

Visit to Nigeria

15th-21st September 2025

My third visit to Nigeria came about rather unexpectedly, with a last-minute invitation from the Primate to address the Standing Committee of the Church of Nigeria in a meeting to be held in the town of Ekiti, a five-and-a-bit hour drive from Lagos. Some hasty rearranging of my diary and the generosity of my colleague +Paul meant that I was able to go for a week, and I managed to find the time to prepare a lengthy talk on 'The Journey and Prospects of Renewal in the Church of England', as well as going through the laborious process of obtaining a visa.

I quickly realised that the Standing Committee was a very much larger group than the name suggested: in fact it consists of five people from each of the 164 dioceses – the bishop, the bishop's wife, the chancellor, a senior clergy representative and a lay woman – adding up to a maximum attendance of around 800! The General Synod of the Church of Nigeria, I discovered, is twice as big (i.e. 10 members per diocese) but only happens for a week every three years, with the biannual Standing Committee filling in the gaps.

The addition of the bishops' wives might raise an eyebrow in the UK, and must be challenging for them too, especially as most of them now have secular jobs, and are dependent on understanding employers (or annual leave) to find the time to attend these events. Whilst expectations of their role have changed considerably, though, they are still expected to be Presidents of their Diocesan Mothers Unions, and to hold a significant place in the life of the Church and in wider society – someone even described them as the 'bishop to the women', though the ecclesiology here seemed a little odd! I later asked a younger bishop and his wife whether any of the younger wives had dared to question the tradition of Mothers Union Presidency, and it was clear that such a subversive idea had never occurred to them.

Monday

Given a busy Sunday back home, I didn't fly to Lagos till the Monday morning, which would effectively mean missing the first day of the Committee. I somehow managed to blag my way through the check for yellow-fever certificates – I've had the jab, but have either lost or never obtained a certificate in the first place – and had an equally tricky time with a new system of online landing cards, not least because I couldn't get the airport Wi-Fi to work. Eventually everything came together, and I met my host, Bishop James Odedeji, on the other side, by which point my large and heavy suitcase had arrived on the conveyor belt, filled with a wide array of robes and suits, which I hoped would cover every eventuality.

+James is Bishop of Lagos West, and proved an excellent companion through the trip, if gloriously liberated from the English custom of self-deprecation. The largest diocese, the

speediest church growth, the most talented family... it was only when I later met him with his wife Lydia, and effectively shared a flat with them in Ekiti, that I grew to like him (and them) very much indeed, exuberance and all. In fact +James' pastoral care for his people (including an apparently endless series of phone calls to clergy, family members, bishops and others to encourage, strengthen or rebuke) acted as a kind of soundtrack for the visit – hugely demanding compared to the measured world of emails, but also more conducive for building a remarkable range and depth of pastoral relationships.

By now it was after 8pm, and I was driven straight to a hotel with a substantial amount of space for one person and rather smart pretensions. I'd eaten plenty on the plane and was grateful for a simple supper of cheese biscuits, an apple and a cup of tea – though the prospect of an early start the next morning, together with a dramatic thunder-storm and lashing rain, competed successfully against my tiredness and a genuinely comfortable bed, and I didn't get much sleep. The breakfast staff the next morning were clearly unused to having to serve a customer at 6am, though they dug out some cornflakes, some dried milk (on which they poured hot water) and a sugar-lump, together with a slightly desultory scrambled egg, sitting cold and lumpish in the middle of the plate. And then it was time to go.

Tuesday

The 5-and-a-bit hour trip began with streets under 18 inches of water, though the day cleared up a little as it went along. To an African novice the driving would have seemed haphazard and alarming – endless weaving in and out of non-existent traffic-lanes, a horn which liberally accompanied every attempt to over- or under-take, some horribly smoky lorries and the odd cow, goat or chicken on the road to add to the element of surprise – but Bishop James' driver inspired confidence, not least in exercising extreme caution around potholes and resisting the urge to overtake when he couldn't see clearly ahead. +James (who experienced a horrendous road accident earlier in his episcopacy, I discovered) proved a very diligent and rather nervy back-seat driver, urging moderation in all things; and he inadvertently taught me the true meaning of a common English phrase to which I'd never given any serious thought – 'Better late than never'. I'd not previously understood the phrase as meaning, 'It's better to arrive somewhere late than accidentally getting yourself killed on the way'.

