

Eti, Reuben Ezenekwe (1946–2018)

CHIGOZI ETI

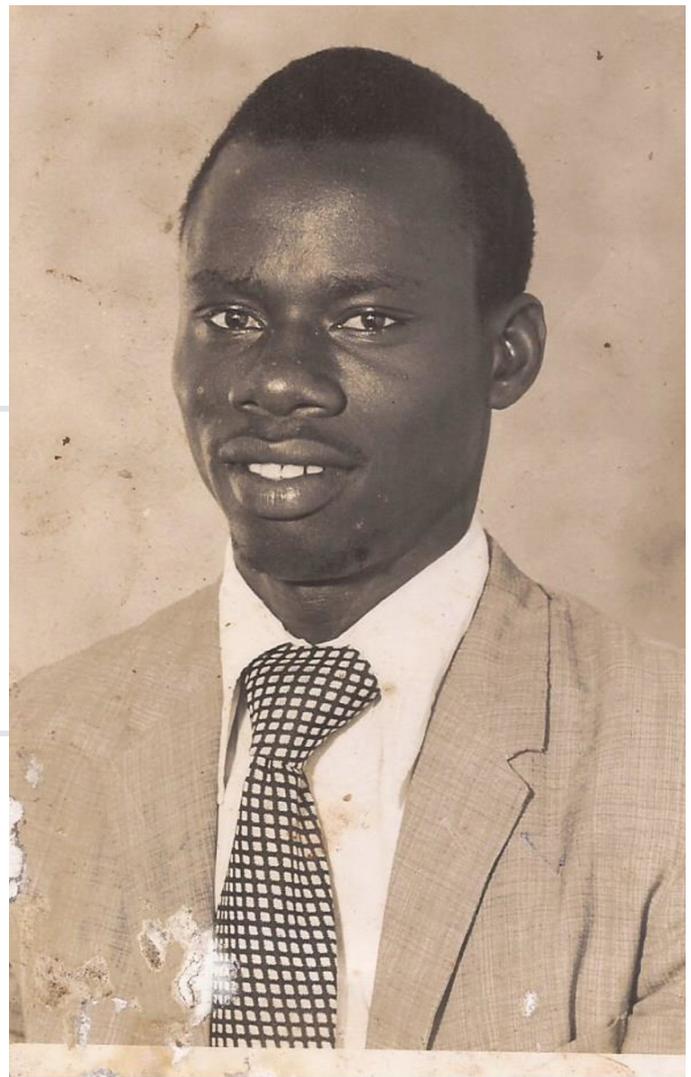
Chigozi Eti, M.A. (University of Ibadan, Nigeria), taught media writing and journalism courses for nine years in the mass communication department of Babcock University and was ordained into the gospel ministry in 2017. Pastor Eti is a widely sought-after speaker and writer in the areas of prayer, spirituality, leadership, and media ministry. He is married to Chioma, a prolific speaker and counselor, and has four children.

Reuben Ezenekwe Eti was a pastor, evangelist, and church administrator from Nigeria.

Early Life

Reuben Ezenekwe Eti's birth was marked by what to his people was a strange natural occurrence – “a semester series of solar eclipses that occurred between 1946 and 1949. He was an infant when the first one occurred.”¹ Since there was no birth registry in Egbada at that time and most people including

Eti's parents were unlettered, his birth was not registered. One Fema, a school teacher, kept a notebook where he recorded the birth of children born at that time. Sadly, the records were destroyed during the civil war, but he did remember that Eti was born in the early part of 1946.² He grew up as the first son of the family, a very important position in the African tradition, but he was “remarkably humble. He cultivated and epitomized patience, hard work and perseverance.”³ However, his home professed no religion, “though the extant culture did not encourage an entirely atheistic stance. His parents...believed in God and had a sense of moral obligation to Him and humanity. They had a concept of sin and righteousness but were not wholly consecrated to the ‘forces’ behind these phenomena.”⁴



Pastor Reuben E. Eti.

