

# Anambra-Imo Conference

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EPHRAIM UZODINMA OKPULOR

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The Anambra-Imo Conference in the Eastern Nigeria Union Mission of the West-Central Africa Division existed from 2003 through 2014, at which point it was divided into Imo Conference and the Anambra Administrative Unit. The Anambra-Imo Conference comprised the territory of Anambra and Imo States in eastern Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> The final report of the Anambra-Imo Conference listed 5,917 members in 86 churches and 67 companies<sup>2</sup> among a population of 1,473,022.<sup>3</sup> Imo state is one of the 36 states of Nigeria. It was carved out of the East Central state on February 3, 1976.<sup>4</sup> It is bordered by Abia State on the east, Anambra State on the north, and Rivers State on the south and has an estimated population of 4.8 million people with an area of 14,323 square kilometers (5,530 square miles). It is a predominantly an Igbo speaking state with minor differences in dialects.<sup>5</sup>

## Origin of Seventh-day Adventist Work in the Territory

The indigenes of Imo State are predominantly Christians of different denominations but mostly Roman Catholics, though a few practice traditional religions. The history of Adventism in Imo State is scanty. "Efforts have been made to get close to the most authentic version but it has not been easy because of their disjointed nature."<sup>6</sup> One version has it that the "church came to Imo territory through some itinerant preachers who were mostly civil servants and literature evangelists." Another version said it was from "the fishermen from the coastal area of the state and that the first convert was one Nwachukwu Ogbuokiri of Amuzu in Mbaise who left the Roman Catholic Church to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1927." From that earliest beginning, the church spread to other parts of the state.

Anambra-Imo Conference was the last of 10 conferences created by the then Nigeria Union Mission before that union was reorganized into two union missions in 2004. The carving out of Anambra and Imo States into an entity of the church was born out of the desire to propagate the gospel in this territory that is dominated by other Christian denominations. The movement that culminated in its creation began early in 1986.<sup>7</sup> The first meeting toward its actualization was held on July 13, 1986, at the Ebikoro Primary School, Emii, Owerri.<sup>8</sup> The meeting was not a spontaneous action of some laymen coming together to discuss and pursue a successful end a project initiated by themselves.<sup>9</sup> It was, rather, "a deliberate action of God using a willing servant Pastor Dominic U. Nwadike to sensitize and mobilize into action a crop of equally undaunted laymen willing to take a common cause of far-reaching importance that is destined to further the Advent message"<sup>10</sup> in Imo state.

Initially, the demand was for the creation of Imo Mission out of the then East Nigeria Conference (ENC) with the six districts from the Owerri zone of the state that belonged to that conference. As the negotiation intensified, the Mbaise zone with her own six districts from East Central Mission saw the need to join their brethren in this new development. This was made possible by “the visit of one Elder Eric Nwanedo from Mbutu to Emii on October 13, 1991,”<sup>11</sup> for consultation on how best to collaborate with the Emii zone to actualize the dream. This merger further strengthened the resolve to have a new field carved out of the ENC.

## The Coming of the Anambra Brethren

The church in the whole of Anambra State belonged to the same East Nigeria Conference; therefore, for the struggle for a new mission to be inclusive, the brethren from that state needed to be approached. The primary reason for their inclusion was that once the church in Imo State assumed a mission status, “the brethren from Anambra would have to traverse the whole of Imo State to get to Aba for any meeting of the conference if they still belong to ENC. Ideally, it would not be appropriate for the members from the neighboring state of Anambra to continue with East Nigeria Conference once the church in Imo State assumed a mission status.

This realization caused what was known as the Steering Committee that was pushing for the creation to woo the members of the church in Anambra State to join their brethren in Imo State in the move for a new entity. To accommodate this expansion, the nomenclature was changed to reflect this merger. The transformation from Imo Mission to Anambra-Imo Mission gave additional impetus to the demand for the new mission.

## Ban on Creation of Missions

“At the heat of this demand a ban was placed on the creation of mission fields by the leadership of the Nigeria Union Mission because of the intense pressure for the Nigeria Union Mission to attain a Union conference status.”<sup>12</sup>

This development did not deter the movement because the Steering Committee immediately transformed their demand from that of Anambra-Imo Mission to Anambra-Imo Conference. Following a series of delegations to both the East Nigeria Conference administration and the Nigeria Union Mission, the request was brought to the attention of the then Africa-Indian Ocean Division (AID) leadership, “consequent upon which the president, Pastor Luka Daniel, paid a fact-finding visit to the proposed territory in 1994.”<sup>13</sup> The negotiations continued until the AID and the Nigeria Union Mission leadership saw the need to reorganize the church in the eastern part of Nigeria.

