

**EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND EPISCOPAL VISION: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF
BISHOP OWEN CHIEDOZIE NWOKOLO TO EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIOCESE
ON THE NIGER, 2011-2023**

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the initiatives and contributions of the Rt. Rev. Dr. Owen Chiedozi Nwokolo, Bishop of the Diocese on the Niger (Anglican Communion), to educational development in the diocese since his enthronement in 2011. Against the backdrop of the Diocese's historic legacy as the cradle of Anglicanism in Eastern Nigeria, the study examines how Bishop Nwokolo redefined the Diocese's educational identity through infrastructure development, institutional expansion, and pedagogical reform. By investigating his role in establishing and reviving primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, including the landmark foundation of the University on the Niger. This paper situates Bishop Nwokolo's work within the broader history of mission-based education in Nigeria. It argues that his episcopal leadership represents a modern continuation of the 19th-century Anglican educational mandate, adapted for social, economic and spiritual challenges.

Keywords: Diocese on the Niger, Bishop Owen Nwokolo, Educational Development, Institutional Expansion and Pedagogical Reform.

Introduction

The Diocese on the Niger holds a unique place in the religious and educational history of Nigeria. As the first Anglican diocese in Eastern Nigeria¹, established in 1864, its legacy is deeply interwoven with the missionary efforts of its pioneers Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Church Missionary Society (CMS). This origin which could be traced to the missionary endeavors of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) started on the 27th day of July, 1857 under the leadership guide of Crowther, an indigenous missionary priest ordained in 1841 that later ascended to the Bishopric of the Diocese.² As this mission expanded, the need to appoint Crowther as a bishop became increasingly evident. Thus on June 29, 1864, he was consecrated as the pioneer and inaugural African Bishop of what was then known as the Diocese of the Niger Territories beyond the British Dominions³, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, marking a significant milestone in the history of the Anglican Communion. In Recounting in his first synod charge in Onitsha in 1866, Crowther has this to say;

Our first station commenced at Onitsha in 1857, where on dear brother the Rev. J.C Taylor was landed, assisted by the late Jonas, a scripture reader... In this place they remained for months and went out to preach as well as to work, building their own mission house on the spot which we now occupy.⁴

Bishop Crowther consequently was designated as the Leader of the C.M.S mission to the Niger area, a role which implicitly placed him as the indigenous spiritual overseer throughout the western region of Africa. His leadership played a pivotal role in church growth in the region, laying a robust ground work for subsequent missions and the evolution of the church in the area.⁵ The Converts Crowther garnered during his missionary activities exhibited loyalty to him and subsequently became strong advocates of the new Diocese, which he established along the Niger River in West Africa.⁶ Thus, Crowther with the activities of these initial converts, along with early missionaries were instrumental in shaping the early history of the diocese and by extension the trajectory of the Anglican Church in western African.⁷ Unfortunately, the passing of Bishop Crowther from a stroke on December 31 1891, precipitated a period of profound revolutionary change in the ecclesiastical domain that Crowther superintended. This era was characterized by changes in mission policy, shift in racial attitudes, alteration in evangelical spirituality and ultimately the availability of new sources of European missionaries; all of which combined to slowly dismantle Crowther's mission.⁸ Financial controls were tightened, young Europeans began to take over key roles and the African staff members were dismissed, suspended or transferred.⁹ This systematic undermining of Crowther's authority culminated in the writing of the damning report prepared by a C.M.S Youth group in Cambridge; which dealt a severe blow to Crowther's bishopric authority. Deeply disheartened by this disregard of his office, Crowther chose to resign in protest and the result was that he succumbed to a stroke that

eventually led to this painful death. The aftermath saw a European; Bishop Joseph Sydney Hill succeeding him in 1893 and the landscape of the Anglican Church in West Africa forever changed- with the name of Crowther's Diocese changed to the Diocese of Western Equatorial Africa, it would not be until 1952, sixty years after Crowther's death, that another native Anglican Bishop would emerge.¹⁰ Shortly after Hills death in 1894, Bishop Herbert Tugwell was consecrated Bishop of "Crowther's old Diocese" and continued to uphold Onitsha as the Headquarters of the Diocese.

