

## CHRISTIAN MINISTRY AND SAMUEL YEMEM CHUKUIGWES LEADERSHIP ROLE IN IKWERRELAND, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Theory of the Church Missionary Society is the three-self that is aimed at planting and fostering the development of churches that would be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Principal amongst these is raising native agents who would drive the mission vision through leadership. In Ikwerre, early natives were limited to lay assistants for decades. This paper examined the factors responsible for the delay. They included the people's cultural life, demands of the church on marriage, education, and internal and external discouraging actions. In mid-1950, the narrative was changed with the ordination of Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe was ordained. The emergence of pioneer Ikwerre native clergy revealed the virtues of diligence, humility, patience, faithfulness, and accountability. The paper concluded with a call of missionaries to pursue the founding vision of the CMS by encouraging full native participation in clerical leadership and natives demonstrate Christocentric in their services. In this way the church would be rooted in African soil.

**Key words:** *Agency, Clergy, Christian Ministry, emergence, and Ordination.*

### Introduction

Christian historiography and the development of Christianity in Africa are traced from the pivotal role played by native agents and missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Christianity becomes rooted in many areas as native converts rise to leadership positions. Studies from Kalu, (1980) had confirmed the contributions of native agency in the development of Christianity in the continent. The activities of agents and missionaries in Church planting culminated to the emergence of Christianity in Ikwerre land in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early Ikwerre converts remained in the laity for about six decades. Clergies, such as the orders of bishop, priest, and deacon provides the leadership, while those who responded to the

leadership demand of the church ministered within the outer altar as lay readers, local helpers, church teachers, agents, and catechists. In mid-1950, Ikwerre entered the church clerical ministry.

### **Evolution of Christianity in Ikwerre land**

The name Ikwerre refers to both the people and their language, that also refer to themselves as *Iwhuruohna* (proper natives). They are found in four Local Government Areas of Rivers State that is, Port Harcourt City, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor, and Emohua. Ikwerre constitutes the largest upland ethnic group in Rivers State of the Niger Delta region, south-south, Nigeria. Christianity became rooted in what is known today as Nigeria through the Niger mission of the Reformation (Protestant) Christians in the 1840s championed by missionaries of the Methodist and Church Missionary Society (CMS)- Anglican. This was after the failed attempts in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Portuguese Roman Catholic mission to Benin, Warri, and Itsekiri.

Christianisation of Ikwerre as in most Niger Delta communities did not begin until the natives took the initiative. Christianity entered the area through the waves from the sea. Prior to the founding of Christianity in Ikwerre, the people maintained friendly ties with their principal Niger Delta neighbouring communities of Kalabari, Bonny, Okrika and Ijaw through trade, marriage, wrestling, and other socio-cultural activities. When western education began in the Niger Delta city states through the missionary agencies, some Ikwerre families sent their children across to be educated. In the process of acquiring western education, they were converted to the Christian faith. Most of these converts returned home and started witnessing to their kith and kin, and planting churches. The process of evangelisation of Ikwerre was not homogenous as different communities received the gospel message from different directions and by different missionary agencies.

Chief Ikiri Solomon Agbagbue of Oduoha-Ogbakiri for instance, was converted and baptised as Solomon by Reverend Pokogbo at Kalabari, he returned home and started a Christian worship centre in his home town, Oduoha-Ogbakiri in 1895. The church that started under United Native African Church (UNAC), a fellowship of indigenous believers from the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and other Christian denominations that were passionate about “establishing a Native African Church free from foreign control, in which the people would be free to worship and serve God in all freedom of African outlook, divorced of foreign dogma and with a clear conscience” (Onu, 2018, p.142). The founding of UNAC on September 10, 1891 in Lagos was triggered by the “shabby treatment meted out to Bishop Crowther and his African agents in the Niger mission”. The inaugural worship took place at the *Jehovah Shalom* (the Lord is peace) hall. In 1983, UNAC was changed to The First African Church Mission (TFACM).

Other Ikwerre communities of Odegu received the gospel in 1900 through Kalabari, Obio in 1902 through Bonny, Isiokpo in 1907 through Kalabari, Akpor in 1912 also through Kalabari and Igwuruta in 1916 through Okrika. In 1940, the Oduoha-Ogbakiri church merged with the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) church that was planted in the community few years later. The merger gave rise to the present Saint John’s Anglican Church, being pathfinder Christian congregation in Ikwerre.