## Reorganization Seminar

A reorganization seminar was held by Pastor C. N. Bayne, who was then the African-Indian Ocean Division Stewardship director for the twelve districts that would make up the proposed territory. Six of the 12 districts belonged to the East Nigeria Conference, with its headquarters at Aba in Abia State, while the other 6 belonged to the East-Central Mission in Umuahia in the same state. The seminar, which was held in Owerri, the proposed headquarters of the anticipated conference, was held June 13–17, 2001.<sup>14</sup> The success of this seminar heightened the resolve of the leadership of both the Nigeria Union Mission and the Africa-Indian Ocean Division to grant the request for the creation of the Anambra-Imo Conference. The 12 districts that were to make up the entity were ceded to the East Nigeria Conference for an action to begin with an administrative unit status because of the peculiar features of the area in terms of membership, financial strength, and workforce. It can be concluded “that the Anambra-Imo Conference was carved out of both East Nigeria Conference and East Central Conference.”<sup>15</sup>

## Leadership

In spite of the constraints of the new field, the Nigeria Union Mission saw fit to appoint leaders to pioneer the work. “Valentine C. Onwubuariri was appointed the Administrator. Iheanyi Bonny Mewu as Secretary and Chimobi Elukpo as Associate Treasurer,”<sup>16</sup> while Ephraim.U. Okpolor was appointed the director of the Stewardship, Family Ministries, Youth, and Chaplaincy departments. Okechukwu Mbaeri was assigned the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries departments. Thus the stage was set for the official takeoff of the Anambra-Imo Administrative Unit from July 1, 2001, with a “membership of 6991 and 39 organized churches, 65 unorganized and a workforce of 22.”<sup>17</sup> The leadership and the membership were united in ensuring that the dream of getting the field inaugurated into a conference status was actualized within a record time. Their efforts yielded the desired result when on February 1, 2003, the administrative unit was inaugurated into a conference status after 18 months of experimentation. The three officers were retained at the inaugural session of the conference status; however, at the maiden constituency session of March 1–5, 2006, Valentine .C. Onwubuariri and Chimaobi Elukpo were reelected as the president and treasurer. Pastor Ephraim Okpolor succeeded Iheanyi B. Mewu as the executive secretary and was subsequently elected the president at the session of January 21–25, 2009. At that session too, Pastor Michael O. Akubude was elected the third executive secretary of the field since its inception. Elukpo was once again retained as treasurer. In 2011, Elukpo was deployed to the Elele Adventist Comprehensive High School as treasurer and was replaced with Mrs. Chinenye Nwachukwu.<sup>18</sup>

## Reorganization of Anambra-Imo Conference

The wave of the reorganization exercise carried out by the Eastern Nigeria Union Conference caught up with the Anambra-Imo Conference 10 years after it was created. The major reason for the reorganization was the slow growth of the church in Anambra state. The leadership of the union felt that for the church in Anambra to grow,

a close administrative presence was needed. The burden of supervising the church from Imo State also became too expensive as a result of heavy overhead costs.

The implementation of the action to reorganize took place at the constituency session of December 14–16, 2012, at Ihiala in Anambra State. This reorganization along the states saw Anambra becoming an administrative unit of the church, with Imo retaining the conference status. Pastor Ifeanyi B. Mewu was appointed the administrator, while Uba Okoye and Nnamdi Okagbue served as secretary and treasurer, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

## Imo Conference

The exit of the members from Anambra State repositioned the church in Imo State for effective and efficient evangelistic activities. Imo retained the conference status of the Anambra-Imo Conference. Four out of the 20 districts of Anambra-Imo Conference were ceded to Anambra Administrative Unit with a membership of 1,353 while Imo Conference was left with a membership of 8,111 and 16 districts. At the session that marked the end of Anambra-Imo Conference, Pastor Ephraim.U. Okpolor was elected as the president of Imo Conference, while Pastor Okechukwu Mbaeri became the executive secretary, and Chinenye Nwachukwu was retained as treasurer.<sup>20</sup> On January 1, 2015, Nwachukwu was deployed to Bayelsa Mission as treasurer and was replaced by Godswill U. Uwalaka. The constituency session of January 2017 brought in Pastor Goodluck O. Alozie as the executive secretary, while Mrs. Chinenye Nwachukwu was recalled as treasurer, and the president was reelected. At the time of the writing of this article, the conference has a “membership of 4,525; 54 organized churches and 53 unorganized churches.”<sup>21</sup> The conference has been able to establish a secondary school and a bakery and has also relocated its headquarters from Adventist Crescent to Amawire Orji following the conversion of the building to a secondary school. The movement of the headquarters to the new site has also resulted in an accelerated work at the secretariat project. At the same time, nine new churches have been planted within the Owerri capital city. The Owerri Township district of churches that used to be the only district in the state capital has given rise to four additional districts of churches as a result of the church planting effort of the conference. The task of growing the church in Imo State has not been an easy one, but God has been faithful, and the future remains hopeful.<sup>22</sup>

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## NOTES

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