

East Nigeria Conference (1977–2012)

MATTHIAS N. OLUKAIKPE

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The Adventist work in east Nigeria was established in 1923, organized in 1930, and reorganized in 1971, 1977, 1986, and 2003. It was comprised of assigned local government areas in the state of Abia, Nigeria.¹ The administrative unit named East Nigeria Conference existed from 1977 to 2012. It was dissolved in 2013 when its territory was divided between the Aba East, Aba North, and Aba South Conferences.

The Beginning

The Seventh-day Adventist message came to the eastern part of Nigeria through the work of Jesse and Catherine Clifford, British missionaries, who came to Eastern Nigeria in 1923 after serving in Ghana for four years (1919-1923). The Cliffords settled in Aba with their missionary friend A. V. Wilcox.²

Jesse Clifford began his evangelistic work among the Sierra-Leoneans living in Aba. With the help of C. H. Dede, a teacher at the government primary school in Aba, Clifford conducted Bible studies with some students at the school who were among his first converts. Among them were J. W. Evoh, Daniel Onyeodor, Robert Abaribe, and Phillip Onwere.³

As the number of Sabbath keepers grew, Clifford began searching for a piece of land on which to build facilities for the Adventist mission work at Aba. In consultation with L. F. Langford, a British missionary and his senior missionary coworker in Ghana, and William McClements, an Irish missionary who came to Nigeria in 1919, a plot of land on the brow of a hill about a mile northeast of Aba was chosen. Its lease was negotiated at a reasonable price with Chief Nworgu of Umuola. Clifford quickly arranged for the clearing of the site and facilitated the construction of a church building and a house. With help of several church members, the buildings were constructed with sticks and plastered with mud. The Cliffords moved into their new home.⁴

The Adventist message spread rapidly. The tracts, Bible studies, religious pictures, and the missionaries' visits to nearby villages attracted many more converts. Sabbath schools were opened at Umuobiakwa, Akpaa, Umuocha, Mgboko-Obete, and Umuakpara.

The growth of membership necessitated a larger church building in Aba. The bigger church building was to be constructed with sun-dried bricks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets. The church members made the bricks and helped in preparing the timbers. On the day of the construction, dark clouds suddenly announced imminent

heavy rain. The walls of the new church building in progress would be surely destroyed if the workers were unable to put the roof on before the rain started. Clifford contacted a professional builder in Aba, who was not only willing to join the work himself but also invited eight bricklayers. The church members turned out in large numbers to assist them. The building was covered just in time to be saved from the rain. Many people were encouraged. The church building served not only the church member but the whole community. It became the evangelistic center where representatives of members from the various churches met regularly for Bible lectures and to plan the mission work for new areas.⁵

Growth and Development

Among the early members who joined the church through baptism between 1923 and 1926 were B. I. Tikili, Phillip Onwere, Robert O. Nwosu, Wilson O. Uzuegbu, Jacob Ukegbu, Allison Njoku (later Ukumunna), Sunday Ebenma (later Ubani-Ukoma), James Nwambu Adiele (later Ogbonna), and Joshua N. Achor.⁶

Jesse Clifford left Nigeria in 1931. He was asked to return to Ghana to head the Ghana Mission of Seventh-day Adventists.⁷ L. Edmonds succeeded Clifford as leader of the work in Aba District, Umuobiakwa District, Umuocha District, and Umuakpara District. In 1931 Aba was chosen as the headquarters of the Southeastern Nigerian Mission, which comprised the Calabar, Owerri, Warri, Ogoja, Onitsha, and Benue Provinces, and part of the British mandated territory of Cameroon (south of Benue). L. Edmonds was appointed director of the Southeastern Nigerian Mission.⁸

The publishing ministry was organized in 1932 by J. J. Cook, field secretary. The first literature evangelists were Albert J. Dike, Albert Nnanta, Frank Ihuoma, Monday Wogwugwu (later Atughonu), and David Izima. In 1935 Cook transferred the management of the publishing ministry department to Albert Dike. In the same year, a school was opened at Umuobiakwa with R. O. Nwosu as the headmaster.⁹

In 1936 the first ordination to the gospel ministry in Nigeria took place. B. I. Tikili was the first Nigerian national to be ordained. The same year, Albert Nnanta succeeded A. J. Dike as the field missionary secretary. In 1940 Konrad Mueller established the first college printing press at Ihie in the Isiala Ngwa North local government area.¹⁰

To accommodate the growing church membership and the mission projects in the East Nigeria Mission, there was a need to upgrade the mission to a conference status. In order to become a conference, the mission needed to be financially self-sufficient. Thus, a stewardship committee was organized, and its members were Hope I. C. Oriaku, Matthias N. Olukaikpe, and A. M. Okoko. They visited the churches, promoted the giving of tithes and offerings, and shared with members the vision for the East Nigeria Mission to become a conference.