### **Christian Ministry and Church Administration in Ikwerre land**

Ministry is the work and service performed by a minister, servant or attendant responsible to a superior authority. Christian ministry is “the office held by persons who are set apart by ecclesiastical authority to be ministers in the church” (*Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 2006, p. 584). Generally, it is the office held by persons who are set apart by ecclesiastical authority to be ministers in the church or whose call to special vocational service in a church is afforded some measure of general recognition, (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2023). Christian ministry is a collective term for the clergy, profession of a minister, service of any of the fivefold offices enumerated by Paul in Ephesians 4:11-12 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher), and by extension, any similar work in the Church (Kurian, 2000). It is the area of service of a Christian, a single aspect of a given responsibility (Onu, 2015). A Christian minister, clergy or cleric is the teacher of the Christian faith, organiser of his church activities, preacher of the word of God, administrator of Church affairs, pastor of his flock, and priest of the parish in his sacramental duties, (Towler, 1969).

In matters of evangelism and mission, the person is the co-coordinator, mobiliser and motivator. A fundamental goal of the CMS mission in Africa “was not to establish itself but to establish a Church-a Church for the local people run by the local people”. This is rooted in the 3s principle of “self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing” church. The Lower Niger Mission under Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther, in reaction to the ill treatment to Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther severed relationship with the CMS Upper Niger Mission, and declared the area Niger Delta Pastorate. It was formally inaugurated on April 29, 1892 in commemoration of the day and month mission work officially began at Bonny. In his declaration, Archdeacon Crowther said:

*We are a self-supporting and self-governing Pastorate Institution, in full communion with the Church of England. We recognize the Church Missionary Society as our Organiser, and are deeply sensible of our obligations to that Society, for we owe to it, our Christianity, and our Church Organisations (Onu, 2018, p. 128 citing Epelle, 1955).*

The division only affected the system and policy of administration, not doctrine and ecclesiastical polity. The Constitution of the Pastorate was ratified by Canterbury in December, 1897, stating that the Pastorate was not prepared to diverge liturgically, theologically and doctrinally from the Anglican Church. The declaration implied that indigenous converts who had the call of God would be encouraged to function in the church ordained ministry. However, Ikwerre converts remained in the lay support ministry until mid-1950s.

### **Ordination of Clergy into Christian Ministry**

Ordination is from the verb ordain meaning “appointing, consecrating, or commissioning of persons for special service to the Lord and His people”. It is the ceremonial appointment of a person into one of the orders of the church ministry; the rite in which God gives authority and the grace of the Holy Spirit to those being made Bishops, Priests and Deacons, through prayer and laying on of hands by bishops (*Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 2006). It is the bestowal of a spiritual gift and imposing of a sacramental character on a man by the prescribed prayer, as when a person is ordained deacon or priest (Onu, 2014).

Ordination involves the recognition that a person has been entrusted by God's grace with appropriate gifts for leadership in the body of Christ, setting the person apart from "normal" responsibilities in order to take up the mantle of leadership in the church, empowering the person with the laying on of hands, and calling the person to accountability. It is the spiritual empowerment of a member of the body of Christ to function in a sacred office for the growth of the church. Priestly ordination gives a faithful the right to minister from the inner altar and celebrate the Eucharist.

On the other hand, word clergy is from Greek *kleros*, signifying "share," or "inheritance," as used in I Peter 5:3 to designate the priesthood of all faithful but ordained, or set aside, for particular service, especially in connection with Eucharistic ministry. It is a body of ordained ministers in the orders of bishop, priest, and deacon to perform pastoral or sacerdotal functions in a Christian church. Clerical ministry traces its beginnings to the commissioning of the Twelve Apostles and the Seventy for service (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2023).

Clergy is a skilled, professional, qualified and expert member of the church, who with the bishop, is called in order to help the whole people of God to be the Church. He is a member of the body of Christ, called by God and ordained by the Church, to minister the word and sacrament, and lead the people of God in the expansion of His kingdom (Onu, 2014). Distinction between clergy and laity developed in the second century. Laity is from Greek *laos* and *kaikoi* meaning the whole people of God, the "*populus*". In the total mission of the church, both clergy and laity have co-responsibility.

