

Christian clergy are being kidnapped and killed in Nigeria

From farms to churches, no place feels safe.

by [Patrick Egwu](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



CRIME SCENE: The entrance to St. Mark's Catholic Church in Enugu, Nigeria, a few meters away from where priest Clement Ugwu was taken by armed men. (Photo by Patrick Egwu)

On April 24, 2018, Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha were presiding over an early morning mass for about 50 parishioners at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in a village in north central Nigeria.

About 20 minutes into the service, gunmen, suspected to be from the largely Muslim Fulani ethnic group, stormed the parish and opened fire on the congregation. Nineteen people were killed, including both priests. The gunmen also razed houses, destroyed crops, and left the community in a state of chaos.

After the attack, bishops, priests, and thousands of residents demonstrated to protest the killings. The protesters called on the Nigerian government to arrest and prosecute the killers.

Three years later, no one has been arrested or prosecuted.

“Our community was shocked and in fear after the killing, and many people stopped going to church for some time,” said Paul Anyakan, a parishioner who lives some miles away from where the attack happened. “When you go to the farm, you are scared of being attacked or killed, and when you go to the house of God, the same thing happens. Nowhere is safe.”

The killing of the two priests at St. Ignatius was not an isolated incident. It used to be unheard of for a member of the clergy to be attacked—in Nigeria, the office of a pastor is regarded as sacred, and even a minor verbal attack is seen as instigating God’s wrath. But in recent years, this has changed. About 20 priests and other clergy members have been killed or attacked by members of the terrorist organization Boko Haram alone.

Nigeria, a nation of more than 200 million people, is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. Islamic extremists have specifically targeted Christian communities as a way of pushing a Shari’a law agenda. In 2000, more than 3,000 people—mostly Christians in northern Nigeria—were killed and more than 60,000 displaced after the imposition of Islamic law in the region.

The current surge of attacks on priests has reportedly been carried out by Muslim Fulani herders, bandits, Boko Haram insurgents, and the Islamic State’s West African Province. (Since its split from Boko Haram in 2016, ISWAP has become a dominant jihadist group in the region.) The attacks have ignited tensions between Christians and Muslims.

The most recent clergy killing sparked outrage across the country. On January 15, John Gbakaan, a priest at St. Anthony Catholic Church in Gulu, was abducted with his brother while they were traveling to visit their mother. The gunmen initially demanded 30 million naira (US\$78,750) and later 5 million naira (US\$13,200) in ransom money from Gbakaan’s diocese, the Diocese of Minna, for the release of the two men, which the diocese refused to pay.

The next day, Gbakaan’s body was found, covered in machete cuts. No one has been arrested in connection with the murder, and the priest’s brother has not yet been found.

On December 27, 2020, the first abduction of a bishop was reported in Nigeria. Bishop Moses Chikwe of Owerri, a city in southeast Nigeria, was kidnapped and later released unharmed.

“It is a serious problem that is happening across the country and has affected the body of Christ,” said Martin Anusi, director of communications for the Catholic Diocese of Awka. “Priests are targeted for no reason, and this should call for great concern . . . anyone can be a victim.”

Anusi said that abduction for ransom has become a growing business for kidnappers, and it may be that they target priests because they think they can demand and receive a ransom from the priest’s parish or family.

Priests are also one of the most vulnerable segments of Nigeria’s population, Anusi said. A priest’s itinerary can be easily monitored and tracked, he said, and this makes them soft targets for attacks.

“You can’t hide your program as a priest,” he said. “When you go to the church’s bulletin, you know the day he will be in the office, the day he will have a funeral, the day he will celebrate mass.” And unlike Nigerian politicians, clergy don’t travel with armed security.

But the ransom money doesn’t always come, Anusi said. “In my diocese, our bishop told us that if a priest is kidnapped while carrying out his pastoral assignment, the diocese will do everything possible to pray for you—but no ransom would be paid for your release,” he said. “If they kill you, that would be part of our life and vocation as a priest.”

Anusi said the reason for turning down demands for ransom is simple: “Once you start paying ransom, you are opening a business for the kidnappers who target priests. Then they will begin a massive abduction of priests.”

But the attacks are not always about money.

In March 2019, in the southeastern city of Enugu, Catholic priest Clement Ugwu was on his way to his church when he was abducted by gunmen who had been trailing him for about a week. Members of his community came out from their houses to see what was happening and were sent running following gunshots. A few days later, Ugwu’s body was found nearby.

Six months later, Paul Offu, another priest in the same diocese, was attacked and killed by armed men suspected to be Muslim cattle herders.