The Northern Europe-West African Division invited Z. N. Imo, president of the East Nigeria Mission, Matthias N. Olukaikpe, secretary/treasurer of the East Nigeria Mission, and Nwosu Sunday, who represented the laity of the

mission, to the Nigeria Union Mission's headquarters in Maryland, Lagos, to present about the growth and needs of the church in the East Nigeria Mission.¹¹ At the end of the meeting, the division officers recommended to the division executive committee to approve the change of the East Nigeria Mission's status from a mission to a conference.¹²

On January 6, 1977, the Nigeria Union Mission held a constituency session at Aba, the headquarters of the East Nigeria Mission, with delegates from all the local churches of the East Nigeria Mission. There, it was voted that the East Nigeria Mission be organized into a conference. Officers of the East Nigeria Conference were elected by the delegates: Isaac Nwaobia, president; Isaac Ekpendu, secretary; and Matthias Olukaikpe, treasurer.¹³

Between 1977 and 2013, the membership of the church grew significantly, creating the need to reorganize the work in the territory in several phases. By December 2012, the East Nigeria Conference was dissolved and reorganized into three conferences: the Aba East Conference, the Aba South Conference, and the Aba North Conference.¹⁴

Schools

Clifford established the Seventh-day Adventist primary school at Isiugwu, Aba. He also started an informal school with the help of two national teachers for the purpose of evangelism. His objective was to train young people to spread the Adventist message in the villages. The Bible lessons were the center of the curriculum. The schools were successful, and many newly trained workers were sent to churches in Aba, Ogba, Abua, Obete, Umuocha, Umuakpara, and Umuobiakwa.¹⁵

Between 1930 and 1944, L. Edmonds constructed the new buildings for the Aba Adventist Church and the Adventist Girls' School. These buildings were damaged during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. After the war the church building was rebuilt by a missionary builder E. Witzel, who was based at the Adventist College of West Africa, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State.

In 1948 the Adventist Teachers Certificate College was moved from Ibadan to Ihie and renamed the Nigerian Training College. The Adventist Secondary Technical College was also established at Owerrinta in 1993.

The Adventist Secondary Grammar School in Nigeria was established at Ihie in 1953 with Wilfred B. A. Preacher as the first principal.¹⁶

Medical Mission Work

On June 10, 1963, a twenty-bed hospital built by Northern Ngwa County Council at Okpuala Ngwa was handed over to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Dr. Sherman A. Nagel became the first medical director. It is now operated by Abia State Health Management Board.

In early 1980 the East Nigeria Conference received funds from ADRA–Finland and ADRA–Sweden for the purpose of building a health center at Aba. Torrey Oldbrothton, a building construction expert, came from Norway to supervise the construction work of what became the Adventist Hospital and Motherless Babies Home, Aba. Upon completion, the buildings were dedicated by the conference, and approval was received from the government to operate as a private hospital.¹⁷

The Effects of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970)

The Nigerian Civil War (July 1967 to January 1970) between the government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, which sought independence from Nigeria, was devastating to both the people of the eastern region of Nigeria and the Adventist church in Nigeria. The economic restrictions imposed by the federal government of Nigeria exhausted the people of Biafra. As the war raged and federal troops advanced from one town to another, people deserted the towns and villages. Z. N. Imo, president of the East Nigeria Mission, moved the mission's office to the premises of the Teachers Training College and High School in Ihieon. Imo secured the vital documents of the church by taking them with him wherever he went as a refugee.¹⁸

After the war ended on January 12, 1970, people returned to their towns and villages. Their houses, churches, and schools had been destroyed or badly damaged. With the help of the Adventist World Church, the East Nigeria Mission gradually resumed its activities.¹⁹

East Nigeria Conference Officers (1977-2012)

Presidents: Isaac Nwaobia (1977-1985); Friday Okoro Ubani (1986-1987); Johnson O. Achilihu (1988-1996); Gideon C. Nwaogwugwu (1997-2003); Kingsley C. Anonaba (2004-2010); Moses C. Njoku (2011-2012).

Secretaries: Isaac A. Ekpendu (1978-1980); J. I. Nnaji (1981-1983); M. U. Nmagu (1984-1985); Sylvanus I. Anuligo (1986-1987); Friday Oluikpe (1988-1996); Paul E. Chigbundu (1997-2000); James Ogunji (2001); Moses Njoku (2002-2003); J. C. Nwarungwa (2004-2010); Victor C. Nwosu (2011); Joel N. Ubani (2012).

Treasurers: M. N. Olukaikpe (1973-1979); Ndubueze (1979-1980); U. Nnaji (1981-1983); A. C. Ohuonu (1984-1985); P. Ugorji (1986-1987); John Onuoha (1988-1996); Chinedu Uhegwu (1997-2000); M. N. Olukaikpe (2001-2003); M. N. Olukaikpe (2004-2010); M. N. Olukaikpe (2011-2012).

SOURCES

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Mensah, C. B. "Jessie Clifford." *African Seventh-day Adventist History*. Accessed May 18, 2022.

<https://www.africansdahistory.org/jessie-clifford/>.

NOTES

1. "East Nigeria Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2013), 448.
2. Dayo Alao, ed., *90 Years of Adventism in Nigeria 1914-2004—A Compendium* (Ikeja, Lagos: The Adventist Publishing Ministries, 2004), 86.
3. Unless stated otherwise, this article is based on information from oral tradition handed down by generations of Adventists in Nigeria.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. C. B. Mensah, "Jessie Clifford," *African Seventh-day Adventist History*, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.africansdahistory.org/jessie-clifford/>.
8. "Southeastern Nigerian Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1931).
9. Personal knowledge of the author as a young Seventh-day Adventist at that time.
10. Ibid.
11. Personal knowledge of the author as a church worker at that time.
12. Personal knowledge of the author as a member of the Stewardship Committee and the secretary/treasurer of East Nigeria Mission.
13. Ibid.
14. "Aba East Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (2014), 446.
15. Personal knowledge of the author as the first treasurer of the East Nigeria Conference.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

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