

# WEEKEND LIFE

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Survivor Jennifer with bruised face

## Survivors recall horror scenes at Port Harcourt church stampede

- I watched my daughter shout for help till she passed out, says widow
- 'How my five-year-old son slipped off my hand and was marched to death'
- I nearly lost my life trying to save a child —Survivor

**I** Mrs. Jennifer Jackson has been grappling with nightmares since May 28. Jennifer, whose husband died in 2020, saw death on that day but cheated it by divine grace.

Her 15-year-old daughter, Precious, was however not as fortunate. The fragile soul, who would have turned 16 in October, was marched to death and her feeble bones crushed during the stampede that happened at Polo Club, Port Harcourt, in the early hours of that day.

Jennifer said amid sobs: "I can no longer sleep. I have been having nightmares since the incident occurred."

"I haven't received any medical treatment myself. On Sunday, I almost died because I fainted but my mother brought me back to life."

"I don't have money to go to the hospital after surviving that stampede. My face is swollen and I have injuries all over my body."

"I was busy trying to save my daughter. But I lost her."

The journey that snuffed life out of her daughter and almost took hers started when a member of the King's Assembly, a new generation church based in Port Harcourt, informed her about a give-away programme tagged 'Shop-for-Free, which the church organised at the Polo Club in GRA.

She said: "One lady on our street just saw me. We moved into the area newly. She told me they had something to share in their church."

"On Friday last week, I went to her and asked her about the time for the programme. She said they would open the gate by 4 am on Saturday."

"She said some people were already there on Friday night to sleep over. She advised me to go on time so that I would

■ Mike ODIEGWU, Port Harcourt ■

be able to enter.

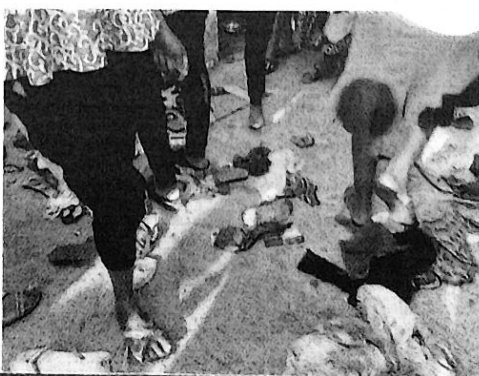
"I told my daughter and my younger brother that the three of us would go to the place together. So, on that Saturday, I woke up at about 3 am and woke my daughter also and we left before 4 am."

"When we got there, the crowd was not much. They didn't open the gate, so we stood there and others were worried that the gate was not opened."

"As we stood there, many other people were coming. After some time, a car came and someone asked us to form a line."

"After we formed a line, more people were still coming. Then we saw some people entering the venue and we wondered where they passed through."

"Some people suggested that we should move closer."



When we got closer, we discovered that the gate was still shut but people were inside."

"We later discovered that there was small gate behind that those people used to gain access to the place. But I told my daughter we should wait."

"I held her hand. We were at the middle of the line. But many people were behind us and were also at various corners."

Jennifer recalled that as the line started moving, there was a sudden surge of the crowd from different corners towards the gate. She fell down with her daughter as the crowd pushed with ferocity. While she cried out faintly gasping for breath, she heard a cacophony of weary voices begging for help. Her daughter let out a dying outcry.

She said: "We fell and I saw myself dying. I heard my daughter shout faintly. Others on the ground were shouting. I shouted too. I discovered that I was dying but I kept praying inside of me. I told God that I came because of food and that he should not allow His servant to die."

"I called on the Holy Spirit to give me strength. 'Holy Spirit, help me. I am your worker, give me strength. I don't want to die here,' I prayed."

"By that time, I didn't hear my daughter's voice again. I didn't feel her shaking too. But I kept praying for help. As I opened my eyes, I saw a crowd of dead bodies lying on the ground."

"I saw my daughter's face come down. But I had no strength to carry her. I kept saying, 'My daughter, please wake up. Both of us came together, you cannot leave me. Please wake up. You are the only helper I have even the food we came to collect, we haven't seen anything, please wake up'."

"I had lost my strength so I couldn't carry her."

Jennifer said people came to pick their loved ones and a

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# Survivors recall horror scenes at Port Harcourt church stampede

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man helped her to carry Precious out of the gate. She lamented that vehicles evacuated her daughter and other victims to the hospital, but there was no immediate medical treatment. She said all the victims were kept in an open field but no medical personnel did anything to revive the dying victims.

She said: "I couldn't hold my daughter because my hands were weak. But the man helped me to carry the girl out of the gate."

"I had no money to carry her out of the place. Some cars came and took us to the hospital. But as we got there, they dropped us on the field. There was no emergency treatment."

