, Voice of Prophecy department
1977-1979	Conference evangelist, East Nigerian Conference
1979-1982	Enugu
1982-1983	Pastor, Onitsha district
1983-1985	Director of Stewardship, East Nigerian Conference
1986-1988	Evangelist, Nigeria Union Mission
1988-1997	President, East Nigeria Conference

Retirement Years

Pastor Achilihu retired in 1997 and returned to his home, Akpaa Osokwa, on February 13, 1997. In retirement, he remained very active in preaching the gospel in his local community. He was very supportive of his local church and kept his turn to preach the sermon every quarter as well as preaching in the camp meetings.

Pastor Achilihu lived a life of meekness. Nothing was so important to him as pleasing God by faith, and he always believed that as long as Christ remains alive, nothing would happen to him and his family. He was brave and zealous about the gospel, a disciplined man and a pathfinder for the lost. He was full of vision and optimism and lived a transparent life. Pastor Achilihu was a man of strong faith and always diligently searched the words of the Scriptures. He regarded the Bible as the manual of life and living, and he taught his children and relatives to read and draw inspiration from the words of the Bible.¹⁵

Pastor Achilihu was a very social, jovial and friendly man. He liked to converse with people. His conversation was genuine with great philosophies. He joked with teenagers and played with schoolchildren. He was full of life even in his old age. Along his life's journey, he made a special difference in people's lives. He loved gospel music and enjoyed listening to choir songs. He made friends in every city where he did God's work.¹⁶

This servant of God so walked with God that he knew when it was time for him to depart this world. During Pastor Achilihu's retirement years, his son in ministry, Pastor J. M. Ukegbu, was posted to pastor his home district, Akpa I. Shortly before his death, Pastor Achilihu invited Pastor Ukegbu to his house. Pastor Achilihu said to him, "Ukegbu, look after my wife and family." When the pastor tried to find out what Achilihu had in mind, he changed the discussion to another topic. When Pastor Achilihu died a few days after that talk, it dawned on his son in ministry what Pastor Achilihu meant by "look after my wife and family."¹⁷

As can be seen, his entire life was devoted to serving his Lord. He was always enthusiastic about being a co-worker in the Lord's vineyard. Before his Lord called him to rest on May 15, 2010, he preached a sermon in Umuotuu Branch Sabbath School, one of the churches in his home district, Akpa I, on May 8, 2010. In his sermon, he enjoined the members to be of good faith, that he was going home and that they may not have time to see and talk with each other again, and that he hoped to see them in heaven.

Legacy

In spite of his busy schedule, Pastor Achilihu understood the need to make his home the first mission field. This home missional focus made all his children, up to the date of writing this article, still committed members of the Seventh-day Adventist church.

The ministry of Pastor J. O. Achilihu impacted all who crossed his way. This included young and old, male and female, rich and poor, the clergy and the laity. Those who worked with him testify that the calmness and serenity prevailed during his tenure in office and had a positive impact on all and sundry. He worked

collaboratively with his co-officers, directors, and fellow pastors. There was no rivalry due to tussle for position and power during his time in office. He was a servant leader who led by example.¹⁸

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