Nevertheless, an event worthy of mention in the aftermath of Crowther's death was the changing of the name of Crowthers old Diocese yet again in 1919, from the "Diocese of Western Equatorial Africa" to the "Diocese on the Niger." It was more or less divided into two divisions; the eastern and western. The western division which became the "Diocese of Lagos" was thus carved out of "Crowther's old Diocese" with the Mother Diocese still intact and Archdeacon Melville Jones was consecrated Bishop to oversee the new See. The Eastern division now "Diocese on the Niger" still headquartered at Onitsha, had no need for alteration in their Episcopal leadership during the transition from the Diocese of Western Equatorial Africa to Diocese on the Niger, as Bishop Herbert Tugwell still remained the Bishop,¹¹ seating on the Episcopal chair of Crowther.

With Bishop Tugwell's resignation on March 4th 1921, Bishop A.W. Howells who was consecrated as the Assistant Bishop on the Niger on June 11th 1920 undertook certain Episcopal duties for the diocese until in 1922 when Bishop Bertram Lasbrey became the substantive Bishop of the Diocese on the Niger.¹² However, there existed a paradoxical situation within the Anglican Church of Nigeria with regard to Crowther's recognition and his legacy. On the one hand, Crowther was unarguably acknowledged as the founding figure of the Anglican Church of Nigeria and his pioneering efforts to establish the Church in the region have been widely accepted, celebrated and documented. But then on the other hand, it remains a matter of historical contention that the Diocese which Crowther led-the seedbed of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, is not recognized as the first indigenous Diocese within the Nigerian boundaries.¹³ For instance, a record of the history of Nigerian Bishops in church of Nigeria prior to 1979 begins with Bishop Melville Jones in 1919,¹⁴ leaving a glaring omission of Crowther and his successors contributions and thus erroneously situating the Lagos Diocese, carved out of the Diocese of Western Equatorial Africa that became Niger Diocese, as the primal Diocese in the country. This no doubt remains an extension of a calculated colonial ploy and agenda to delegitimize Crowther's mission work and achievements within the Niger Mission. Although the Anglican Church worldwide had apologized for the churches mistreatment of Crowther in what Justin Welbey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury said "was wrong,"¹⁵ expressing regret and shame over the betrayal and undermining of rightfully consecrated bishop, attempts to marginalize Crowther's contributions to the establishment of the Diocese of Niger Territories continue- since his Diocese has not been generally accepted as the "primus inter pares" by the Church of Nigeria. Nevertheless, the succession process following Crowther's death, underscored the legitimacy of his Bishopric and the place of his Diocese that later became the Niger Diocese. For instance, the Church Missionary Society report for 1893-1894 noted that the Archbishop of Canterbury accepted the committee's nomination of Revd. Joseph Sidney Hill to the See left vacant by Bishop Crowther's passing.¹⁶ Thus, even though its title and nomenclature have been altered many times its place as the oldest Anglican Diocese in Nigeria remains unchanged and beyond contest.

Below is a list of all the Bishops that served in the Diocese on the Niger from its inception to the enthronement of Bishop Owen Nwokolo.

Table 1: List on Bishops of the Diocese on the Niger

| S/N | NAMES OF BISHOP | FROM | TILL |
|-----|--|------|------|
| 1 | Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther | 1864 | 1891 |
| 2 | Rt. Rev. Joseph Sidney Hill (Western Equatorial Africa). | 1893 | 1894 |
| 3 | Rt. Rev. Herbert Tugwell | 1894 | 1921 |
| 4 | Rt. Rev. A.W Howells (Assistant Bishop) | 1921 | 1922 |
| 5 | Rt. Rev. Betram Lasbrey | 1922 | 1945 |
| 6 | Most Rev. Cecil John Patterson DD | 1945 | 1969 |
| 7 | Rt. Rev. Lucius M. Uzodike | 1969 | 1975 |
| 8 | Most Rev. Dr. Jonathan Onyemelukwe | 1975 | 2000 |
| 9 | The Rt. Ken. Sandy Edozie Okeke | 2000 | 2011 |
| 10 | The Rt. Dr. Owen ChiedozieNwokolo | 2011 | - |

Source: Researchers' Fieldwork

This was the complex but rich history of the Diocese Owen came to inherit as Bishop in 2011, A See with history as old as the very beginnings of Christianity in the whole of Igbo land. At the present count, the Anglican Diocese on the Niger has a total of 119 inaugurated parishes within its 19 Archdeaconries, and a staggering number of over 253 churches¹⁷, with more than 400 ordained priests.

