

Pastor, wife and only child perish in auto accident

Dada Aladelokun

Should thousands of people die on a Saturday, even in a pogrom, as it is often said, voices will rise the next day in hearty praises to God. No argument. However, whoever expects pulsating rhythms from the choir of St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church, Aguda, Surulere, Lagos, even in the next couple of weeks, is a wishful thinker.

For the past three weeks, the church has, in its tradition, been celebrating the beginning of new weeks, but strange enough, without one of its shepherds, Reverend Chris Okonkwo.

Yes, the congregation's unshaken faith has kept the church going, but the choristers' drums have ceased to give the neighbourhood its usual joyful "disturbance."

Even Reverend Okonkwo's lovely wife has not been in such services. Just like celebrating a birthday without the celebrant, one would say.

As the Saturday Punch correspondent was told on Wednesday at the church premises, the church has never had it this troubling since April, 1990, when it was declared open for worships by Reverend Abiodun Adetiloye.

On his way back to Lagos from Ilorin,



•Rev. Okonkwo and his wife, Ijeoma... before their sad end

Kwara State, where he reportedly had a stop-over for a conference, while returning from his hometown in Anambra State on August 14, 2006, the devil played the hard one on Reverend Okonkwo's family. He died with his wife, Ijeoma, in a ghastly auto accident.

And if you are wondering how their children would stand the grief and ultimately

weather the storm to adulthood, come off it! Victor, the couple's only child was involved. Like his parents, he did not live to recount how the calamity occurred.

Indeed, the vast church was a shadow of its usual self that Wednesday, when the correspondent visited.

Even petty traders and artisans on Yeside Street on which the church is located, re-

mained petrified with fear and shock. Many still wondered why a family would perish in an accident "just like that."

Apparently unaware of the tragedy, a woman, who according to her, had come from Agege, a Lagos' suburb, to meet with the cleric on an undisclosed problem, stood transfixed on a spot on the street for about three minutes after learning about the incident. She gave her name as Mrs. Faith Ugochukwu.

For that while, she could not close her mouth as she stared at the church and her informants. She could not decide whether to shout or wail. Visibly shocked, she simply dashed away with her problem.

Those in the church for the day's special service as at 9.13 am that day were fewer than 25. They plucked up the fortitude to put the tragedy behind them and be part of the programme.

"I remember that I was here early last year for a service like this. That day, even as early as 8 am, the whole place had got filled up; what is happening?" the correspondent asked one of the church's security guards, who obviously, was yet to overcome the shock.

"Oga, the death of the Curate with his wife and only child three weeks ago shook the church, and as you can see, it is still shaking it," the young man responded after a sigh of agony, as he threw his head back into his waiting right palm where he sat outside the church, dejected.

He was to later explain why none of other priests of the church was available to speak with the correspondent, "You cannot find any priest around; not even the church secretary, who, normally should speak with you. They all travelled to Anambra State for the burial of the Curate, his wife and child. The burial took place yesterday (Tuesday) and we are expecting them back today (Wednesday)."

Undoubtedly, quite many will try to conjecture how the cleric's kinsmen would receive his dead body alongside those of his wife and child.

Not a few, according to neighbours who knew the Man of God, will miss him greatly. "He, like other priests in the church, was a wonderful father and spiritual counsellor to many, no matter your tribe and where you came from," said a neighbour, who simply gave his name as Patrick.

All Richard Nwankwo, an activist lawyer and member of the church could say on the tragedy was, "It is shocking, but God knows best. From Him we all came and to Him we shall all return."

On Thursday, the correspondent was there again, but the senior priest, who a source said, was the only person that could speak on the matter officially was not around. But the source revealed, "Reverend Okonkwo will be missed by all. He was a gifted, disciplined and very hardworking servant of God. Though he worked closely with other Curates in the church as one family, they also had a lot of regards for him. Yes, he will be missed, but God's decision on him cannot be queried."

A big blow, it is, no doubt, on the church. But one would naturally expect it to summon the spiritual courage to bear the loss, that the drums of salvation may remain loud in the sanctuary.

Reckoning day for robbers in the cloaks of policemen

Sesan Olufowobi

What will you do if you are walking down the street and a policeman orders you to stop? Will you ignore the order and move on, or obey the policeman?

Different people, no doubt, will have different responses to this question. As far as the spokesman of the Lagos State police command, Olubode Ojajuni, is concerned, the police have the right to stop anybody, so it is an order that must be obeyed absolutely. "You don't know whether they are on stop-and-search duty or any such thing. You have no choice but to obey," he said.

That, perhaps, was what was on the mind of Muhammed Sanni last Sunday when he obeyed the order of three men who claimed to be policemen on stop-and-search patrol.

He was on his way home from a function around 8 pm, and on reaching Famiku Street in Agege area of Lagos, he was stopped by the three men. But as soon as he stopped, one of them pointed a locally made pistol at him, forcing him a dark corner where he was given the beating of his life before his two handsets, the sum of N4, 000 and other valuable items were collected from him.

But luck ran out on the robbers who had wasted valuable time dealing with Sanni before they robbed him of the items. By the time they escaped into the night, some curious residents of the area had recognised one of them, identified as Idowu Giwa.

Soon enough, policemen from Isokoko Police Station were able to apprehend Giwa who quickly revealed the identities of the two accomplices. Then at the station, the three of them, Giwa, Ladimeji Adebisi and Yinka Awosola, told the Saturday Punch correspondent that they did not see themselves as robbers but as adventurers who were out to get what they would eat by whatever means.

According to 20-year-old Giwa, the



•The robbers after they met their Waterloo

leader of the gang, hunger forced him into the hard life that he led. "Since my parent died and I had to drop out of school two years ago, I have had to fend for myself."

But for Aweosola (19), who trained as a motor mechanic, survival was so difficult that he could not resist the urge to join the gang.

The youngest of the three, Adebisi who is 18 years old, is actually a commercial bus driver. He told Saturday Punch that he joined the gang as a result of curiosity. "That was the first time I joined them. They used to do it a lot but I just said let me see how they actually do it. I'm not a robber. I even sometimes carry policemen here when they need commercial vehicle for patrol. Ask them," he said.

Giwa said they used to conduct the 'business' in the evening so that they could enjoy the cover of darkness.

"We don't have a particular spot where we operate. We just go somewhere that is not too rowdy and wait for a victim."

According to him, they preferred to go for someone that was alone, "like this one that landed us here. We saw that he was alone and we went for him."

He further revealed that once they had identified a victim, they would quickly position themselves as a police patrol team. Once their victims get near, one of them

would shout, "stop, police," and as soon as the man stopped they would explain that they were plain clothes detectives on stop-and-search duty. Once the victim relaxed, they would pull their gun and drag him away from the road for a few metres. As soon as they had robbed their victim, they would disappear into the night. They could regroup and go to another spot or call it a day. "It depends on how much we make from them (victims)," said Awosola.

He added that apart from the cash they collected from the victims, the handsets would also be sold at rates that ranged between N2, 000 and N7, 000, depending on how sophisticated.

Although the trio pledged to become law abiding citizens if they were pardoned, Ojajuni said that could not be too soon because they would have to face the consequences of their action. "They will be taken to court. There are many of them around, using the name of the police to do evil. We are on the look-out for them. We are appealing to the public that any act of crime should be reported so that the police will know what to do to curb it and also patrol the areas where the crime had taken place. People should also be more careful and realise that no policeman will conduct a stop-and-search in a secluded or very dark place," he said.