

# Onwere, Philip Emelefu (1892–1992)

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## KINGSLEY CHUKWUEMEKA ANONABA

Kingsley Chukwuemeka Anonaba, Ph.D., is an ordained pastor, a dedicated and result-driven administrator, evangelist, and educator. He served as a front-line pastor for five years and a field evangelist and Church administrator for twenty-five years. Currently, he is a senior lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies, Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

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Philip Emelefu Onwere was a pastor, church administrator, evangelist, and teacher in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

## Early life

Onwere was born in the Mgboko Amairi autonomous community in the Eastern-Ngwa municipal division in the Eastern Nigeria region. This location has been re-designated and renamed the Umuoriaku Village, Amato Mgboko autonomous community, Abia State, Nigeria. He was born to the family of the late Mr. and Mrs. Nwakwe Oriaku. He had six siblings: Onwere Nwakwue, Agnagbue Nwakwue, Akwarandu Nwakwue, Akoma Nwakwue, Peter Nwakwue, and Agbagharauka Nwakwue.

Rather than adopt his father's name (Nwakwue) as his surname, Onwere adopted the name of his father's elder brother (Philip Emelefu), who was very influential in the community and influenced his childhood development. He considered it too late to change his surname to his father's name later in life, as Onwere (his preferred name) had become an integral part of his professional and popular identity.<sup>1</sup>

To compensate for that name swerve, Philip Emelefu named his fourth son Philemon, which means Nwakwue in Igbo, indicating his direct stake in the Nwakwue family and ensured Philemon's homestead was located at the family's traditional compound, "Okpulo" Nwakwue. Philip Onwere was a member of the Anglican Church before his conversion into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He joined the ministry of Pastor Jessey Clifford in Aba in the early 1900s. He had read a Sabbath lesson track shared by Mr. C. H. Dede at the Aba government school. The tract led to his conversion into the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>2</sup>

## Education

Onwere had only elementary school education, which was a good qualification to serve in the SDA Church in the Eastern region of Nigeria at that time. He attended the Government Primary School, Aba, where he obtained a standard six certificate. Thereafter, he was engaged as an auxiliary teacher in the missionary school in Aba. From 1923 to 1933, Onwere contributed greatly to the growth of the first missionary school started by Pastor

Jesse Clifford, which was focused on the development of mental and spiritual aspects of their pupils. This was the beginning of Seventh-day Adventist educational work in Eastern Nigeria.

By 1927, the Mission school was upgraded to a standard Seventh-day Adventist Primary School, where students could acquire formal education. Onwere was among the earliest auxiliary teachers for the school in Aba; with Daniel Onyeodo, Robert Abaribe, Robert Nwosu, Micheal Moses, and Jacob Ukaegbu as his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

## Family

Onwere married Alice Nwajo in 1929. Alice had been born into the family of Mr. and Mrs. Nwaejiaka Nwogu of the Umuoba Community. The Onweres were blessed with seven children: Godfrey Obilor Onwere, John Chinyere Onwere, Pius Nduka Onwere, Philimon Nwawkwe Onwere, Akobundu Albert Onwere, Chukwuma Ephraim Onwere, and Onyekachi Jonathan Onwere.

## Ministry

Onwere met Pastor Jesse Clifford in the then-Government School at Aba, located at the present site of the Abia State Polytechnic, G.R.A Aba. He was among the second set of people baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1924 through Jesse Clifford's ministerial work in Eastern Nigeria. Pastor Onwere became a teacher at a denominational educational teaching ministry before accepting the call to serve in full-time ministry. He was ordained into the gospel ministry in 1939 with Pastor Robert Nwosu, one of his contemporaries.

During the 1940s, the churches were divided into four districts. Pastor Onwere was responsible for the Umuocha District while Pastor B. I. Tini pastored the Aba District. Pastor Robert Nwosu was the pastor of the Umuobiakwa District, while Pastor A. E. Ukaemunna pastored the Umuakpara District. These men and their ministerial services were dedicated to evangelism and soul-winning, which led to the growth of the mission work in the Eastern region. He was known for his famous saying, "I can't leave my work. I am called to serve." He was very committed to his calling and passionate about whatever he was asked to do, mostly for the Adventist Church and for the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Onwere served as one of the first indigenous ministers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria and, as such, was involved in pioneering evangelistic work in the region and the country at large. He became an administrator and the second president of the Adventist Church in the Eastern Nigeria Mission of Seventh-day Adventists in the 1960s. Although Mgboko Obete Church (his local church of origin) was the second local church with a large membership after the Aba headquarters church in the Ngwa province, this church also contributed to the planting of other local churches including the Umuocha, Umuobiakwa, and Umuakpara churches, which were the first four districts in the former Eastern Nigeria Mission Aba.<sup>5</sup>

## Legacy

Pastor Philip Onwere was an early church worker in Nigeria who contributed to the growth of the Adventist Church in Nigeria and West Africa. He was an advocate of human resources development and, to that effect, he ensured that his children received a college education. His legacy continues through their work for the SDA Church.

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### SOURCES

“History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern States of Nigeria.” *Golden Jubilee Celebration*, January 1973. In the author’s private collection.

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### NOTES

1. Philemon Nwakwue Onwere, who was the oldest man in the Umuoriaku Village. This interview was conducted by the author, February 9, 2024.
2. Sylvester Ubani-Ukoma, who was a district pastor in the Obete District, Aba East Conference. This interview was conducted by the author, January 9, 2024.
3. Ibid.
4. Jacob Onyeodo, a member of Seventh-day Adventist Church and the first son of late D. O. Onyeodo during an interview conducted by the author, January 15, 2024.
5. History of Seventh-day Adventist Church, Golden Jubilee Celebration, January 1973.

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