

# Family, church at war over missing pastor

■ He drowned in boat accident –Bishop ■ It's a lie, show us the corpse –Family

By Murphy Ganagana

**As a young man, he traded in auto spare parts in Nigeria's northern cities of Kaduna and Abuja for almost a decade.**

The second child among seven siblings, Ikenna Nnadi, who hailed from Ovoko in Igboeze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, believed he had a divine call from the beginning, and had the whole desire to preach the gospel.

In 2011, he enrolled for a two-year programme at the Grace of God Mission Theological School in Onitsha, Anambra State, and graduated in November 2012. Thereafter, he served at the zonal headquarters of the church at Asaba, Delta State, before he was posted to Okpai, a riverine community in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of the state in 2014.

For Ikenna, aged 47, sharing the word of God as an evangelical Christian was a divine mandate to save 'unbelievers' from going to hell. So, daily, he was engrossed with the message, and the people. In the line of duty, he had a few dangerous encounters which further strengthened his faith, though he was mindful not to take unnecessary risks.

On Wednesday, February 3, 2021, he set out on a journey to Utchi, a community in the same local government area aboard a motorized boat for a church meeting on the invitation of a fellow pastor, Benjamin Nwabueze.

On board with him were two Deacons of the church, Chukwuma Obi and Edwin Ezechi. There were also about six other passengers, including the boat driver. That was the last time Ikenna was seen.

The next day, his elder brother, Uchenna Nnadi, woke up in the morning to behold an unpleasant text message from an unfamiliar number. The SMS was sent twice within a space of three minutes, at 11:59p.m on Wednesday, February 3, and 12:02a.m on Thursday, February 4. It read: "With heavy heart, Utchi district, Pastor Ikenna Nnadi's station finds it very hard to break this sad news to you that Pastor Ikenna was involved in a water accident and hasn't been seen till now after much search."

Uchenna was momentarily shocked, but he managed to put a call to the phone number from which he received the SMS and was told Ikenna went for a church meeting at Utchi, Oboma with two other members of the church and on their way back to Okpai, the speed boat capsized and only Ikenna, out of the eight others, including three women, was missing.

“The family made unsuccessful attempts to reach the founder of Grace of God Mission Church, Bishop Dr. Paul Nwachukwu. However, a text message to Bishop Paul Nwachukwu Jr., first son of the founder), was replied as he refused to answer voice calls. The texts were sent to the following numbers of his; +234803 321 0517 and +234706 084 1763”, Uchenna narrated to Sunday Sun, as the following dialogue allegedly ensued between them via SMS on February 5.

**“Uchenna:** We are having a great challenge locating my younger brother, Pastor Kevin Nhadi of Okpai Ibusu, Grace of God.



**Bishop Paul Jr.:** Is he missing?

**Uchenna:** That appears to be so, we have no clear information from his district/station after they attended church meetings across the river.

**Bishop Paul Jr.:** Do you have the number of their leader?

**Uchenna:** No, except for a number that sent me text that my brother is missing: +234 807 162 1527”.

Since then, Ikenna has not been found, not even his body. And his family is disillusioned with the church over the scanty information provided on his ill-fated trip and the sheer number of unknowns. Questions have been asked without answers and many more have emerged. Questions on how only Kelvin died in a mishap in which about eight persons were aboard a boat; why neither the church nor the boat owner failed to report the accident to the police until the family lodged a complaint seven days after? Why is Ikenna's mobile phone still functional after his disappearance? And why did the church fail to officially notify the family after the incident occurred?

His family is worried that his disappearance and presumed death is a mystery that has no satisfying end – strange, creepy, and frustrating, and therefore wants the police to ensure it does not get listed among the most baffling unsolved mysteries of our time.

In a petition to the Inspector General of Police dated February 15, 2021, an Onitsha, Anambra State-based law firm, Obumse & Obumse, Ofunne Chambers, wrote on behalf of the missing pastor's elder brother, Uchenna Nnadi, to the Inspector General of Police (IGP), to take over the matter for diligent investigation.

The three-page petition titled, "Mysterious Disappearance of Pastor Ikenna Nnadi", was signed by Uchenna's solicitor, R.I Obumse. It read in part: "It is my brief that Ikenna Nnadi until the time of his disappearance was a pastor attached to Grace of God Mission Church at Okpai in Kwale, Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State. He was married with children.

"It is my further brief that on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 2021, my client received a text message from an unknown number informing him that Ikenna Nnadi got drowned after a boat accident on their way back from Utchi in Kwale, Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State. According to the text message, they were returning from a meeting in company with other church members. Apart from Ikenna Nnadi, nothing happened to all other occupants of the boat.