"They lay them on the field. I said, 'You brought us here but you are not trying to see whether you can revive these people.'"

"I was begging them to help me revive my daughter. I wanted to call my mother but I had no phone. I started calling my daughter."

"I screamed for help to remove her from there to either my house or to my pastor, Ibiyeomi. I didn't have money."

"I begged a man who gave me N1,500 to call a cab. I called a taxi and asked him to take me to my pastor."

"As we reached, I wanted to carry the girl into the church and shout to see whether my pastor would hear my voice, but they didn't allow me to enter. We waited and the pastors came, prayed and anointed her."

"They asked me to carry her to the church's Save Our Life Hospital. As I got there, a doctor checked her eyes, but I said nothing would happen to her."

"I took her home and started calling her repeatedly. I called another pastor who came and prayed for her, but he told me that the girl was already gone."

Jennifer, who was still inconsolable, said her late daughter was preparing to write the external examination conducted by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) when the incident occurred. She could not also wear the uniform she sewed to mark the Children's Day programme at the church on May 29.

"I have been suffering to raise my daughter. We live in poverty, no money or food, and that was why we went there to see whether we could get food."

"I have not received any good treatment since the incident occurred because I have no money," she said.

Jennifer's mother, Comfort Belema, is also a widow. Her husband died in 2019. She lamented the loss of her granddaughter and prayed for help to enable Jennifer get proper medical attention.

Another victim, Friday Eugene, said the military hospital they were taken to after the incident only gave them first aid. Eugene said he fractured his left leg and that after waiting in vain for the hospital to commence full treatment, his family relocated him to the state-owned Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH).

Recalling the incident, he said he was able to save a child who was trapped, adding that he almost lost his life in the process of saving the child.

He said: "My brother told me of a programme organised by a church holding in Port Harcourt that he heard over the radio that I should try and attend. I was curious to know about the things I could shop for free so I went



•Jennifer watches over her lifeless daughter after stampede

early to the venue.

"As I got there, I saw people gathered in huge numbers at the gate. I was thinking that everything was over, so I rushed in to ask some people that were standing."

"The question had not dropped from my mouth when people started pushing to enter through the gate."

"I saw a little child that fell and I dragged the child out. It was just God that saved me as I pulled with all my strength and my legs were entangled with those of other people and I managed to drag it out broken."

"I don't know the parents of the child, but I handed the child over to the people that took us to the hospital."

"Although the bones of my left leg are fractured, I thank God for my life and that of the child I saved."

## Other horror tales

Madam Abigail travelled all the way from her village in Ahoada to attend the programme. But the poor woman only ended up with a dislocated waist after the stampede. She had since gone back home to look for a professional masseuse to fix her waist after waiting in vain for medical treatment.

She said: "I specifically came to Port Harcourt from Ahoada for the programme

**"We fell and I saw myself dying. I heard my daughter shout faintly. Others on the ground were shouting. I shouted too. I discovered that I was dying but I kept praying inside of me. I told God that I came because of food and that he should not allow His servant to die"**



•Victims' footwear and other items at the scene of the stampede in Port Harcourt

because of the good stories my neighbour's told me."

"I slept over at my sister's place to arrive in time because I was told that many people came last year and there was no space to accommodate them."

"I got there by 5:30 am but quarreled with the gatemen for not allowing us in since there were still seats yet to be occupied."

"I just sat at a corner waiting when the gatemen shouted that we should move away from the gate; that it was not yet time to admit people."

"I don't know what or how it happened, but the wood I was sitting fell on the ground and I hit my waist. That was when I realised that I should have gone back home after the quarrel."

"I could not stand because of the pains. I have gone for massage but the pain is still

there. I didn't attend the programme but my waist is dislocated."

**Eyewitnesses blame security operatives**

Samuel Orji-Eke has been in severe pains since the incident happened. His five-year-old son was among those that died in the stampede. But he said his son would not have died if he had received medical attention on time.

Eke would have lost more than the son because he went there with three of his children as well as his wife. He blamed the church for the incident, saying there was no arrangement for crowd management.

He said: "My son was five years old. Around 6:30 am, I attended the church programme with my three children. I was holding my son and carrying my six-month-old daughter in my arm and my wife was holding the other one."

"When we got there, the gate was locked and the crowd was not much. People were refused entry, and in such a church event, the gate was not supposed to be locked."

"This made the crowd to swell and it became too much that the entire road was





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blocked. That was when they opened the gate and there was a mad rush to enter. It was in that process the stampede occurred.

"We had entered the gate properly when people started to fall and the ones coming behind trampled on them. That was when they marched me and broke my hand, and my son slipped off and was marched to death.

"At the time the incident happened, there was no presence of police officers but only ushers. It was when the place became rowdy that policemen came and started shooting in the air to disperse the crowd after the damage had been done.