Historically, it is needful to note that these early Christian missions recognized education as both a tool of evangelism and a means of community empowerment. Over a century later, Bishop Owen Chiedozi Nwokolo revitalized that mission with contemporary urgency, making educational development a core pillar of his episcopacy.

Since assuming office in 2011, Bishop Nwokolo introduced sweeping educational reforms that reflect both theological vision and strategic foresight. This paper examines the multifaceted dimensions of his contributions, from basic education to higher learning, situating his achievements within the historical continuum of church-led education in Nigeria.

Historical Background: Anglicanism and Education in Eastern Nigeria

Education and Christianity arrived in Eastern Nigeria almost simultaneously,¹⁸ with Anglican missionaries using education as a tool of evangelization and social change. The CMS, which laid the foundation of the Diocese on the Niger, emphasized literacy and theological instruction, establishing grammar schools and theological colleges across the region. Notable among these early institutions were; The Teacher Training College, Awka St. Monica's College, Ogbunike (1892), The Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha (1925), etc. However, the post-independence era, especially after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), witnessed the decline of mission-owned schools following the state government take-over of schools in the 1971.¹⁹ The conditions in these schools deteriorated due to neglect from the government. Consequently, there were strident calls for the return of the schools to the missions that owned them. Governor Peter Obi heeded this call and on 21st of November, 2011, returned the management of the schools to their previous owners.²⁰ However, the state government was still to play supervisory roles over them. This created the need for visionary leadership to restore and expand the Anglican educational legacy. It is within this context that Bishop Owen Nwokolo's leadership emerges as both historically grounded and forward-looking.

Bishop Owen Nwokolo: Visionary Leadership and the Philosophy of Education

Owen Chiedozi Nwokolo is a native of Nnobi; in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State in Nigeria. Nnobi is a prominent Igbo town located strategically in the southeastern corridor of Nigeria. It is approximately 30 kilometers northeast of Awka, the capital city of Anambra State. Nnobi occupies a central location, lying between major urban and commercial centers such as Nnewi, Nkpor, Onitsha, and Awka, positioning it as a town of significant socio-economic importance. Demographically, Nnobi is a large and thriving community with an estimated population exceeding 100,000 residents. The town is recognized for its cultural resilience, political organization, and deeply rooted traditional institutions. It is also considered one of the oldest and most historic settlements in Igboland.

Born into the family of a clergyman as the last of many children, young Chiedozi would grow up, deeply inspired by his father's unwavering devotion and lifelong commitment to priesthood, he inherited not only his values and beliefs but also a profound passion to follow in his footsteps and dedicate his own life to becoming a priest. One will not, therefore, doubt where the gentle spirit inherent in Chiedozi came from. His father and some other clergymen remained a source of inspiration to him. In a divine twist of providence, on November 26, 2010, at an Episcopal Synod held in Lokoja, Kogi State, Owen was elected as the next Bishop on the Niger, succeeding the retired Bishop Ken S. E. Okeke. This election marked a significant milestone in Owen's journey. On January 9, 2011, Bishop-elect Owen Chiedozi Nwokolo was fully consecrated as the Bishop of the Diocese at All Saints Cathedral Onitsha. This was a moment of profound spiritual significance, as Owen stepped into the role of bishop in a diocese that had long been considered the mother of many infant Sees and was the first and oldest diocese in Nigeria.

