

'I passed through UZUMECO and UZUMECO passed through me.'

By Sam Ekpe

Class of 1964 – 1971.

HSC 1972, House Head Hardy House 1972

The Methodist Church Nigeria is a Christian denomination that concentrated its missionary and educational activities in the towns along the Northern –Eastern District of the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC). Hence there are Methodist Churches and schools in Makurdi, Oturkpo Agbani, Enugu, Nومه, Nkpa, Uzuakoli, Umuahia and so on, until the Port Harcourt Railway Terminus. The Church was virtually non-existent in the present Anambra and Imo States. As at date in my hometown Enugwu Ukwu, and in fact the entire Awka Senatorial District of Anambra State, I am not sure that there is a single Methodist Church. I stand to be corrected. The popular secondary schools in these parts of Igboland then were CKC Onitsha, DMGS Onitsha, C.I.C. Enugu and a few others. Although Methodist College Uzuakoli was one of the popular secondary schools in Old Eastern Region of Nigeria, it appeared too distant and far removed from those of us in Old Anambra State where we had other nearby schools to attend.

It was therefore by fortuitous circumstances that my uncle took me from my St. Barth's Primary School in Enugu to live with him in Port Harcourt in my Primary Class 2 in 1957. He immediately enrolled me in Wesley Primary School, owned and operated by the Methodist Mission. From Wesley I entered the Senior Primary classes of the School- Banham Memorial School, along Aggrey Road Port Harcourt. It was in this situation that I became the only Christian of the Methodist denomination in my very big family of Anglicans till date. At Banham Memorial, the highest ambition of the pupils was to be admitted into the famous Methodist College Uzuakoli. All the Standard Six Pupils would normally sit for the entrance examination into the school but only a few could be admitted. You can imagine my joy towards the end of 1963 School year when after the entrance and interview session at Uzuakoli, I was admitted, along with one Ikechi Ugwa, whose senior brother Gospel and two other cousins of his were old boys of the school. Ikechi eventually attended Government Secondary School Afikpo.

My UZUMECO Experience

It is not an exaggeration for me to proudly assert that I have attained whatever height in life - Media Practice in a big newspaper house, the Presidency in the Second Republic, the Private Sector – Banking and Public Relations Consultancy, all due to the training, high moral standards, discipline, academic training, self-dependence and reliance and above all fear of God and confidence that a righteous man will always succeed in life I received at Methodist College Uzuakoli.

When we arrived the school in 1964, it had a Nigerian principal Mr. O. Onokala. We didn't have the privilege of a white Principal. By then the school had started experiencing financial difficulties and quality of meals in the dining hall, standards of other benefits and facilities enjoyed by the students had deteriorated. Our seniors regaled us with stories of the good times they had under the white

Principals. We therefore experienced our first baptism of fire – the disruption in our first year with the students' strike in 1964 over poor quality of meals and the school was shut down for some weeks. The *Daily Times* newspaper of that period had a front page banner headline – ***East School shut down, 420 pupils sacked***. It was really a low moment for us. We later returned to school and signed undertaking to be of good behavior and to indemnify the school for any losses arising from our strike action.

We had two streams of classes divided into L for left and R for Right. Among my classmates were Ochi Achinivu, Tekena Ibanibo, Sunday Orji, Ibe Kalu Mba, Okpara Okorie, Oleka Uguru Nelson, Chesa Peter, Akpan Ujah, Henry Maduka, Emmanuel Nwokocha, A. Abalogu, Obioha Iheukwumere, Agomoh, Uwakwe Jonah Ogwo, Onyekwere Ogba, Charles Edem, Sam Ejike (Saejo), Akwari, Innocent Nwogu, Obioma Chikwendu, Atuegwu John, Ugwuzor Chidi, J. Madukwe Onyeabo (Miiaa) etc. The teaching staff was adequate and excellent. Many of our teachers were white – Messrs Muggglestone for Chemistry, Ritchie for Physics, Lodge for English Language, John for Biology and of course Rev. K. R. Cracknell the Chaplain who also taught Religious knowledge while his wife taught Music. We also had very good and experienced Nigerian teachers. They include the Vice Principal Mr. Vin Eloagu who taught History, Mr. Onuoha- Mathematics and Woodwork, Mr. Onwukwe- Physics, Mr. Uzoukwu- Economics, and Mr. Onyeukwu- Physics. One Mr. E.E Nkana taught English Literature in the junior classes, with two novels, King Solomon's Mines and Around the World in 80 Days as major textbooks. The way he illustrated the scenes in the latter book, we believed he was the person the author was narrating his adventure in the book. There were also some very bright junior teachers who were preparing to leave for further education in the university. They include Mr. Ikokwu who taught English Language and Mr. Mbanaso- Biology. We were very elated and proud when the WASC Examination Results of the school for 1964, 1965 and 1966 were released and many students passed in Grade One, a few in Grade 2 and only one or two in Grade 3. That of 1965 students was indeed record breaking as 24 of the less than 40 students passed in grade 1. I easily recall the names of some of them: Okezika Okereke, Dan Ukaogo, Mike Ukaegbu, John Vincent, Dike (Man dyke), Ogbonna Onwudike and many others. Onyema Ugochukwu and others followed in the same feat after them. They became our role models. There were also some students in the higher school classes who were reputed to be exceptionally brilliant. They include one A.B Wabara who passed his 3 HSC papers with AA & B Grades. So also was Bosah Ume who passed his WASC in 1966 in Aggregate 7. In our own set in 1970/1971 Onyekwere Ogba also made Aggregate 7 while Dr. Amanamba (now late) passed in Aggregate 9. The late Mr. Rowland Nwachukwu who won the J.F Kennedy National Essay Competition in 1971 was in our higher school class. So also was the late Sir Sam Umesie a former Perm Sec in Government House Enugu and former State Commissioner who made four (4 no) As in principal subjects in our H.S.C Examination in 1972. It was really impactful to attend Methodist College Uzuakoli and be molded in character and learning.