Photo courtesy of Chigozi Eti.

Eti was six years old when he was enrolled at the First Africa Church School in Egbada, otherwise referred to as the UNA School (an acronym for United Native African Church). It was an unlikely age to start school at that time. To be enrolled, a pupil's hand should cross his head to the other ear. He did not pass the test, but he was accepted. He completed Infant Class 1 and 2, Primary 1 to 3, and then transferred to the St. John's (Anglican) School, Rumueme in Port Harcourt where he passed the First School Leaving Certificate Examination (Standard 6) in 1960.⁵

The First African Church School was Eti's first experience with Christianity. As Sunday service was compulsory for all the pupils, he attended the church and loved it. That was how he began both his educational and faith journey in 1952.⁶ Since most of the people were not lettered, the task of reading the scriptures at the Sunday services fell on him, so he became a lay reader. He was a committed member of that congregation and all the signals pointed in the direction of him ending up in its priesthood.

After primary school, the prospect of further studies dimmed in the shadows of the adverse economic circumstance that beset his family. Between 1960 and 1962, he worked as a houseboy—a domestic servant employed without pay. Later, he joined his father in the village to make thatch roofs from raffia palm. "For a few months in 1964, he had a stint with rubber tapping at a plantation in Omoku."⁷

Awarded a scholarship to pursue studies at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Eti was en route to Ogbomosho in Oyo State when he stopped in Egbada, about two hours from Port Harcourt, Rivers State, to bid his father, Eti Okodima Orukwo, and mother, Latty Nwohia Eti, farewell. While in the village, he met a group of lay missionaries who had come to preach the Advent message. He yielded without hesitation and was baptized by Pastor Erondu Ufomba.⁸

Eti was only 19 years old when he was baptized and joined the remnant church in 1965. He was greatly persecuted by his mother for choosing to attend *chochi ka Agren* (Aggren's church). The church was called Aggren's church because Elder Aggren Okoro was the first Seventh-day Adventist in Egbada. Aggren was the father of church leaders Peter Okoro and Jeremiah Okoro.⁹

Early Career

Following his baptism into the Adventist church in 1965 and consequent loss of the scholarship to the Baptist Theological Seminary, Eti enrolled as an apprentice in a tailoring shop. That went well until the outbreak of the civil war in 1967. During the 30-month war, not only did he lose his First School Leaving Certificate to the destruction that ensued, but war also dimmed any prospects of personal development and growth.¹⁰

Each day that Eti lived during the civil war was a miracle. Eti knew that God had a plan for his life and that by His mercy he would survive.¹¹ He learned to live one day at a time. He sensed that though he did not have the opportunity to develop himself further as he wished, God was putting him through the school of adversity to fit

him for the life of service into which he would soon enter. As God's servant wrote: "The very trials that task our faith most severely and make it seem that God has forsaken us, are to lead us closer to Christ...God permits trials to assail His people, that by their constancy and obedience they themselves may be spiritually enriched, and that their example may be a source of strength to others."² God may allow adverse circumstances to preface or accompany our success and victory so that we may learn to comfort others with the same comfort by which we are comforted.¹³

The 30-month Nigerian civil war ended on January 15, 1970. Economic historian E. Wayne Nafziger writes that "the civil war of 1967-70 had a profound effect on economic activity."⁴ Embargoes on the region's ports, population surges due to the displacement of Igbo people from other parts of the country, and general food shortages heightened the instability in the region. This situation persisted long after the war ended!⁵

It was in the midst of this dire economic and political atmosphere that Reuben Ezenekwe Eti entered denominational work. He enlisted as a literature evangelist on June 1, 1970. He served the literature ministry until August 31, 1976, when he resigned to pursue pre-seminary studies that qualified him for college education. Reminiscing on his days in literature ministry, he said: "my canvassing partner was Goodnews Ogbugo. Those days were trying. Sometimes we toiled the whole day and came back with nothing, but we stood by each other and God was on our side; and he assured our food and water."⁶