It was good to see Nigerian countryside for the first time, given that my previous two trips to Abuja were seriously curtailed by security concerns – though my hopes that we might encounter some monkeys or snakes or wildly colourful birds were sadly not fulfilled. Meanwhile a security vehicle followed us all the way, which was reassuring, given that our route took us along some fairly remote byways and Western hostages are a very valuable commodity; and perhaps the most striking features of the trip were the advertising hoardings everywhere, mostly for a bewildering array of Pentecostal churches, which

made +James' claims look low-key in the extreme. One church campus modestly claimed to be the 'Holiest Land in the Universe'.

We finally arrived about lunchtime, thereby missing the consecration of two new bishops in the morning session; and I was immediately whisked to the front of Ekiti cathedral, for a brief conversation with Henry the Primate and the archbishops (two of whom, Edmund and Emmanuel, I now know very well). All greeted us warmly, but there was clearly an important meeting going on, so we set off for our hotel – with an even larger amount of space and smart pretensions – whose lunch consisted of a very spicy jollof rice together with 'turkey gizzard' (which was as tough as it sounds). In the afternoon session, delegates were divided into various groups (either by 'houses' of bishops, wives, chancellors etc or more randomly) to which I was not invited. I therefore took a rest, started writing up this account, then joined some of the bishops and their wives for a much nicer supper of fish, rice and beans (without the teaspoon of chilli which characterises so much Nigerian food).

As on previous visits, the startlingly varied environments in which the bishops are called to serve – some thriving, comfortable and affluent, others small, poor and living under the ever-present threat of deadly persecution - were immediately apparent in our dinner-time conversations, though we were constantly interrupted by a large gaggle of girls and older women wanting a selfie with me. I felt like an ageing rock star.

Wednesday

Wednesday started early, after a much better night, and I was driven to a 7 o'clock service of Matins with a police escort accompanying us from behind – a reminder of the security challenges even in a comparatively safe part of the country. Matins was very Anglican indeed, in its most traditional vein circa 1950, including pointed psalms and some of the more ancient hymns from Hymns Ancient and Modern (with dynamic markings thoughtfully added beside each line, frequently closing with a fortissimo 'Amen!'). The Bible Study that followed was much less traditional, with the expositor bishop regularly pausing to invite contributions from members of the congregation, both male and female, in response to various questions raised by the text from Ephesians 5. The best response came from a senior High Court judge (and Chancellor of one of the dioceses) who repented of her 'intolerance toward the excesses of her cook' to much laughter and applause – though I never did find out quite what those excesses were!

++Henry invited me to breakfast with him and Mama Angela – I breakfasted and lunched with them on both conference days, courtesy of our hosts, the local Bishop and his wife. It was good to have so much one-to-one time with the Primate, though it also curtailed some of the opportunities to meet with other bishops, including Archbishops Edmund and Emmanuel.

The next session included various greetings, whose elaborate protocol was a little hard to interpret – one, but far from the only, time that I missed having Folli Olokose with me, as on previous visits, to help me to interpret what was going on. With others having prepared five-minute speeches (each of them beginning with a lavish homage to the Primate) I discovered that I was expected to say something too. Thankfully God was good, and my contribution surprisingly apposite and coherent.

There then followed the main event of the meeting – the Primate’s address – which was wide-ranging and very long. It included reflections on the theme of the conference (*‘The Sanctity of the Church: Contending for the Integrity of the Christian Faith and Witness in the World’*), on the Nigerian economy, on the creation of new dioceses and other issues within the Church of Nigeria, and on relationships within the global church, including some typically no-holds-barred remarks about the state of the Church of England and the appointment of Cherry Vann as Primate of the Church of Wales.

I was sorry, though not surprised, that ++Henry had not run this section past me first, as he included some quite unfounded allegations, including that the Church of England had now abolished the word ‘church’ in favour of the word ‘community’! I pointed out to him later that that was simply untrue and added a sentence to my speech the following day about not believing everything you read in the press. But the speech reminded me why trips to Nigeria are quite so complicated, in diplomatic as much as security terms – much more so than my previous African adventures in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda.

The Primatial Address was printed in a booklet running to 50 pages, which ++Henry had to speed through to keep the programme on track – though even then the speech lasted for a magisterial two hours and fifteen minutes. Bishops I spoke to afterwards still commented on how short it was, compared to previous Primates who’d often gone way above the three-hour mark and sometimes nearer four – though they hastily added how wonderful the speech had been and how the Standing Committee meetings got better and better – a mark of both the deference and the upbeat confidence that is such a prominent feature of Nigerian culture.