Discipline and respect for seniors

This is an area I proudly say we are unequalled. Respect accorded to senior boys was much emphasized and highly demanded. A junior boy could not enter any room where his senior was present without requesting for and obtaining his permission. One Osakwe, a year my senior in class made it a point of duty to enter a room as I was about to do so and when I made my request, "**May I come in**"; his immediate response would be "**you may not**" just to rub it on me that I was his junior. I dared not enter the room as my punishment for so doing was grass cutting, or fetching water from **Ilo** stream for insubordination to a senior. Similarly, if you joined in any jokes or conversation engaged in by your seniors, you would be punished for enjoying senior jokes. Juniors were always conscious not to be punished for rudeness to their seniors.

The strict discipline was also enforced in time keeping to school schedules. Wake up times, Cleaning Up times, Attendance at Morning Assembly, Attendance in Class, Dining Hall Timing, Lateness or absence would result in your food being 'barreled'. Singing the Grace before meals was a particularly enjoyable activity we all learnt and later introduced in our own families. All students must observe the siesta or rest period, usually one hour after school period and Lunch. Other activities which had time lines were Games period, Dinner Time and Lights Out by 10pm. Students who flouted these regulations received appropriate punishment. To ensure moral and religious instructions, there were school prayers on Monday and Friday evenings and House Prayers on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. School and House Prefects organized these prayers, bible readings and also delivered homilies. You could not be a prefect at UZUMECO without studying passages of the bible and using them to preach sermons, else you would be looked down upon.

Saturday Clean Up and Inspection

Every Saturday, between 7 and 10 am, every student would engage in cleaning, mopping and ensuring proper sanitation of rooms, box room, lockers, toilets and passages. At exactly 10am, Mr. E.E. Nkana, a particularly clean and well-dressed old man would embark on personal inspection – going from room to room ensuring even the personal hygiene of students. Usually dressed in white shirt on white shorts, he would use any stain on his shorts as evidence of how sparkly clean the student appeared. He would score points to each house and the result of the cleanest house for that week would be announced soon after. Very exciting and interesting experience

Sports

The school had 3 large fields for football and other sporting activities. In our time, football was the most popular sport and the school football team was about the best in Eastern Region of Nigeria. Captained by Stanley Ihekwa (Minister), the team beat Niger Grammar School Umuola 5 – 2 in the final of **Phensic Cup Competition** among secondary schools in the region in 1964 at the Enugu Sports Stadium. I accompanied the team to all its match venues and personally witnessed this match which brought great joy and fame to Methodist College Uzuakoli. There were notable sportsmen in school in our time. Some of them were Friday Maduabuchi (**Toroganga**) who excelled

in 100 yards dash, hurdles and also in football, Obidike- Football, Mike Ezenyirioha- Shot-put, Ekebuisi- Long distance race, Ogala Osoka- Football, Nwosu- Football, and Charles Edem- in Table tennis etc. Two brothers Austin and Chike Maths were very good goalkeepers. We wondered how Maths came to be their family name.