Upon completing the pre-seminary program at the Adventist Seminary of West Africa, Eti was posted to Okehi District in the Rivers Mission where he served as pastor from July 12, 1980, to February 5, 1983!⁷

On February 6, 1983, Eti was appointed to the Rivers Mission office, this time as publishing ministries director. In that role, he recruited, trained, nurtured, and motivated literature evangelists for the mission. One year later, he was ordained into the gospel ministry alongside Daniel C. Ikoro at the Nkpolu-Oroworukwo Seventh-day Adventist church on Sabbath, February 11, 1984.¹⁸ Eti continued to serve as publishing director until March 1985. Having secured admission and approval to return to school, he was posted to Elele district to serve for five months before proceeding to the Adventist Seminary of West Africa. He was preceded and succeeded in the publishing office by S. O. Osaroekie.

As a student at the Adventist Seminary of West Africa between September 1985 and June 1990, Eti was the only student who was ordained. This allowed him to serve as associate pastor to H. V. Kuma, S. I. Anuligo, and later Lawrence Oladini. When a vacancy came open in the office of the seminary pastor, Eti served in an acting capacity until a replacement was found. Vice-chancellor Ademola Tayo remarked that: "From his student days, he served as an associate pastor during his pastoral training in the Adventist Seminary of West Africa."⁹ As a student, he was also actively involved in literature ministry, including three months (June- August 1989) as a student literature evangelist in Bamenda, northwest Cameroon.

Education

For many people, the course of life is a straight-line graph, but for Reuben Eti, life's trajectory was full of twists and turns, reflecting the imagery of the "winding path" cast in Fanny Crosby's classic hymn, *All the Way*. The opportunity for further studies presented itself in 1976, while he was working as a literature evangelist. The director called him into the office one day and broke the news: "Eti, the mission has voted to grant you [a] scholarship to attend the Adventist Seminary of West Africa. So, prepare your things and leave."

As good as the news was, he was stunned by it. He was not expecting it. The last time he was in school was 1960, sixteen years previous. He was almost resigned to the fate his family background had conferred upon him, but he decided God had other plans for him. Since he did not have secondary school education, Eti enrolled in the four-year pre-seminary course that prepared him for the American General Education Development exam.

Having earned the requisite credits for college education, Eti applied to continue his studies at Adventist Seminary of West Africa, but the mission sent an urgent call for him to return. Close friends, like Pastors Joseph A. Alili and Gideon C. Nwaogwugwu, urged him to continue his education, but the Rivers Mission executive committee intervened and immediately deployed him as a pastor.

In December 1984, while serving as the director of publishing ministries, Eti attended the publishing council at the Nigeria Union Mission headquarters in Lagos. While in Lagos, he received information that Adventist Seminary of West Africa was conducting the enrollment examination. He made the 45-kilometer dash to Ilishan-Remo to write the exam. One month later, he received a letter notifying him of his admission to study theology at the Adventist Seminary of West Africa. On September 2, 1985, he undertook a remarkable 18-hour journey back to Ilishan with his wife Priscilla Nma and six children, the last of whom was nine months old.

At graduation, the class of 1990 nominated Eti as their class president.²⁰ His classmates included Michael O. Akpa, Bassey E. O. Udoh, Ezekiel Adeleye, Augustine Inyamah, Christian Ugwuojor, Adefemi Samuel Adesina, Peter Oduroye, Bidemi Awanyane (nee Adeniji), and Victoria Aja (nee Solademi) who was the only woman in the theology program of that class.²¹ As the Adventist Seminary of West Africa was an affiliate of Andrews University, President W. Richard Lesher was on hand to congratulate graduates on Sunday, June 17, 1990.

Before completing the B.A. program, but having the minimum requisite credits hour, Eti applied for and was accepted into the graduate pastoral ministry program that had been agreed upon between Andrews University and the Adventist Seminary of West Africa in 1988.²² Eti was a member of the cohort which began in April 1990. Thus, Eti started his Master's program in the same spring semester he completed the BA in theology. This son of a palm-wine tapper moved from no opportunity to earning a Master's degree in 1994 at the age of 48.