### **Factors for the Delay in the Ordination of Ikwerre into the Christian Ministry**

The first is culture; the way of life of the people, their identity that distinguishes them from any other as unique in the society. As an African society, the people naturally believed in the world and power of spirits. Early converts to the new faith accepted church membership, but not to the extent of not seeking assistance and protection from the divinities. They understood that the ordained ministry demanded commitment and exemplary living, which some even today seem not to give it first thought. It was a rule of the church for a faithful not to visit any traditional native altar in search of life solution. The people believed that contravening such rule could lead to premature death and no family wanted to lose any of their illustrious progressive sons to such preventable death.

Another handicap was monogamous marriage. Most Ikwerre as typically African saw polygamy as a mark of attainments and achievements in life, a way of securing one's strength in his society, a device in diplomatic relations, a way of raising and maintaining effective labour force, and a way of reassuring continuity of the family lineage (Tasie, 2001). The Church rules and regulations on marriage, especially for ministers emphasises "one-man one-wife". The emphasis on monogamy was a challenge to the growth of the church in her early years in Ikwerre. When it became difficult to raise leaders at the local congregations, the church had to tolerate men who were willing to bless their marriage with any of the multiple wives to enable the person function in principal local church offices. There was no compromise for those who felt a call to serve in the clerical ministry. Apostle Paul charged Timothy and Titus to appoint ministers (elders) who are "blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination" (Titus 1:5-6; I Timothy 3:2). In 1932 for instance, the Delta Church authorities declined the ordination training of Mr. T. A. Assor of Elele-Alimini who had been a

Church teacher. The reason being that he had more than one wife(Onu, 2020). The man withdrew with some persons and started the African Church in the town.

The third factor was western education. A number of Ikwerre faithful who responded to the call for service in the early years could not advance beyond the lay support ministry-church teacher, agent and catechist. Their main handicap was educational qualification. Scripture says, "For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:7). An ordained minister is expected to be knowledgeable in scripture and western education as to give proper leadership. Lamenting on poor educational standard and its effect on ministerial training in the Niger Delta Diocese inaugurated January 1, 1952, Bishop Yibo Fubarasaid, "Since the inception of this Diocese, there has been a great lack of qualified men for training as ministers... At the last entrance examination, four offered to take the examination, but only one took, and he failed very badly"(Onu, 2020 p.146).

Courage is "that quality of the mind that enables men to encounter difficulties and dangers". Discouragement means to lose courage, faint or lose heart. *Merriam Webster's dictionary* defined the verb discourage as to deprive of courage or confidence, to hinder by disfavoring, extinguish the courage of, to dishearten, depress the spirit, dissuade or attempt to dissuade from doing something or going forward. In the Delta church, training of workers was a joint responsibility of both home church and the Diocese. Then, it was not an easy to receive the blessing (financial support) of a home church for mission training. Rev. Canon Sunday A. Nyenwe revealed that Ogbakiri District Church Council had agreed to give a grant of ten pounds (£10) in support for pastoral training to members. Unfortunately, when he was admitted into the Theological College, not a dime was given him. Even on his ordination day, being December 17, 1965, his home District Superintendent, Reverend Stephen Hart was busy conducting baptismal service. A Synod delegate from Isiokpo church, Mr. Jackson Mpi, directly told Samuel Y. Chukuigwe, that he was too small to be a clergy. Again, after Chukuigwe's ordination, one Mr. Solomon also of Isiokpo church knelt before him and confessed of making efforts aimed at preventing him from being an ordained minister.

The attitude of these discouragers was it borne out of hatred, envy or jealousy? Did the churches have the resources to provide the desired assistance? Were the natives aware of the importance of having indigenous priest? It should be reminded that then, Christian mission work was viewed with disdain, ridicule, and mockery. It was seen as a function of old people that lacked financial benefits as well as social pleasure. Church workers seldom visited home as they were transferred from one mission station to another. The rich ecosystem of the area made the people live a life of self-sufficiency. Then, many natives were not willing to be distanced from their rich home environment or their kith and kin in the name of serving God. To what extent has the story changed is the subject of another discourse.

Lack of interest was a factor for the poor response of native churches to the pastoral education of native personnel. Next was paucity of fund. There was ignorance and disbelief in the potentiality of young people in mission and evangelism work. Scripture says, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the difficult days come, And the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastics 12:1). The Lord God of Israel says, "For those who honour Me, I will honour"(I Samuel 2:30). Again, it was not an experienced, matured, trained, and equipped adult but a simple young person (David) who fought, killed, and lifted the head of the

Philistine WarLord-Goliath to Israel. Also, it was the food provided by a lad that Jesus used in feeding 5000 men with many twelve baskets leftovers.