Thus, from a childhood framed by priestly robes to a manhood consecrated by Episcopal grace, Owen Chiedozi Nwokolo's life is a testimony to what it means to walk deliberately into one's divine purpose. His journey- marked by deliberate obedience, spiritual clarity, and unwavering faithfulness to the covenant God had established with him, offers a model of vocation that is both historically grounded and spiritually luminous. It is the story of a man who, hearing the quiet voice of God, did not harden his heart, but responded with the fullness of his life and thus walked into his divine purpose, a journey that remains deeply rooted in history while shining as a beacon of

spiritual light. His episcopacy has been seen by many as revolutionary, as it has resulted in an all-round development of the Diocese; particularly in the Educational sector.

When observed critically, Bishop Owen Chiedozie Nwokolo's educational philosophy is rooted in the Anglican tradition of holistic human development, spiritual, intellectual, and moral. His approach has been to view education not just as a church activity but as a societal necessity. According to the Bishop, education remains the "cornerstone of societal development and modernization."²¹ Under his guidance, the Diocese on the Niger has undertaken what many describe as an educational revolution.

His strategy involved both restoration and expansion, reviving neglected mission schools, founding new institutions, and creating policy frameworks to ensure quality and sustainability. Central to this vision is the Diocesan Education Commission, a body empowered to supervise educational policies, teacher recruitment, and institutional development. Under Bishop Nwokolo's leadership, the Diocese has seen an exponential growth in basic and secondary education. Between 2011 and 2023, the Diocese established over 49 primary schools and 41 secondary schools, many of which serve both urban and rural communities²². The scale of this growth demonstrates not only administrative ambition but also pastoral commitment to community development. He focused this attempt at revival and expansion in the two categories of schools in the Diocese. These include; the Returned Mission Schools and the Pure Mission Schools. While the Returned Mission Schools were the former mission-owned Educational Institutions given back to the mission under the administration of Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State, the Pure Mission Schools were the schools established and ran wholly by the Diocese and other Churches under her. The Key Returned Secondary Schools that witnessed tremendous intervention from the Diocese under Bishop Owen include: The Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha; Anglican Girls Grammar School, Onitsha; Patterson Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha; St. Monica's College, Ogbunike, etc. Some of the Key Pure Mission Schools that have also witnessed intervention from the Diocese under Bishop Owen include: The Holy Innocent Juniorate Convent, Nkpor, The St. Christopher's Junior Seminary, 3-3; The Lady Hannah Model School, Awada, etc.

These schools were renovated, re-equipped, and re-staffed under the Bishop's watch, integrating modern facilities such as ICT laboratories, libraries, and science blocks. Importantly, the Diocese ensured that these schools were accessible to children from all backgrounds, aligning with the Anglican ethic of inclusion.

Human Capital and Teacher's Development

Recognizing that infrastructure alone cannot drive educational excellence; Bishop Nwokolo prioritized human resource development. The Diocesan Education Commission actively oversees teacher recruitment, training, and welfare. Salaries, incentives, and professional development programs were improved to ensure that the schools attract and retain qualified staff. This commitment to teacher welfare has produced measurable outcomes, with several diocesan schools outperforming state and federal institutions in standardized examinations and competitions. Moreover, schools under the Diocese have increasingly adopted child-centered teaching methods, aligning with global best practices

Tertiary Education: The University on the Niger and others tertiary Institutions

Perhaps the most monumental achievement of Bishop Nwokolo's educational mission is the founding of the University on the Niger, a project that is decades in vision but finally realized in 2023. On May 15, 2023, the Federal Executive Council of Nigeria approved the establishment of the university, followed by licensing from the National Universities Commission (NUC) on May 24, 2023.²³ Located at Umunya, Anambra State, the University has already begun academic operations with a wide range of courses across different academic disciplines, including: Medicine and Surgery, Law, Nursing, Christian Theology, Forensic Science, Cyber security, Pharmacy, Software Engineering, Chinese Language, Psychology, etc.

In addition, appointing Prof. Chinedu Nebo, a former Minister of Power of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Nigeria Nsukka and Federal University Oye-Ekiti, as the pioneer Vice Chancellor, Bishop Nwokolo sent a strong signal of the university's academic seriousness and national relevance. The University on the Niger thrives and continues to influence and impact her environment positively. Umunya a small town in the outskirts of Onitsha has witnessed tremendous development and change, all thanks to the presence of another university in the land.