Following a speech from the local state governor and various votes of thanks, the paparazzi got to work in a well-organised photo shoot, followed by a very late lunch. The agenda later in the afternoon didn’t involve me again, so I returned to my hotel, where I wonderfully managed to get enough internet access for a phone call with Bev before a simple supper of biscuits and fruit, washed down with bottles of so called ‘Anglican Table Water’ (drawn from a well owned by the diocese) and, improbably, some Baileys Irish cream, which Bishop James had kindly purchased for my benefit.

The security situation is such that I couldn’t do what I longed to do and take a walk around the town and the nearby hills, though the balcony outside my suite had some great panoramic views, when they weren’t clouded by torrential rain – the thoughtful reason

why another Bishop Andrew, the local bishop, had chosen the hotel for me. It has been one of the challenges of each of my visits to Nigeria that I've been unable to take any exercise but have been largely confined to barracks: I've taken to running on the spot in my hotel rooms to try to maintain a basic level of fitness.

Thursday

Another 7am Matins service started the day, and another Bible study with congregational interaction, this time based on the story of Achan in Joshua 7 – not a passage that many Christian Conferences would tackle back in the UK. Whilst it was clearly good to focus on personal holiness and integrity (and integral to revivalist theology and experience), I sometimes felt there was a danger of so stressing the negative aspects of sanctification (the 'putting off' in terms of Colossians 3:5-11) that its positive aspects (the 'putting on' in verses 12-17) were inadvertently relegated to a kind of Holiness Second Division – though I later both heard and witnessed several examples of remarkably compassionate ministry, which helped redress the balance.

After breakfast, there were various items on the agenda, including an impressive report advocating a zero-tolerance approach to Gender-Based Violence, and a clear strategy to accompany the aspiration. It's a subject that is very close to the Primate's heart - I remember hearing him speaking powerfully on the issue at the first Convention meeting I attended in 2023 – and it was impressive to witness the strides that have taken place in this area and in safeguarding more generally.

Next it was my turn – and having been forewarned that my contribution would be limited to 25 minutes (plus questions), I launched forth on a shortened version of my rather lengthy speech. In it I was honest about the challenges within the Church of England over the past few years, including Covid, the death of HM the Queen, the safeguarding scandals leading to ++Justin's resignation and the torturous divisions over LLF (where I stated my position much as I do in the UK). I then introduced the assembly to 'Together', the 'Alliance' and 'Living Out' (the latter of which was a new concept to some) and spoke of the cultural changes in the UK over the past few decades to help shed a little light on issues that are completely inexplicable in a Nigerian context. I encouraged the delegates to reflect on the Church's response to those struggling with their sexual identity, then challenged the persistent narrative that only a small handful of bishops and others in the Church of England subscribe to the Church's historic teaching on the doctrine of marriage. I closed on a more positive note with reference to the Quiet Revival and with a request that the Steering Committee might pray for us, as well as to encouraging Nigerian Anglicans to continue worshipping in Church of England churches.

There was very warm applause at the end, and one of the archbishops later sent me a WhatsApp which read:

'Thank you, Bishop Andrew, for your usual clarity. Your lucid presentation has given us the proper context of the recent labyrinths in the CoE. You have helped us to see the blessings from ++Justin's ministry, the impact of the late Queen's faith, as well as the ambiguities and other difficulties. Most of all, you have helped up hope in God: GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME. Your presentation clears much fog. A million thanks'.

Various other contributions followed, on the themes of Economic Empowerment, Health Care, Global Mission and an Alternative Dispute Resolution Policy (to stop Christians taking each other to court); and the very long session ended at around 3pm, where I had lunch with the Primate and Mama Angela once again. He is ridiculously busy, and I expressed concern for his wellbeing, followed by a time of prayer together; and I then caught up with a number of others, including the so-called Bishop Theologian, +Dapo Asaju, who was very positive about the idea of us hosting a cross-cultural zoom meeting between our Local Ministry Programme and some of the Nigerian seminaries.

That conversation also opened my eyes to the ordinand question in the Church of Nigeria, where a very good number of coming forward but sometimes for the wrong reasons. The Church of Nigeria continues with the pattern they inherited from the Church of England, where clergy are given a vicarage and a stipend (though not necessarily a pension), which is standard across the dioceses; and at a time when inflation is running at 24% the package rates favourably against many other careers. Clergy serving in the north of the country, of course, or other areas of high activity from Islamic militants, the Fulani or simple banditry could hardly be accused of having chosen an easy path (indeed some have had to evacuate from high-danger zones, and one, Revd. Joseph Rafi, was killed just last month). But those elsewhere could be applying for the wrong reasons, which is why a robust system of vetting has now evolved, not dissimilar to our own.