"My client informed me that he contacted the son of the General Overseer of the Grace of God Mission who incidentally is the Bishop of the church and overall boss within Ndokwa metropolis in the name of Bishop Nwachukwu Junior. Unfortunately, nothing positive came out from that angle. The said Bishop Nwachukwu Junior stated categorically that he was unaware of any such incident.

"My client thereafter took a trip to Okpai and lodged a formal report at the Divisional Police Station, Ashaka in Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State. On the instruction of the DPO, Mr. Idris Harima, the police visited the scene of crime. Deacon Chukwuma Obi, one of those who were in the boat was arrested while Deacon Edwin Ezechi ran into the bush immediately he sighted the police vehicle. He was subsequently apprehended after a long chase...The church members who promised to bring the other members who were in the boat on that fateful day failed woefully to produce them.

"Up till date, no reasonable explanation was given as to how only Ikenna Nnadi out of the many occupants of the boat disappeared neither was his corpse shown to the family. No search party was conducted to recover his body, especially where the incident was said to have occurred at the bank of the river. No explanation was given as to why Ikenna Nnadi's phone is still functional despite the fact that the phone was in his possession throughout the incident...The Bishop as overall chief executive/General Overseer claimed ignorance of the mysterious disappearance of his church pastor Ikenna Nnadi.

"The entire scenario points to an irresistible conclusion that the Church members in collaboration with the boat driver knew exactly what happened to Ikenna Nnadi. It is my humble submission that if the sudden disappearance of Ikenna Nnadi is not thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators brought to book, it will only mark the beginning of such ugly occurrence in the said area and beyond, especially given the dilly-dally attitude of the Church in the said matter. The life of a Nigerian citizen is as precious as the life of all Nigerian citizens and we urge you sir to do all within your powers to unravel this mystery and punish the perpetrators accordingly".

Following the petition, the immediate past IGP, Mohammed Adamu, had directed that the Special Tactical Squad (STS) at the Force Intelligence Bureau (FIB) in Abuja, take over investigation into the

incident from the Delta State police command. It was learnt that the case was promptly transferred and it is currently being handled by detectives at the STS.

However, in an interview with Sunday Sun, Uchenna, who spoke on behalf of the family, gave an insight into the family's suspicion, frustrations, and the circumstances surrounding the appeal for the IGP's intervention.

Hear him: "There was no communication from the Church, beyond the exchange of texts, on the whereabouts of their own pastor, Pastor Ikenna Kevin Nnadi to his family, not even to his wife, who has been battling in and out of hospitals with her little child. However, members of Qkpai community came to stay with his wife till the family reported the incident to the police.

"On February 10, 2021, the family reported the matter to the Divisional police station, Ashaka, Ndokwa East, Delta State. And through the help of the vigilante, the two members of the church that went to the meeting with him were arrested. Qkpai is a difficult terrain for the police as the community usually resist arrest violently; officers have lost their lives there.

Subsequently, the boat driver, who initially ran away, and the pastor that called the meeting at Utchi were also taken into custody at Ashaka Police Division.

"The Divisional Police Officer of Ashaka approved the transfer of the matter to the State CID, Asaba on the 23rd February, 2021. On the 24th, the four suspects were moved to the State CID. On the same day, the founder of GGM (Grace of God Mission) Church, Bishop Dr. Paul Nwachukwu, called the family. Like his son who called earlier on the 17th, he was not concerned about his pastor that has been missing for three weeks then; he was worried and expressed his strong displeasure over the family reporting the matter to the police.

"Being a man of means and huge network, the family implored him to use his means to find the missing Ikenna instead of threatening the family into silence and abandoning the family in time of great need. This reinforced the family's resolve to seek stronger police intervention, and believed therefore that moving the case to the State CID Asaba was the right thing. The situation the family met at the State CID, Asaba indicated less to be desired, hence the family intensified their effort for Inspector General (IG) of Police to intervene and take over the matter.

"Neither the Church nor the community, the boat owner or the driver reported to the police about the missing pastor until the family sensing there is more to it, reported to the police after seven days of the incident. Yet the State CID was comfortable releasing the suspects without ado.

"The Church in a bid to frustrate the family into silence went to the Benin zonal police headquarters to drop a counter petition against the family of the missing Pastor Ikenna Kevin Nnadi. Unknown to the Church, the family had already sought the Inspector General of Police's intervention.

“On the 10th of March, 2021, a team from Abuja came to take over the matter. To everyone’s disappointment, the four suspects have been released and the State CID, Asaba was not able to get the suspects. It was also discovered that no further investigation has been carried out before releasing them. The church has now brought more pressure for the case to be returned to State CID, Asaba”.

Uchenna says the family suspects that his younger brother did not board the boat with other members of the church on the alleged ill-fated return trip to Okpai; they fear something horrible had befallen him elsewhere but the church was being economical with the truth.