School Clubs and Societies

There were some clubs and associations to which students belonged. They include Arts and Debating Society, Young Farmers Club and Press Club. The Arts and debating society was the most popular with students as it appeared a training ground for future politicians and top public office holders. Elections for the President of the society were very competitive, and campaigns for it were as fierce and bitter as in the present Nigerian Political Parties Election campaigns. That of the 1966/67 school year was particularly contentious. The rivals were Vincent Amodi (Bobby Vee) from Owerri and Jasper Agwu from Item. In the end, Amodi emerged victorious but his tenure was short lived as the outbreak of hostilities in 1967 led to the closure of the school.

From the time I was admitted into the school, I joined the Press Club and contributed articles for publication in the school magazine, ***The Mocol Star***. I eventually became President of the Press Club in the 1971/72 school year after defeating Emeka Ijioma in another hotly contested election. Dr. Ijioma later became Rector of Abia Polytechnic. Undoubtedly my interest in Media Practice commenced at UZUMECO and developed thereafter.

UZUMECO after the Nigerian Civil War

A good number of students returned to the school soon after the War ended in January 1970. Many could not do so and continued their studies in locations close to them while some dropped out completely. The situation we met in the school on our return from the War could be likened to the situation illustrated by King David on being informed about the death of King Saul, ***the glory of Israel has departed from the high places. How are the mighty fallen***. The entire school compound was overgrown with weeds. Buildings, facilities and equipment were in terrible state of disrepair and it seemed as if we were embarking on a very uncertain journey. From our Pre-War experience of living in well run boarding houses and being served meals at the dining hall, many students were forced by economic circumstances to become day students. Going to Agbagwu market, buying raw food stuffs and cooking our meals became normal routine for students. We lived in groups in various teachers' quarters in the school and with some families in Amanba village and only appeared for assembly and attended classes as conveniently and how affordable each student could make it. However, cooking was not allowed in the ***Castle*** and students who were privileged to lodge there arranged an Ad-Hoc Catering System on payment of minimum fees. However the bitter experience of the Nigerian Civil War adequately prepared students for those tough times. I lived with Rowland Ichenku in one apartment while Bond and John Achara lived with Chukwu Achara in the other apartment in one of the teachers' quarters. We did all our cooking, laundry and night studies with lanterns in this "dormitory". I easily recall the late Chukwu Achara who made A1 in Igbo language in 1971 WASC Examination praising Bond Achara for his expertise in preparing beans

cuisine. **“Nwatakiria na adagbu agwa”**. By the end of 1970, the difficulties eased and we all returned to normal boarding life in the **Castle** in the first term of 1971.

There were total of eight (8 no.) Houses at UZUMECO from 1964 to 1972. These were the four Houses in the Castle – Aggrey, Williams, Carver, and Hardy as well as two, Spray and Achinivu at the extension. The last two Okpara and Nwana Houses were established in 1967. I personally belonged to Williams 1964 to 1966, Nwana 1967, Aggrey (by affiliation to our teachers’ house “dormitory” in 1970) and finally Hardy in 1971/1972. I really had a taste of what life in various Houses of UZUMECO, the stiff but healthy competitions in Athletics, Music, Cleanliness as well as a mutually satisfying junior/senior, not master/servant relationships.

Roll of Honour

There is a Roll of honour in the school Assembly Hall which emblazes in gold the names of former students of the college and their years of graduation. Names like GCN Akomas 1927, DN Achara 1927, Dr. M.I Okpara 1934, S.O. Achara 1934, G.E Achara, J.C Achara, C.N Isong, H.K Offonry, B.E Ogbuagu, M.C Abengowe, Nnamani, Achinivu, Edwin Ogbu, Pita Nwana, O.K Ogan, H.U.U Osoka, Dick Ogan, A.O Chikwendu, E.N Ukpaby and many others were great inspirations to us and we prayed and aspired to also have our names written likewise in the school records. Particularly noteworthy was the role and influence of the late Dr. M. I Okpara, Premier of Eastern Region of Nigeria on us. He was the special guest of honour at our Speech and Prize Giving Day Ceremony in 1965 during which he announced donation of a television set to the students. On the installation of the set at the Assembly Hall in the **Quadrangle** we would rush to watch a popular television programme, “Ukonu’s Club” on Sunday evenings at 8pm. That was our first experience of such a social activity in the school. There is no doubt that Old Boys of Methodist College Uzuakoli are leaving indelible footprints on the sands of time of our great school. It is my sincere wish that at the Centenary Celebration of our great institution in 2023 we shall once again demonstrate that we passed through Methodist College Uzuakoli and Methodist College Uzuakoli passed through us. Fortunately for me, I am happy and proud that in the Board of **House Chiefs** in the **Castle**, the name **S.C. Ekpe** is boldly inscribed for Hardy House in 1972. What else can one wish for as evidence of having passed through the great citadel of learning and character molding - **Methodist College Uzuakoli**, Glory and Thanks be to God.