Marriage

Priscilla Nma Chukwuma had been betrothed to Eti before the onset of the civil war on July 6, 1967. As was common in wars, soldiers kidnapped and molested women. While some were sexually abused and dumped, the

soldiers married some by the force of the gun. After months in hiding with other young girls, Priscilla Nma Chukwuma was unfortunately captured by a soldier. It took all the men in the village and a lot of *kaikai* (a locally-brewed gin) to “appease” the soldier and get him to release the young girl. The soldier released her to her intended father-in-law and her marriage to Eti was sealed.

Eti and Priscilla Nma Chukwuma both survived the civil war but were childless for seven years. Eventually their marriage was blessed with eight children: four daughters—Ogechukwu (1974-1976), Tochi (1981-2013), Chidiebere, and Uchechukwu; and four sons—Chibundu, Chigozi, Ogochukwu, and Chinedu. In spite of receiving no formal education, Priscilla Nma Chukwuma supported her husband in their fifty-one years of marriage, forty-one of which were in ministry. She did subsistent farming, petty-trading, and contributed meaningfully to the sustenance of the family when the pastor’s presence was scarce and resources were lean.

Later Career

Following graduation, Eti returned to the Rivers Mission and was immediately deployed to Bodo district on July 1, 1990. He worked in Bodo while his family remained in Ilishan-Remo so the children could complete the school year. He was in Bodo until January 31, 1991. The following day February 1, 1991, he resumed work in the mission office as church ministries director, a role he filled while also serving as the pastor of Eleme district. Having served for twelve months as church ministries director, Eti was redeployed to serve as mission evangelist as well as chaplaincy director, which included ministry to public campuses. He served in these roles from February 1, 1992 to March 4, 1993.²³

In March 1993, the Rivers Mission attained conference status. Eti was elected the first executive secretary with Simeon J. Okochi the president and Epalibo Grant Esukpa as treasurer. Eti assumed office on March 5, 1993. The three-year term lapsed December 31, 1995, and Okochi retired after over forty years in service. At a constituency meeting held in December 1995, Eti was elected and consecrated as president on January 20, 1996.²⁴ He served with Samuel W. Amadi, secretary, and Epalibo G. Esukpa, treasurer. Eti was elected for a second term on January 20, 1999, with Moses O. Okai, secretary and Emmanuel G. Manilla, treasurer. He served another three-year term till January 19, 2002.

As conference president, Eti had the distinction of visiting every church in the old Rivers Conference. He physically touched every organized church, every company, and every branch Sabbath school. It was a huge encouragement for the churches, especially those in the hinterlands that were having such apostolic visitation for the first time and many have not had it again since then. With his jalopy, an old Peugeot 505, he trudged over hill and dale, mud and swamp, to reach the people of God wherever they were.²⁵ As president of the Rivers Conference, Eti co-chaired with G. C. Nwaogwugwu the committee that pioneered the conception and establishment of the Eastern Nigeria Union Mission which eventually came into being on December 4, 2004. He

also served for six years, from 1996 to 2002, on the board of Babcock University.

Later Years and Retirement

In January 2002, Reuben Eti returned to frontline ministry as a district pastor. He served in Elele, Igbuduya, Yenagoa, Upata, and Ogba districts. His ministry was characterized by fervent prayers, intensive Bible teaching, and mentoring of younger ministers. Pastors who called him mentor and father included Nation Amadi Nation, Uzoma Nwosi, Obioma Sunday, Solomon Dedua, Ahaoma Onyebuchi, and many others. In a personal tribute during Eti's funeral, Nwosi wrote: "The relationship that existed between me and [the] late Pastor Reuben Ezenekwe Eti (rtd) was like the one that existed between Apostle Paul and Timothy of the Holy Bible. I was a son to him but he took me as a ministerial colleague and guided me through the rough waters of my early years in gospel ministry."²⁶