Bishop Paul Nwachukwu, founder and General Superintendent of the Grace of God Mission, however, says such a conspiracy was impossible. Speaking through his lawyer, Barrister Josiah Nduka, he said Uchenna had resorted to cheap blackmail.

“Let me tell you, the boat owner does not even attend the church. So, how can you have the type of conspiracy he is talking about with people who are not even related. To have a conspiracy of how many men in order to kill one person, it is not possible. I am a lawyer; there are conspiracies that are not possible. But like I told you, somebody who is bereaved, I understand”, he said in a telephone interview.

Dismissing the family’s posture as cheap blackmail, he queried: “Was Bishop Nwachukwu the one that called the meeting? This is a local meeting called by a district pastor; did they not tell you that? Ikenna’s brother who called you, did he not tell you that? Why does it have to be a cheap blackmail, because that is what he is doing; a district pastor called a meeting; not just himself (Ikenna), he went with other people. Nobody in the hierarchy of the church was part of it. And if you send people from your house to the market, is it not possible that an accident could occur? So, why all this blackmail, why? I don’t understand it”.

While responding to a Sunday Sun question on the proper step to take when an incident occurs, Nduka said, “Of course, it is expected that the people who were around the scene of the accident should make a report”.

However, when asked if he found out whether any report was made by the church members to the police before Pastor Ikenna’s family reported the incident, he said, “To the best of my information, these people managed to even survive. And as survivors, we have what we call the dilemma principle. Somebody in a dilemma may not take a decision he would take under normal circumstances; I’m sure you know that. When you put this in insight, yes, it’s perfect. But when you make a real time decision, it could be a different thing”.

On if it wasn’t proper for the church at whatever level to report the incident to the police when it occurred? Nduka retorted: “I ask you again, this question, if an incident occurs in a local assembly, why will you go to the head of the church to ask this type of question? If you were asking why the local congregation did not report, it would be understandable, but it was on the wrong premise, and I see it

as the usual pattern. Every time a Pentecostal church is involved, it is always so. Why does it have to be so?

Nduka further contended that it was unnecessary at the moment for the authorities of the Church to inquire from the local leadership why the incident was not reported to the police seven days after it occurred. He said: "How can they do that now, when the police are already investigating the matter? Anything the Church authority does now will be interference to the investigation. I am sure you know that".

He, however, denied knowledge of a counter petition written against members of Pastor Ikenna's family by the Church authorities to the police zonal headquarters in Benin, Edo State, as alleged by Uchenna.

Has the Church taken any steps to assuage the pains of Ikenna's family which seem to be at war with the Church? Nduka thinks otherwise, and justifies his position. "If a family decides to toe the police line, what else do you want the Church to do? I have advised them legally, and my advice is that we should wait; we should not be accused of interfering with police investigation.

"Why will they be at war with the church? You see, my brother, if I come to you now and I start accusing you of cover up, what will you do? The thing you will do is to take precaution, is it not so? So, if you accuse the church of cover up, what do you expect them to do? I am sure they have a lawyer writing petitions for them; if they are serious, let them reach out to me. We talk lawyer to lawyer. If there are things they want to be done, we look at it and if it's something doable, we do it. But if they think that by blackmail they will get something, well, I wish them good luck".

It's over three months since the occurrence of the boat mishap in which Ikenna was said to have drowned, but his body has not been found contrary to the common belief by the locals, a situation that has heightened suspicion of a foul play by members of his family and worsened their agony.

But Nduka says it shouldn't be a worrisome situation. His words: "No, it doesn't worry me, and you know why it doesn't worry me? Because this may not be the first time somebody died and the body was not seen. It has happened before. And if there were no eyewitnesses, the people who went with him to the meeting, who encountered the same accident with him, it would have been a different thing. There were people, in fact, survivors, who were eyewitnesses; who went for the same meeting with him. Anyway, I do not blame somebody who lost a relative. So many things will come to the person's mind".

When asked what would be his honest advice to the Church in the circumstances, he said it depends on what Ikenna's family wanted. "It depends on what the family wants, because the way they are approaching this issue, they appear to be convinced that something horrible happened to their son, though the death alone is horrible. So, there is nothing you can do unless they calm down and come to a point of reasonableness. The person who lost a loved one is entitled to cry, we understand that. As a Church, we cry with those who cry; we comfort those who are bereaved. But if you don't allow

the church to do that, what will the church do? What do they want the church to do? Let them come up, we are waiting for them”.

In the meantime, Ikenna’s young wife, Ifeoma, has become an emotional wreck. Daily, she sits at her home with arms akimbo, gazing intermittently at the sky and her two children, Favour,6, and two-year-old Chukwudalu, apparently at a loss on what would become of their future.