### **Background of Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe**

In Omueke, Isiokpo in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State lived King Chukuigwe Owbo Ogbuehi, a great warrior, husband of seventy wives, and a prominent colonial court judge who was instrumental to the founding of Christianity in Isiokpo in 1907. Through his marriage with Mrs Hannah Wobia Chukuigwe, a son was born in 1911. The child was named *Elenweryemem* shortened Yemem, literally meaning “women are doing me”. At baptism, the boy was christened Samuel.

King Chukuigwe Owbo Ogbuehi died in 1912, and the mother of Samuel Yemem took him to her parents’ home at Nkarahia where the boy was raised. It was to protect the child from unhealthy problems of polygamous family. Young Samuel started Western education at St Peter’s School Isiokpo where his brilliance, fear of God and passion for the work of God was noticed very early. On completing primary four, the school authorities appointed him an auxiliary teacher due to the dearth of teachers. Eventually, he passed his Standard six examinations in 1932.

### **Pastoral Formation and Ordination of Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe into the Christian Ministry**

His pastoral formation started as he took up teaching appointment with the Delta church serving as both school teacher and lay support worker. He had formal training at St Paul’s College Awka, 1938-1939 which qualified him as a Catechist and School master. He further went for training at the same institution in 1944 through 1945.

In one of the qualifying examination for clerical training Samuel Chukuigwe attended, an Ibo person, Mr. Chukwuka was absent due to the sudden demise of his wife. Surprisingly, when the result was released, the absentee’s name appeared on the list of successful candidates while Chukuigwe’s was conspicuously missing. It was a clear act of name substitution and robbing Peter to pay Paul. It was worrisome as the church is charged, “let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24). The injustice caused Samuel to meet Bishop Patterson and expressed his plight. The Bishop simply answered him, “Don’t be silly” (Samuel Chukuigwe, personal communication, June 9, 2004). I think the bishop may have meant go, “And no man takes this honour to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was” (Hebrews 5:4). Samuel humbly went back to his station and continued his catechist work. Like king David, he encouraged himself in the Lord and waited for the manifestation of God’s will. *“But those who wait on the Lord, shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint”* (Isaiah 40:31).

In 1953, the Church Committee of St. Michael’s Aba where he was serving as Catechist decided to improve the quality of their worship by investing in a modern western instrument. They raised the sum of thirty pounds (£30) for the purchase of an electro-organ. The cash was given to Catechist Samuel Chukuigwe to make payment at Port Harcourt. On his way, the vehicle he was travelling with collided with a locomotive passenger train that was crossing the railway gate at Imo River. The impact of the accident was such that all passengers lost their lives in exception of the driver, a man and his son, and Samuel. He came out of the vehicle with blood stains and the church money. Contrary to the counsel of some persons that he should take the money home and claim that it was lost in the accident, he



decided to express the virtue of truthfulness and honesty. He returned back to Aba, called the Church Committee, narrated the incident, and presented the cash whole and intact to the surprise of all.

The Church Committee, in addition to some material gifts, appointed a delegation who reported the incident to Bishop Ebenezer T. Dimieari. The committee specifically prayed the apostolic father to approve that Samuel be sent for ordination training as a reward for his dedication, honesty and faithfulness. The Bishop presented the matter at a Diocesan Board meeting held at Abonnema and it was resolved that Samuel should proceed on a divinity training. Thus, in 1954, he was admitted to St. Paul's College, Awka for a one-year training. Successful training of Samuel equipped him for the ensuing ordination.

On December 18, 1955 Samuel was made Deacon by Bishop Dimieari alongside five others were at St. Peter's Church, Okrika, thus, emerged Reverend Samuel Yemen Chukuigwe. Expectedly, his ordination was greeted with great joy as Obuoforibo would say; "Brethren, one would exclaim, Behold, the first Ikwerre Priest of the Anglican Communion" (1990, p.106). "As a result all stops were pulled out to celebrate this noble achievement" (Chukuigwe, 2001, p.20). The ordination was an act of mercy and grace of God, as Apostle Paul wrote, "So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16). The development lifted Ikwerre faithful to the House of clergy. What were the characters qualified Samuel for this honour? First was the understanding of his calling as a Christian and representative of Jesus Christ who seeks to lead people to Jesus for their salvation and spiritual growth. Next was his consecration to God, loving and serving the people of God as a faithful steward. Others are conscientious effort to take right actions (hard work) for the good of all, positive connectivity to the people of God in humble obedience and patience. Most importantly was his effective communication of the gospel message in the spirit of honesty and accountability.

