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## Lamentations of a grief-stricken father

Posted By: [BOLAJI OGUNDELE](#) On: September 8, 2018 In: [News Update](#), [Saturday Magazine](#)



*It was a sad and sombre atmosphere in Adagbrasa-Ugolo, Okpe Council Area, Delta State, last Sunday as a 100-year-old building of a parish of the Catholic Church*

*collapsed on parishioners who were there for the morning mass, killing one and leaving tens of others injured. BOLAJI OGUNDELE captures the anguish and pains of victims and their relatives.*



THE day began like any other Sunday: a day devoted to worshipping God. Worshippers at St. Paul Catholic Church, Adagbrasa-Ugolo, an Okpe community, gathered for the morning mass. Even without a priest to lead the service, those that were present were in high spirits, singing hymns and getting on with other normal processions until some of them started sensing strange sounds and vibrations around the church building. Before anyone could really make out what was amiss, the walls had begun to come down on the worshippers.

It was like a scene from a Hollywood movie. There was pandemonium and then graveyard silence as though the same space was not where sonorous hymns were wafting across only a moment ago. Everything went dead quiet as dazed worshippers tried to figure out what had just happened.

Then came shrills, shouts and panic sprints. Those who were not held down by the rubble or collapsed furniture made for the nearest open space; the first thought being running for dear life. Then some who had gotten up and out of the billowing dust realised there might be others who were still held down where they had just managed to escape from; co-worshippers who had not been strong or lucky enough to come out like they did.

This was when the first set of rescue workers, they also being victims of same disaster, resumed duty on the same site they had sprinted out from a couple of minutes earlier. People started calling out those they knew were with them in the church building before disaster struck—family members, friends, even not really close acquaintances—anybody

you could call out, to be sure that they were safe. Then people started going in to pull others out. Before noon, everybody who went in for service had been pulled out, one way or the other.

In all, close to 30 worshippers were rescued from the rubble while one was brought out dead. The unlucky victim, Jeffrey Eukanerhire, an 11-year-old instrumentalist, was busy playing the guitar as he usually did when the incident occurred. About 15 others who were writhing in pains, were later taken to various hospitals for medical care.

### ***Horror moments***

Reliving their ugly experiences during the unusual service, some of the survivors, including Jeffrey's father, Mr Jackson Eukanerhire, said they had no inkling whatsoever of a looming disaster. It was all as sober and Pius as a morning mass should. Although the officiating priest was still being expected, the worshippers had launched into the preliminary rituals of hymnals and prayers.

Describing the horrifying moment in a chat with our correspondent, a parishioner, Miss Elohor Amerotoraine, said the church members were holding the initial service rituals pending the arrival of the officiating priest, when they started observing cracking sounds from the walls around them.

She said: "I was inside the church when it happened. It was between 7.30 and 8.00 am while we were having service. We are under Orerokpe (parish). They posted a seminarian to us, but the seminarian was yet to come when it happened. We had just finished sharing the rosary and were singing some hymns when we started hearing the walls cracking and falling.

"At that point, everybody started running out to escape the falling walls. Before long, the entire church building had collapsed. It even killed an 11-year-old boy (Jeffrey). The five

persons who got injured have been taken to the hospital. I don't think anybody was trapped inside because we all came out."

### *A father's grief*

Distraught Jeffrey's father, Enukanerhire, a former councillor in Okpe Local Government Area and Speaker of the era's legislative house, recalled that he was busy helping in the rescue operations because he was in the church when the incident occurred. It, however, did not occur to him that his resourceful, guitar-playing son was also in the rubble and in need of help.

He said: "I was inside the church when it happened. I was at the back and my son was playing the guitar because he was an instrumentalist. It was between 7 and 7.30 am. Suddenly, we heard a noise and we all dashed out. I then joined other members of the church to rescue those who were trapped. Unknown to me, my son was also trapped in the rubble. It is sad."