Ugwu and Offu's killers never demanded a ransom.

Anusi said that religious division "will not go away until we begin as individuals, groups, and establishments to de-emphasize ethnicity and emphasize humanity so that when I see a young man standing before me, I see first a human being made in the image of God. When this happens, people will begin to see themselves as human beings who are related or connected on higher values than ethnicity or religious affiliations."

Evaristus Bassey, former director of Caritas Nigeria, the relief and development arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, said the abduction of priests is part of an agenda perpetuated by religious fundamentalists whose goal is to convert the nation to Islam.

"This forms part of the whole Islamic agenda by extremists in northern Nigeria," Bassey said. "The government is weak, and they know this. That is why they use every opportunity to push their agenda of attacking Christians."

Bassey said he hopes for a "neutral government in the future—one that would believe in the true corporate existence of Nigeria for the common good of all."

Since the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 with a bloody campaign to impose Islamic law on the country, more than 30,000 people have been killed and more than 2 million displaced from their homes, according to the Institute for Security Studies.

In recent years, there has been growing insecurity in Nigeria, and the government has been unable to provide adequate protection for priests or other citizens. Jihadists and other armed groups from neighboring countries like Chad and Niger regularly smuggle arms into Nigeria through the porous border.

On Christmas Day in 2019, unverified footage showed ISWAP militants killing 11 Christians. The group said it was in retaliation for the death of their leader, who was killed in a raid by special forces from the United States military.

Additionally, armed bandits and militias in the northwest have been attacking citizens and abducting them for ransom. Since January, about 1,000 students have

been kidnapped, including a group of 317 schoolgirls taken from their hostels this February.

The situation has forced many priests to adjust their schedules and take precautionary measures to protect themselves. Donatus Ajibo, a pastor in the Nsukka Diocese, where priests have been attacked and abducted in the past, said he is more careful and observant while driving along isolated paths or traveling for pastoral work.

Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani Muslim from the north, has been accused of protecting his kinsmen and not doing enough to condemn their crimes. Buhari won the 2015 presidential election on a promise to eliminate Boko Haram militants and to end insurgency in northern Nigeria. His administration has repeatedly claimed that the group has been “technically defeated,” but the group continues to carry out attacks, targeting both Christian and Muslim communities.

For example, on Christmas Eve last year, Boko Haram insurgents stormed a Christian town in the northeast, killing more than 20 people and abducting a pastor, Bulus Yikura of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Yikura was released on March 3 after the government reportedly paid an undisclosed ransom.

Others have not been so lucky. In January 2020, Boko Haram executed pastor Lawan Andimi, who had been abducted and held in captivity for more than two weeks. Andimi was a leading official of the Christian Association of Nigeria in the region.

“The government has not made efforts to arrest and prosecute these people,” Anusi said. This, he added, is why so many Nigerians believe government officials are shielding the attackers and emboldening their mission of attacking Christians.

Buhari recently fired Nigeria’s army chiefs, whose security tactics have been questioned and criticized. But his decision did not come soon enough.

In December 2020, the United States designated Nigeria as a “country of particular concern” for religious freedom, alongside China, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. This designation is for nations that engage in or tolerate “systemic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.” If they fail to improve their records, sanctions can follow.

According to Open Doors' 2021 World Watch List, more Christians were killed for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country in 2020—3,530, up from 1,350 in 2019. In overall violence, Nigeria was second only to Pakistan, while it trailed only China in the number of churches attacked or closed at 270, according to the report.

Christian communities and organizations in Nigeria have regularly condemned the attacks on priests and other Christians. The Catholic bishops conference met with Buhari to express concerns over the rising insecurity in the country and, in one of their public statements, called for his resignation.

"Today in northern Nigeria, many people live in fear, and many young people are afraid to become pastors because pastors' lives are in great danger," said John Hayab, vice-chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria.

"When bandits or kidnappers realize that their victim is a priest or pastor, it seems a violent spirit takes over their hearts to demand more ransom and, in some cases, go to the extent of killing the victim," he said. "We are simply pleading with the federal government and all security agencies to do whatever it will take to bring this evil to a stop."

About three years after the mass killing at St. Ignatius Catholic Church, members of the community continue to live in fear. The priests and parishioners are regarded as martyrs by people in the region.

Despite the attacks, Christians there are optimistic. They say they will continue to profess their faith despite the challenges that come with it.

"This is persecution of our faith, but we will not give in," Anyakan said. "But we hope they stop attacking Christians and priests—because we don't bear arms but our faith to fight with."

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Dangerous ministry."