"My son did not die immediately but when it happened, there was no help, no first aid. I am calling for justice for a church to openly invite people and no proper logistics."

Felix Sylvester Emizibo, a taxi driver, said he was at the scene when the stampede occurred, having conveyed one of his customers to the venue of the programme.

The customer, Patience Emesiobi, whom he described as a friend, died after the stampede. He, however, said it was the gunshots that were fired in the air by security operatives that

triggered the stampede.

He said some operatives of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) later arrived at the scene when a mammoth crowd was struggling to enter the venue. He said there was pandemonium after the gunshot.

Emizibo said: "After dropping off my family friend, Patience Emesiobi, I had to stay around a little further to see the items the church was going to give and how they really wanted to do it.

"About 10 minutes after I dropped my friend, who is also a neighbour, I saw the crowd trying to access the premises through a pedestrian gate, pushing themselves in the process.

"Not quite long after that, we heard gunshots from the security personnel there.

"After we got there, it didn't take more than

four to five minutes before men of the civil defence came. The police came later than the civil defence. I think the first set of security operatives that arrived at the venue was the civil defence, followed by the police.

"I really never got a glimpse at the security operatives that fired the shots, but I heard it was the civil defence personnel that fired three shots.

"There was pandemonium immediately after the gunshots. There was this mad rush of people with children, some of them pregnant ladies and the elderly. They were all rushing through the gate to get into the premises, and in the process, the stampede happened.

"I saw a lot of dead bodies. Many of them were lifeless. Children were marched by the crowd. When I finally found my friend Patience, she was equally lifeless.

"Those of us that had vehicles conveyed the victims to the military hospital. I took my friend Patience Emesiobi to the military hospital, where a doctor confirmed her dead."

He, however, said the hospital attended to the victims based on its capacity. He said many could not be admitted because on their arrival, they were pronounced dead, adding that his friend was confirmed dead on a stretcher and could no longer be admitted in the hospital.

He said others, whose loved ones were pronounced dead, took them to other hospitals for confirmation. He said although the church tried to put measures in place for crowd management, its efforts were not adequate.

"I think the church did not expect that a lot of persons would come, and that was why they even hired Polo Club as the venue.

"The church must have thought that Polo Club was wide enough to accommodate the crowd they were expecting, but the church failed in managing that crowd in good time," he said.

Felix insisted that though the incident happened before the 9 am the church scheduled to commence the programme, they should have started their crowd management earlier.

He said: "I will first and foremost blame our attitude as a people, as Nigerians generally. When it comes to issues like this, they rush.

"At least we need to have some level of self control, show some kind of dignity whenever we find ourselves in public places.

"I will also blame the church. If you give an open invitation to a number of persons like this, you should expect that things like this are possible.

"Arrangements ought to have been on ground to control the crowd to avert a stampede of this kind.

"I will blame the government too. The government has never taken the welfare of the people seriously. I think there is hunger in the land."

#### Black Saturday

May 28<sup>th</sup> was, indeed, a black Saturday. Although the police said 31 persons including children died in the stampede, the death toll, it was later gathered, was more than 50. Their lifeless bodies littered the ground of the Polo Club.

The victims had gone in search of free food and other gift items promised them by the church, but they died even before the distribution of the items could begin. Individuals who escaped with injuries like Jennifer had been abandoned to cater for their medical needs.

The acting Police Public Relations Officer, Iunge Grace Koko, said the police would probe the incident to determine its remote and immediate causes. The Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike, also vowed to constitute a panel to probe the tragedy.

Despite the promises, nothing has been said of the tragedy about one week after it occurred. People have since been going about their normal activities as if nothing had happened.

King's Assembly, whose outreach programme caused the stampede has only regretted the disaster but has not taken further steps to ameliorate the pains of the victims and deceased families.

The church, in a statement, signed by its Director of Administration, Chimeka Elem, tried to give an excuse that the stampede happened before the commencement of its "benevolent and outreach programme called Shop-for-Free".

Elem described the programme as non-denominational and said its purpose was to share with the less privileged the gifts provided by members of the church, friends and partners.

"Unfortunately, lives were lost and several people sustained varying degrees of injuries," he said.

Elem added: "While the incident has been reported to the Nigerian Police Force, the church has commissioned a team of safety specialists to establish the immediate causes of the stampede to enable us provide the authorities all required information in compliance with public safety laws.

"Our Shop-for-Free programme was started in 2014 as our annual benevolent outreach and our choice of the large venue, Polo Club, was to accommodate the projected attendance.

"This year's turnout, buildup and the attendant circumstances were absolutely unanticipated. The crowd converged overnight long before the security team for the event took formation."