

A Reluctant Pastor

After her husband's death, Nkechi Francis Anayo-Iloputaife became the head of one of the largest churches in Africa.

When her husband was murdered in 1995, Nigerian pastor Nkechi Francis Anayo-Iloputaife doubted she could survive the grief, much less handle the reigns of their growing Victory Christian Church in Lagos. But today the ministry is taking the city by storm with dozens of community services, including a 24-hour prayer chain, daily Bible studies and monthly Agape Sundays when the church offers food, clothing and medical services.

Just six years ago, Iloputaife was a pastor's wife, content with ministering beside her husband, Bishop Harford Anayo Iloputaife. The couple started the ministry with 12 Bible students in their garage in 1984 and watched it grow to 10,000 members—making it one of many large churches in Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. By 1995, Victory had planted 10 satellite churches, carrying the ministry's vision to see the lame walk, the dumb speak and the blind see as far away as London and Trinidad.

Though the pastors frequently ministered together, Iloputaife allowed her husband to take the lead. Though some African cultures encourage women to play subservient roles to men, Iloputaife says she grew up in an environment where women were celebrated. Yet she lacked confidence in her own ability, and only at her husband's insistence did she begin preaching on Sundays.

"My husband believed that everything he could do spiritually, I could do," she says.

Soon she was preaching alone throughout Africa and overseas. During this time she had a dream in which she was ministering before thousands with her husband in the background. Years later she would remember that his form faded farther and

farther away until he finally disappeared.

A TRIP TO HEAVEN

On Feb. 4, 1995, Iloputaife's life took an unexpected turn. She and her husband had just returned home from greeting relatives at the airport when armed gunmen burst into the house and attacked everyone inside. After beating the pastors, they ordered them to the floor.

"They kept saying: 'We'll send both of you to heaven,'" Iloputaife told SpiritLed Woman. "[But] I didn't think they were really going to shoot."

But the gunmen did shoot, hitting the bishop in the head and Iloputaife in her right arm. Thinking they were both dead, the assassins left. The bishop died five days later in the hospital. He was 36.

Iloputaife survived, though more than 50 tiny pellets from the gun remain in her arm. Doctors refused to remove them fearing they would cause her more damage during the operation.

"I had pain in my arm and in my heart," she says. "I went through a season when I couldn't pray. I was bitter. As God began to speak to me, the desire to pray, the desire to read my Bible began to come. The more I began to read the Bible, the more healing began to come."

But Iloputaife wasn't the only one grieving for the bishop, who some alleged was murdered because of his outspoken opposition to government corruption. The church body also was in mourning.

Despite her own emotional turmoil, Iloputaife realized the weight of the ministry had landed firmly on her shoulders. After one deacon resigned, she wondered if the others, a majority of whom were men, would follow her as their pastor.

"The magnitude of the work my husband left behind was too

big," Iloputaife says. "But God said, 'Don't run from me, run to Me.' The Lord kept saying, 'I will be there.'"

Though others recognized the gifts within her, Iloputaife had yet to realize that she was equipped to carry on the work. "Everybody in my ministry knew I was functioning [in a pastoral position] while he was alive. But I didn't believe in myself. But God began to heal me as He spoke to me: 'Run to me, not from me.' He began to remind me of the visions He showed me while my husband was still alive. Everything I needed was in me."

Iloputaife instituted a 24-hour prayer chain and often called the body together for concentrated prayer efforts lasting several days. Soon it became evident that God was turning the situation around. In 1996, she says, a cold feeling took over her arm, and the pain suddenly left. And to her amazement, the pastoral leadership at Victory rallied behind her in full support.

"I don't take credit for all that God is doing in the ministry," she says. "I know it can't be me; it has to be God."

Today she remembers a vision God showed her in 1985 in which she was ministering with her husband, healing the sick, when suddenly her husband disappeared. She began to look for him, but a man stopped her and told her to keep on with the work. She says she wanted to continue searching for her husband, but the man took her hand and laid it on people, and they were healed.

At the time, she says, she simply thought God had called her and her husband to do a great work. Now she realizes God was preparing her to minister alone, and she believes her husband understood the vision.

"Every time I told him the vision, he would get quiet," she says.

Since her husband's death, she has adopted two children: Chukwuebuka Hesed, age 6, whose first name means "God is too great"; and Chukwuderah Helga, age 3, whose first name means "the purpose of God must stand."

"People who knew the kind of relationship I had with my husband didn't think I could survive [his murder]. But I believe the will of God can never lead us where His grace cannot keep grace of God has brought me this far, and the grace of God will bring us farther."

A GLORIOUS CHURCH

Lately Iloputaife has been preaching about an end-times move of God in which He will reveal His glory. She believes that each day is as a thousand years and that the church ended the sixth "day" of human history with the turn of the millennium and the completion of 6,000 years.

"I believe after the sixth day, the church must prepare to be caught up to glory. But while we prepare for the Lord to come, there will be a demonstration of God's power through the church. But we've got to get busy [and] influence the political system, influence the economic system.

"Now is the time for the glorious church to arise. I've been seeing a new wave of Holy Ghost ministry. I've seen my people running with the vision."

Part of that vision is to impact their local community with spiritual and practical ministry. They host evangelistic crusades each weekend and feed, clothe and offer medical assistance every second Sunday of the month. "The church is about people," she says. "We want to make sure we preach the gospel that Jesus preached, which is for the whole man."

There is also a 24-hour prayer chain, through which members pray for their community and government leaders. "The church is the agent of change for community transformation. I read

Jeremiah was telling His people to pray for the peace of your community.”

Visitors to Victory Christian Church marvel at its jubilant praise and note that it is not marked by the poverty and turmoil that has plagued much of Africa. Iloputaife believes the African church will help ignite a greater passion for God in the hearts of Western believers.

“The African church has a hunger,” Iloputaife says. “There seems to be a complacency among the churches in the West. In the midst of their comfort, in the midst of their wealth, they lose Bible says whoever shows hunger will be filled.”

Though a majority of her church members are men, Iloputaife says she wants to see men and women side by side in ministry. “I believe it’s going to take both men and women to accomplish His will in these end are very influential.

“A woman is a dangerous tool in the hands of the devil—but she’s just as dangerous in the hands of God.”

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