

# The Ebonyi Church Killing

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EDITORIAL



LAST week, a 55-year-old woman, Mrs Chinyere Agwu, was shot dead on the premises of a church in Ebonyi State. According to reports, Agwu and two other women were about to step into the church hall of the Solution Ground International Ministries located on Okigwe Road, Amasiri, in the Afikpo North Local Government Area of the state around 5am on Sunday, March 24, when a man identified as Paul Okoudu allegedly opened fire on them. Strangely, as admitted by the general overseer of the church, Pastor Michael Uche, Agwu's killing had been fortuitous, as the suspect's real target was his (the suspect's) own mother.

Prior to the attack, the suspect had allegedly threatened to deal with his mother over an alleged squabble between her and his wife. Corroborating the story, an assistant pastor in the church, Emmanuel Onyiagha, said that the congregation resorted to self-help after failing to secure the assistance of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad in the area to rescue the victim. Onyiagha said Agwu was later rushed to the Mater Hospital in Afikpo, where it was discovered that she had suffered multiple bullet wounds before she died. The Police Public Relations Officer in the state, Mrs Loveth Odah, said the suspect had been arrested and would be charged to court if investigations linked him to the crime. Odah said: "The report before me says he used a locally-made pistol to shoot the woman. We are calling on Ebonyi residents to come up with useful information on anyone with criminal record, who is bent on committing criminality in the state."

Cases of killings in the hallowed grounds of religious premises are sadly not strange to Ebonyi State. In October last year, a group of assailants attacked a group of youths inside a Methodist Church in Obodo Ogbeni village in Umuoguduakpu community in Ohaukwu Local Government Area of the state. The hoodlums inflicted machete cuts on the youths who were performing a band practice in the church, killing one of them, Augustine Ogbu, a 15-year-old. And in yet another tragic incident in October 2016, the state police command confirmed the murder of a 60-year-old, one Philip Ugwu, by suspected worshippers following a land dispute in Afikpo Local Government Area. The then Public Relations Officer of the command, George Okafor, said that the incident occurred at Amebo-Ndebo village and that one

Tochukwu Okoh, an evangelist, was arrested in connection with the incident. The victim, popularly called Boxer or Coach, had reportedly argued with the worshippers in a new generation church over the erection of a fence to demarcate lands.

It is indeed unfortunate that in spite of the efforts of the Ebonyi State government to nip crime in the bud, cases of killings of innocent souls have yet to abate in Ebonyi, as in many other states of the federation contending with security crisis. Evidently, the security agencies, particularly the police, cannot prevent all killings, but they certainly can curb most with heightened intelligence gathering and prompt response to distress calls. It is sacrilegious to take any life, and in this regard the point is not whether the action is carried out in a worship premises or at a local restaurant. All lives matter in all situations and the state has a bounden duty to protect its citizens wherever they are performing legitimate activities at any point in time. Symbolically and emotionally though, killings in areas dedicated to the observance of religious rites tend to attract greater attention because of the religious nature of the Nigerian society where reverence for the Supreme Deity is a cardinal feature of life regardless of the faith professed by each person.

In the current case, it is indeed saddening that a mother of seven who chose to attend church was cut down right on its premises, and by the son of another member nonetheless. What this suggests is that life is unsafe in the country and that governments at all levels need to step up their act and arrest the gradual slide into anarchy. To say the least, a state that cannot guarantee the peace and security of its citizens has no right to ascribe that title to itself. Killings and other crimes foster an atmosphere of fear and apprehension and ought to be discouraged with all the ideological and repressive apparatuses available to the state within the boundary of its laws.

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But there is another salient question thrown up by the Ebonyi tragedy: the collapse of societal values. To say the least, it used to be a sacrilege for a son or daughter to lay hands on, let alone kill, his or her parents. Sadly, we can only hope that this is still the case given the frequency of odd and barbaric incidents that defy logic and any cultural explanation in the country. To put it mildly, the falcon can no longer hear the falconer in the Nigerian society. Life is becoming increasingly worthless because of the descent into immorality and the increasing abhorrence of time-honoured values, particularly by the nation's youths. The family, the primary socialisation unit, has virtually collapsed, unable to bear the weight of bad governance and societal threats. Poverty is rife and tempers are high, increasingly approaching the borders of lunacy. Therefore, as we have said time and gain, tragic incidents like the recent one in Ebonyi cannot be effectively addressed without paying attention to moral, ethical and cultural values.

Indeed, what kind of disagreement with parents could have justified the murder that Paul Okoudu allegedly committed, albeit missing his real target? If indeed the mother had done things to his wife with which he was displeased, were there not channels within the family and the larger society through which these infractions, assuming but not conceding that there were any, could have been addressed? Why seek to kill her? As it were, Okoudu's mother is lucky to still be alive, but another woman lies in the grave because of her fractious relationship with her son. With the way things have turned out, it can only be hoped that appropriate steps have been taken by the authorities to safeguard her life. Needless to say, the police in Ebonyi State must keep their word and ensure that justice is done in this case. They must also ensure that they extend the intelligence dragnet with a view to curbing any reprisals by those aggrieved over Mrs Agwu's killing.

We commiserate with the family and friends of Mrs Chinyere Agwu and wish them the fortitude to bear the irreparable loss.