Hon. Enukanerhire was then left with the onerous task of burying his beloved son in the afternoon of the incident. But he was not left to face the grief all by himself. He had the entire community by his side, including some of the wounded persons he had earlier joined others to rescue from the billowing dust and rubble of their fallen church building, as well as some government officials who had come at the instance of the state governor, Dr. Ifeanyi Okowa.

One of the survivors of the accident, a middle-aged man, Daniel Oghenekevwe Charles, who joined others to the home of the Enukanerhires to commiserate the family, thanked God for sparing his life. Although he was among the 15 injured persons helped out of the rubble and later hospitalised, he still found time to join others to mourn the dead.

Narrating his experience, Charles said: "We give God the glory, because they say in everything, we should give thanks. We cannot question God. I thank God I survived it."

## *Why the building collapsed*

The incident, the type that has not been heard of in any part of Delta State in recent times, came to many as a surprise. It is still not clear what really went wrong, because, like most of the eyewitnesses said, the cracks and collapses were sudden. However, an eyewitness, who is the community's vice chairman, Mr Daniel Egiwie, suggested that the church building had lasted a hundred years, adding that the weakness in the building's structure might have been responsible for the disaster.

Two other sources corroborated the age of the building and the fact that the church was at the point of celebrating its centenary anniversary. A social/environmental activist, Comrade Sheriff Mulade, whose organisation, the Centre for Peace & Environmental Justice (CEPEJ), is located at Ugolo, which is an adjoining community, attested to the age of the church, saying: "The church, I was made to understand, is preparing to celebrate 100 years of existence when this incident happened. It is a black Sunday and I just want to send my condolences to St. Paul's Catholic Church over the incident."

Also, the Chief Press Secretary to the Delta State governor, Mr Charles Aniagu, while conveying his principal's condolences and solidarity to the victims of the accident, highlighted the fact that the church building had lasted a hundred years.

"The church is a 100-year-old building and in an attempt to rebuild and expand the church, the old church building collapsed as a result of being heavily soaked in water and the weight of worshippers who leaned against the walls while the early morning mass was on," Aniagu had said.

However, the people had not been left to bear their grief and losses alone. Messages of condolence and solidarity have since been pouring in from far and near, promising to provide succour for victims.

The first of such was a promise to foot the bills for the medical treatments, given by the state government. The Commissioner for Special Duties, Barrister Ernest Ogwezzy, who visited the site of the collapsed building, said the state government would take care of the treatment of the injured victims.

Ogwezzy said: “The Governor, Sen. (Dr) Arthur Ifeanyi Okowa, sent me here. He is sad about it. As soon as the incident happened, he called my line and directed me to come straight to see what happened and report back to him. He is sympathetic to those who were inside it.

“I also want to sympathise with the church and extend the condolences of the governor of the state to the bereaved family and those that were hospitalised. The governor also assured me that he will assist with medical bills. We are going to take care of the medical bills.”

To prevent a reoccurrence, Governor Okowa, speaking through his spokesman, Aniagu, in a statement, said the process of building would no longer be left unchecked as government would enforce that proper approvals are obtained before building projects are started in any part of the state.

The statement reads: “While we pledge to pay the cost of treatment of the injured, people must ensure they seek necessary approvals before construction of buildings, particularly public structures, to avoid incidents like this.

“On behalf of the government and people of Delta State, I commiserate with the family of the deceased; the injured; the Speaker of the Delta State House of Assembly; the Chairman of the Okpe Local Government Area, Chief Julius Scott; the Orodje of Okpe, HRM Orhue 1, Major Gen. Felix Mujakperuo (rtd); and the entire Ugolo community in Okpe Kingdom, on the unfortunate incident.

“It is our prayer that the soul of the deceased will rest in peace, and that the injured will experience quick recovery.

“Our thoughts and prayers will continue to be with the people of Ugolo in Okpe Kingdom over this tragedy.”



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