Eti retired on July 1, 2011, after forty-one years of active, diligent, and faithful service. In the same year, he was awarded a Medallion of Honor by the Ministerial Association of the World Church of Seventh-day Adventists for his valuable service. In the first year after his retirement, he served as head teacher of the nursery and primary school in Omoku, where he revised the curriculum. He continued to provide ministerial service in the Rivers West Conference while serving as a local elder, Bible teacher, and prayer ministries coordinator in the Egbada church. He served in various committees of the Egbada community, led the community in fasting and prayer at a time of intense crisis, and provided a safe haven in his home for the fearful, weak, and downcast in the heat of an insurgency that hit the community between 2015 and 2018. As people came to his house to pray, they were assured of the presence and mercy of God. His faith in Jesus was authentic and contagious²⁷

Reuben Ezenkwe Eti died March 10, 2018.²⁸

SOURCES

Adventist Seminary of West Africa, Graduation Bulletin, June 17-19, 1990.

Eti, Chigozi. *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*. Port Harcourt: Synopsis Communications, 2018.

Eze, Simon. *Stories of Our Pioneers*. Unpublished manuscript, 2019. Personal collection of Chigozi Eti.

Nafziger, E. Wayne. "The Economic Impact of the Nigerian Civil War." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 1972): 223-245. Accessed July 5, 2019. www.jstor.org/stable/159964.

"Our History." Babcock University. 2019. Accessed July 5, 2019. <https://www.babcock.edu.ng/about/our-journey>.

Reuben Eti Church Service Record, Eastern Nigeria Union Conference Records, Abia State, Nigeria.

Tayo, Ademola. Condolence Letter on behalf of Babcock University to the family on the demise of Pastor R. E. Eti. May 14, 2018. Personal collection of Chigozi Eti.

“Walking with Jesus: A Summary of the Life of Pastor Reuben Eti.” Funeral Program. May 17, 2018. Personal collection of Chigozi Eti.

NOTES

1. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti* (Port Harcourt: Synopsis Communications, 2018), 22.
2. Chigozi Eti, personal knowledge as son of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti.
3. Eti, 2.
4. Chigozi Eti, 2018, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 21
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Chigozi Eti, personal knowledge as son of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti.
7. Chigozi Eti, 2018, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 4.
8. Chigozi Eti, personal knowledge as son of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti.
9. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 22.
10. Ibid.
11. Chigozi Eti, personal knowledge as son of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti.
12. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2002), 129.
13. 2 Corinthians 1:4, *paraphrased*.
14. E. Wayne Nafziger, “The Economic Impact of the Nigerian Civil War,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 10, no. 2 (July 1972): 223-245, accessed July 5, 2019, www.jstor.org/stable/159964.
15. Ibid., 241.
16. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 16.

17. Reuben Eti Church Service Record, Eastern Nigeria Union Conference records.
18. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 17.
19. Ademola Tayo, Condolence Letter on behalf of Babcock University to the family on the demise of Pastor R. E. Eti, May 14, 2018, personal collection of Chigozi Eti.
20. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 19.
21. Adventist Seminary of West Africa, Graduation Bulletin, June 17-19, 1990.
22. "Our History," Babcock University, 2019, accessed July 5, 2019, <https://www.babcock.edu.ng/about/our-journey>.
23. Reuben Eti Service Record, Eastern Nigeria Union Conference records.
24. Simon Eze, *Stories of Our Pioneers*, unpublished manuscript, 2019, personal collection of Chigozi Eti.
25. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 24.
26. Ibid., 29.
27. "Walking with Jesus: A Summary of the Life of Pastor Reuben Eti," Funeral Program, May 17, 2018, personal collection of Chigozi Eti.
28. Chigozi Eti, *Torn at the Knees: The Story of Reuben Ezenekwe Eti*, 40.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000