Meanwhile I was a little saddened by how few of the bishops' children had entered the ministry (none in my unscientific straw poll of around twelve episcopal families), and by the commonly held aspiration that children should emigrate to the US, Canada or the UK, in search of a better life.

The Standing Committee officially ended at around 4.30pm; but the poor bishops had to return for a House of Bishops meeting at 8pm, which – it transpired – continued for a further eleven hours till 7am the following morning! During the night they elected fourteen bishops, nine to new 'missionary' dioceses – i.e. parts of the country in need of a significant evangelistic boost. In each case four candidates were seriously considered and whittled down until the successful candidate received at least 2/3rds of the episcopal vote.

One missionary diocese wasn't filled in this way, given that the bishop of the 'sending' diocese had died just two days' before. That bishop's predecessor had also died suddenly in post; and given that the final day of the Committee had lasted for a full 24 hours (with

chaplains and drivers having to stay up all night as well as the bishops), it seemed clear to me that serious questions should be asked about the relentless pressures on the people I met.

Friday

Having staggered to bed at 7am, +James emerged in his pyjamas two hours later to meet with one of his clergymen who had been elected bishop during the night – indeed the new bishop of half of +James' current diocese, which has 400 serving clergy and is sensibly being divided in two.

We eventually set off for Lagos at around 9.45, and I noticed rather more during the five-and-a-bit-hours of our journey than on the way, perhaps because of the better weather. There were beautiful views of hills and woodland, with mile upon mile of fruit-bearing banana palms, and the odd colourful wildlife too, including a fabulously technicoloured lizard and a bright yellow bird with a long green tail. Markets in the villages added some vibrancy to the journey too, as well as the variety of beautiful fabrics that even many of the poorest of the poor were wearing with pride – though in one village our minibus was attacked by a group of young men armed with sticks (though blessedly not guns) who were clearly wanting to extort money from us, but who rapidly dispersed when the security vehicle behind us intervened.

There was deep poverty on display as well, both rural and urban, with large numbers of children standing in the middle of the road (especially where traffic slowed down for potholes and speedbumps) selling little packages of eggs, dried bananas, giant African land snails and cola nuts (which have a deeply significant medicinal and cultural resonance in much of Nigeria). I was concerned that quite so many children were out of school – and +James explained that the universal provision of primary education has largely broken down in many places, except where the Church had stepped in. A Unicef report that I accessed online later that day put the number at 10.5 million or 39% of children aged from 6-11, with the proportions much worse in the north.

The Primate phoned during our journey and spoke very warmly of our friendship and the importance of my visit. He clearly hadn't changed his mind about the Church of England being hopelessly compromised – his language would be much stronger than that – but he was appreciative of what I'd shared and very keen that we should keep in touch. He also stressed to me that he thought that 'orthodox' Church of England clergy and bishops (his word, not mine) should remain within the Church, rather than moving out – a positive and maybe surprising position from quite such a leading light in GafCon.

I certainly hadn't expected any more from the visit than that, but the opportunity to address most of the key movers and shakers in the largest of all of the Anglican Provinces seems to have changed something of the atmosphere and cleared some misconceptions. As another bishop wrote to me, *'We need more of your visits to share*

some of the positive work of the Church of England – the Quiet Revival among the Generation-Z and others’ – though I purposely avoided any binding commitment to visiting again, a decision which will need to be taken on its own merits.

As I returned to my original hotel in Lagos - where I was greeted by an enormous basket of fruit that +James wife had kindly ordered in for me, far more than I could eat - I found myself reflecting on the extraordinary impact that the Church of England has made, and continues to make, on the Church of Nigeria, and just why the divisions that led to the creation of GafCon matter so much to ordinary Anglicans here and to their leadership. (Many in the Church of England might wish they mattered less).

It’s not simply the history, liturgy, hymnody, vesture or cultural practices – for example the system of vicarages and stipends, as mentioned above - that maintain that heritage, often much more strongly than in today’s Church of England herself. It’s also that the theological fundamentals of Anglicanism (at least in the form first propagated by the Church Missionary Society, with just a hint of the Oxford Movement at points) are quite so treasured, including ‘scripture as interpreted by tradition and reason’ and a holistic approach to mission, with parishes, schools and hospitals at the forefront of the Church’s efforts.

