

# I feared God until I discovered his grace

**Ugonna Nkwunonwo** grew up in a strict Nigerian church, but found out faith was more about a relationship than rules

WHEN Ugonna Nkwunonwo was a small boy living in Nigeria, he definitely feared God.

Unfortunately, he had been brought up in a strict Christian tradition that emphasised obeying the rules, rather than experiencing grace. It wasn't until he was a teenager that he understood what a relationship with God was like.

Fast-forward to 2018 and he is married with three children, is an ordained minister, has a doctorate, and is part of one of Portsmouth's fast-growing church plants. He puts it all down to God's grace.

"I couldn't be where I am today without God's grace," he said. "Although I only lately discovered this grace, it has continued to work for me, in me and through me. While I am still a project in God's hands, my testimony as

of today is a synopsis of God in action."

Ugonna was born in 1978 and raised in south-eastern Nigeria. He was the third child out of six. His father had fought in the Nigerian-Biafra war, which lasted from 1967 until 1970, and the conflict meant the family grew up facing extreme hardship. His family also had a long history of going to church, and he was baptised as a child and was confirmed at 13.

"In those days, the church in Nigeria seemed like an institution where people were taught basic dogmas and rules, to guide and help them live morally and mutually in a multicultural society," he said. "The way my father appropriated the church teachings made him a strict disciplinarian and one who feared God and abstained from evil at all cost.

"The problem is that we feared God to the point that we could not approach him. Definitely, such moral values formed the major part of my upbringing and helped me to be 'a good boy'. But I lived daily in fear and in bondage, and there was simply no relationship with God. I didn't know about God's love and mercy."

Ugonna committed himself to Christ in 1991 as a 13-year-old, when he heard a sermon as a new student at his secondary school. The preacher talked about having a relationship with Christ in a way that drove him to tears. He raised his hand, prayed a prayer of commitment and was born again.

He subsequently experienced a boldness and courage to share his new-found faith with his friends. Ugonna was actually the first in his family to experience being born again, and he wondered

how he would cope telling his parents, siblings and friends. Ultimately his father gave his life to Christ on the day that Ugonna preached in church as a university student.

As a young Christian, he was taught to read the Bible from cover to cover at least twice a year, which he has done for many years. He had also been told to pray and fast every day, which he found difficult as a young man with a somewhat large appetite.

He also struggled with the traditions which his new-found Christian experience seemed to impose on him – don't drink alcohol, don't dance, listen only to Christian songs, only watch films about Jesus and so on.

"At first everything seemed impossible, of course impossible without an alternative," he said. "My Christian experience and faith journey had been that of extensive hard work, ardent struggles and persistent effort to know Christ and to be worthy of Him.

"One day I found the text in Titus 2: 11-14. That was when I realised how much I needed the grace of God to keep up the faith and to see God's plans and purpose for my life come to fulfilment. I knew little about that grace, so I could not have imagined that what I had struggled with could be easily dealt with by means of God's grace.

"In my Christian life and journey, I have had ups and downs, mountains and valleys, but thank God that today I'm still a Christian. There have been times I felt like quitting – but I couldn't imagine what kept me still in the faith. Actually it is the grace of God."

In 2009, he married Ugochi and the pair had three children, Chimzi, now aged eight, Bube,



**Ugonna Nkwunonwo and his wife Ugochi**

aged six and Annabel, aged four. He worked as an academic in Nigeria. Meanwhile, he also studied theology and was ordained as a minister in the Anglican Church in Nigeria.

The family came to England in September 2012, when Ugonna secured a place to study Environmental Sciences at the University of Portsmouth and ultimately was awarded his doctorate. Now he lectures at Kingston University in London.

## 'God spared our lives and not a hair on my son's head was lost'

"My beautiful wife Ugochi and I have our moments, but we have chosen to stick to each other in love, submission, kindness, understanding and forgiveness," he said. "We have been happy, we are happy still, and we will ever be happy."

The family worshipped at St Jude's Church in Southsea, and then were part of the small team that created a brand new congregation in the church hall at St Margaret's, Eastney, from September 2017. Ugonna is one of those who preaches occasionally

during their regular Sunday afternoon services.

Ugonna also credits God for keeping him and one of his children safe when they had a cycling accident around 18 months ago. He was bringing his then five-year-old son Bube home from school on his bike when it skidded at a road junction. Ugonna fell on his jaw, losing three teeth and fracturing both of his wrists, but his son was safe.

"It was a serious accident, but God spared our lives," he said. "Not even a single hair of my son's head was lost. And, thanks to God, I have healed much faster than anticipated."

Ugonna also hopes to be ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church, and would like to be involved in a potential new congregation that might serve African Anglicans.

"I'm still a deacon at the moment but I hope to be made a priest," he said. "I'd love to be involved in a service that imitates both African and Anglican. At the moment, many people come from Africa and settle in the Portsmouth area, and if they want lively worship, they tend to go to other non-Anglican churches. But there are many Africans who are Anglican and would like to remain at an Anglican church when they come."