Beyond the University on the Niger, Bishop Nwokolo also overseen the establishment of other tertiary institutions to meet vocational and professional training needs: Lasbery College of Health, Ogidi; College of Nursing Sciences, Alor and Gozie Anyachebelu Polytechnic, Onitsha. These institutions focus on critical sectors such as healthcare,

applied sciences, and mid-level technical education. Their creation reflects the Bishop's responsiveness to local development needs and the labor market realities of Nigeria.

Health Education as a Pillar of Community Transformation

In addition to expanding conventional education across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, it is needful to stress that Bishop Owen Chiedozie Nwokolo placed particular emphasis on health education, viewing it "as a crucial component of holistic societal development."²⁴ Recognizing that primary health care is the foundation of a resilient healthcare system, especially in underserved communities. He intentionally incorporated health-focused institutions into his broader educational vision. This focus stems from a dual theological and social imperative: the biblical call to heal the sick and the urgent public health needs within Southeastern Nigeria. In several pastoral communications, the Bishop has underscored the role of health education in reducing preventable diseases, improving maternal and child health, and empowering individuals with knowledge for healthier living. To actualize this vision, Bishop Nwokolo oversaw the establishment of three major health institutions under the auspices of the Diocese on the Niger. These are:

- i) College of Nursing Sciences, University on the Niger Teaching Hospital Iyenu, Ogidi, established to train competent and efficient health care givers in different health-related disciplines;
- ii) Lasbery College of Health, Ogidi – a specialized institution focusing on community health education, health records management, and disease prevention. It serves both as a training center and a hub for rural health outreach;
- iii) College of Nursing Sciences, Alor – designed to train competent nurses and midwives, this college plays a critical role in addressing the shortage of healthcare personnel in rural and peri-urban areas. The curriculum emphasizes practical community-based primary care.

These institutions are not mere academic centers but are envisioned as agents of healing and human dignity. They embody the Bishop's belief that "health and education must go hand-in-hand to liberate a people." Moreover, by focusing on primary health care education, Bishop Nwokolo directly addresses both national and global development goals—such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3, which advocates for good health and well-being. His strategy integrates faith-based compassion with empirical science, positioning the Diocese as a proactive partner in Nigeria's healthcare landscape. This visionary emphasis on health education distinguishes Bishop Nwokolo's episcopal legacy. It reflects a commitment not only to academic excellence but also to human survival and flourishing, especially among the most vulnerable populations. By building institutions that train health professionals, promote disease prevention, and extend healing ministries, Bishop Owen Nwokolo made health education an indispensable part of the Diocese's mission to serve both God and humanity.

Educational Theology and Strategic Vision

Bishop Nwokolo's educational interventions are not merely administrative projects; they are theological expressions of faith. In his public addresses and pastoral letters, he repeatedly affirms that education is a "divine mandate" and a form of evangelism in itself. His commitment is deeply rooted in the Anglican theological understanding of education as service—"for the glory of God and the edification of humankind." By setting high-performance targets, encouraging research, and fostering ecumenical academic partnerships, Bishop Nwokolo positioned the Diocese on the Niger not just as a spiritual force, but as an intellectual hub in Southeastern Nigeria.

Conclusion

The contributions of Bishop Owen Chiedozie Nwokolo to educational development in the Diocese on the Niger are both monumental and historic. In line with the Diocese's foundational mission of evangelism through education, Bishop Nwokolo has revitalized and expanded educational institutions at all levels. Through his strategic vision, infrastructural investments, and theological grounding, he has ensured that education remains a pillar of spiritual and societal transformation in the region.

His legacy is not merely one of quantity but of quality and sustainability. The schools and universities established under his leadership are already shaping future leaders, professionals, and citizens grounded in Christian ethics and academic excellence. In continuing the legacy of the early Anglican missionaries, Bishop Nwokolo has shown that education remains one of the most powerful tools for both evangelism and nation-building.

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