The family held a special thanksgiving to God for the ordination on December 26, 1955. Unfortunately, the following day, December 27, he lost his wife, Jemimah to death. His mother, Mrs Hannah Wobia Chukuigwe who was privileged to witness the ordination of his son also died on December 23, 1956. The young Reverend Samuel Chukuigwe was ordained a priest in 1957. The following year, 1958, he married Josephine Nyege of Ipo. On December 6, 1971, he was preferred an Archdeacon. He was canonically collated by Bishop Yibo Fubara on February 27, 1972 at St. Stephen's Cathedral, Bonny as the pioneer Archdeacon of the newly created Port Harcourt Archdeaconry. The Archdeaconry took effect from January 1972 and comprised of fourteen districts and parishes, namely; Ahoada, Apará, Eberi-Omuma, Elele, Eleme, Etche, Evo, Isiokpo, Ndele, Ogbakiri, Ogoni, Omoku, St. Thomas Diobu and Tai. In addition to parish functions, he served as Assistant and main Secretary of Niger Delta Diocese as well as member of Rivers State Governor's Prerogative of Mercy. He retired from active sacred ministry in 1983. Thus, Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe by divine providence emerged as pioneer, pathfinder and premier Ikwerre Christian clergy being the first Deacon, Priest and Archdeacon.

The other pace-setters in Ikwerre Christianity included Right Reverend Monsignor Peter Ohaleté Ohochukwu of Isiokpo first Roman Catholic priest ordained in 1962. Reverend Canon Lawson N. Ndu of Elenwo was first Ikwerre to be preferred Honorary Canon, 1977. Reverend Moses and Venerable Edmund Owo of Omagwa, first father and son to enter into the Christian ordained ministry. The Right Reverend Samuel Onyuku Elenwo of Okporowo-Ogbakiri first Bishop, consecrated March 1, 1983. Most Reverend Dr Blessing Chinyere Enyindah of Omerelu is the first Ikwerre Anglican Archbishop, presented on July 11, 2021 and appointed Dean of Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion in 2023.

### **Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe and Community Leadership**

The mantle of leadership of Omueke-Isiokpo people fell on Venerable Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe in 1982. Being active in pastoral ministry then, someone had to stand in for him. After his retirement in 1983, the people expected to return and take over the leadership but he continued in his mission work. On a faithful Saturday, while he was officiating in a marriage service, his native people entered the parsonage, carefully and diligently parked all his personal belongings into a waiting vehicle and took them to his country home. Returning from the service he saw residence empty. He had no option than to relocate to Isiokpo. Thus, in 1983, by the collective wish of his people, Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe ascended the throne of Omueke and became a member of 'Ohna Isiokpo'. He ruled his people for twenty-six years. Venerable Chief Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe joined the church triumphant on March 29, 2008 and was laid to rest at the premises of Saint Peter's Cathedral, Isiokpo. In all, Samuel Chukuigwe invested 80 years of his life, 1928-2008 in the service to God and humanity; 55 years (1928-1983) in active Christian ministry, and 25years (1983-2008) in impactful community leadership.

### **Conclusion**

The investigation into the emergence of Ikwerre into the Christian clerical ministry revealed that the services of native converts to the new faith were limited to the lay ministry as local helper, church teacher and catechist for six decades. Factors for this limitation included cultural life of the people, challenge of monogamous marriage, western educational qualification, and discouraging acts from both natives and non-natives.

Samuel Yemem Chukuigwe from a humble beginning in Omueke Isiokpo cultural royal family, providence took him to the sacred royal priesthood as the pioneer, pathfinder and pace-setter in Ikwerre Christian ordained ministry. His emergence is an indication that godly character of diligence, humility, patience, faithfulness, and accountability has great reward. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). It therefore portend that the Ikwerre should be encouraged to venture into honourable fields of human endeavour for the general development of the area. The church in Ikwerre should be intentional in teaching the importance of investing in the theological formation of faithful who have the call of God for the promotion of native agency ministry. That faithful who desire to serve God and humanity should be Christocentric, love the people of God, and always think of the progress of the work of the Kingdom.

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