Reading +James vision for the diocese of Lagos West was salutary here – both the sense of competitiveness in the strapline, which once again reflects his chutzpah and almost child-like exuberance: *‘To be the leading Diocese in the Church of Nigeria in preparing the Nation for the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’!*; but also in the five bullet points that followed. They included sustained growth, enhanced worship, Christian generosity and cordial relationships with other dioceses; but number three stood out for me as most definitely **not** appearing in any of the church development plans in the Diocese of Guildford: *‘To assist every member of the diocese in the understanding and practice of the 39 Articles of our faith’*.

Saturday

Saturday was the quietest day of the visit, and a good opportunity to catch up with emails from home, to update this account and to prepare for Sunday morning’s preaching assignments. Starting, deliciously, with a simple English breakfast of porridge, coffee and toast, I had the time till 9.30 for myself, followed by a trip to one of +James’ churches to experience my first Nigerian marriage blessing. It wasn’t the most spectacular event – surprisingly low-key in fact – but I duly prayed for Simon and Blessing in their new life together, following a sermon, both rousing and humorous, from the Bishop.

Disappointingly a possible visit to a place called Badagry was called off, though for very understandable reasons: a 4-hour round trip was adjudged too big a time commitment on top of the long drive from Ekiti the day before. Whilst it was probably a sensible decision, it would have been very good to visit that historic town on the Lagos coast,

which was both a major embarkation port in the Transatlantic Slave Trade (the so-called 'Point of No Return') and also the landing point for Henry Townsend and Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the founding fathers of the Church of Nigeria.

+James still had some time to spare, but we failed to make the most of it. My suggestion that might find a market selling traditional Nigerian arts and crafts got lost in translation, and we ended up in a dreary Western shopping mall, where we bought four colourful shirts before returning to the hotel, where I watched some Premier League football, and prepared for the following day.

Sunday

I set the alarm for 5.15 to prepare myself for two services on Lagos Island, scheduled for 7 and 9. Following a breakfast where I continued to work my way through the enormous basket of fruit, I was picked up at 6 o'clock by +James' long-suffering chaplain and driver and we set off for Our Saviour's Church on Lagos Island, arriving with twenty minutes to spare. Lagos Island lies at the heart of the Nigerian economy (akin to the City of London) and Our Saviours was originally the colonial church, though is now the church-of-choice of some of the most powerful Nigerian Christians in the country; indeed, a former president (with the never-to-be-forgotten name of Goodluck Jonathan) was once among its members.

It was good to get a glimpse of the sea as we drove along the impressive 12-kilometre bridge from the mainland, and we were warmly welcomed on arrival by the Bishop of Lagos, +Ifedola Gabriel Okupevi, and Folorunso the local vicar. A congregation of around 300 attended the 7 o'clock Communion, which was a fairly traditional service, though enlivened by an excellent organist enjoying the full range of the Church's impressive 1990s Manders organ (with four manuals no less); while around 500 came along at 9 for Matins with a difference, complete with organ, choir and a wonderful youth band comprising keyboards, drums, trumpets and a violin section, whose passion, skill and enthusiasm raised the roof. After a week of generally rather staid worship it was a joy to enter into something far more joyful and spontaneous; and I felt that the Church of England could learn a thing or two here about liturgy and liberty complementing one another, rather than being somehow in competition.

The Lectionary readings were 1 Corinthians 13 and the Parable of the Good Samaritan – and I felt very at home in the pulpit again, and far more energised than when preaching about the joys and travails of the Church of England. The response was warm and enthusiastic, and it was wonderful to witness another Church of Nigeria tradition, with dancing processions celebrating several birthdays in the congregation, most notably that of an 82-year-old emeritus professor from Lagos University, who was remarkably sprightly for her age.

Following the services I had a brief glimpse of the children's and youth churches meeting into the original church building - apparently their children's church is 300-strong - then set off for the hotel once more. I am now packed up and preparing for a late flight, due to arrive in Heathrow at 5 o'clock tomorrow morning.

I hadn't expected this account to run on for nearly 5000 words but have primarily written it as a kind of personal aide memoire of the trip. I will share it more widely with those who might be interested, and hope and pray that it gives a slightly more rounded picture of the Church of Nigeria, which is often best known for the fiery statements emanating from its Primate; just as I equally hope that my visit gave the Nigerians a rather more rounded view of the Church of England.