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Stories of Pain and Hope **Collected by** De Marillac Centre for Street Children Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, FJDP Makurdi, Hope for the Village Child Foundation, JDPC Bauchi, JDPC Ekiti, JDPC Ibadan, JDPC Jos, JDPC Maiduguri, JDPMC Osogbo, JDPC Pankshin, JDPC Shendam, JDPC Yola, Samuel Ioron Foundation

Illustrated with pictures from Grace Bithum



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OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE:

THE WOUNDED HEARTS OF NIGERIA



We are more than 200 million people who regard Nigeria as our home. We speak over 500 languages and belong to more than 300 different ethnic groups. Yet in all our diversity, we share resilience in overcoming adversity, and our ability to join hands and pray for a better future for the country of our dream. Our hopes, dreams and values of community life bind us together – but we also face diverse experiences of pain.

As much as we have a great potential for a meaningful and peaceful life, we need to admit that violence is part of our lives and our communities. It happens in our families among people we trust, and it affects children and makes their growing up filled with fear and mistrust. It happens in our communities between clans and different groups. Even our cultural and religious perceptions and our practices sometimes seem to encourage violence and discrimination against other groups of people whom we perceive as different, unacceptable or simply inferior to us. This violence wounds not only our physical bodies but also our hearts and our relationships. It limits our ability to trust others and believe in one another. Those whose wounds have not healed up, sometimes tend to wound others, perpetuating a cycle of violence from one generation to the next.

We are part of this Nigerian community and we want to tell four stories of pain from our country that represent millions of others whose stories are not known or will never be told, since nobody knows what is going on in their lives. We believe that sharing their stories will create stronger connections between us and strengthen solidarity in our communities. We want to let the wounded hearts speak through us in voices that transcend the differences in our language, culture and religion. The language of the heart is universal and so is our latent ability for compassionate listening.

Supporting people by helping in their recovery is not only the duty of experts, but it is our task as community members, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, neighbours, cultural and religious leaders, and decision-makers to be involved in the healing process. We should not avoid the pain of others or harden our hearts against the violence others have gone through. Or even worse, think that we are better off because life may have spared us, while others are "cursed", as we sometimes label bad things that happen to others. We should also stop spreading the idea that people going through violence and pain have brought this fate upon themselves because of their ideas, cultures or religion. Nobody deserves violence; nobody has the right to violate others.

Through caring and connecting with one another, we change the lives of those whose hearts are wounded, and our own hearts too. Mending wounds is about creating togetherness and inclusion. It is the ground on which lasting peace can grow – peace in our homes, communities and our nation at large.

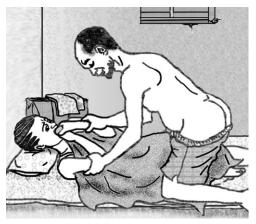
OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE: THE WOUNDED HEARTS OF NIGERIA



RONKE'S STORY

Ronke was 12 years old and the eldest child with two brothers. When her dad died, he left his family in poverty and Ronke's mother could not afford her school fees anymore. When Ronke's uncle Alawo offered support to enrol her in school in the city, the mother was so happy and relieved to know that help had come her daughter's way to enable her to continue her education. She gladly accepted the generous offer from her brother in-law.

However, some three months after Ronke's arrival in the city, Alawo's behaviour suddenly changed. He started touching parts of her body that she did not want to be touched, and he made lewd remarks that left her confused and ashamed. He drank alcohol and asked her to be "nice" to him. Ronke was scared and started to fear him. One evening, he demanded that Ronke undressed before him to "show her gratitude" to him for all the good things he had done for her, especially for



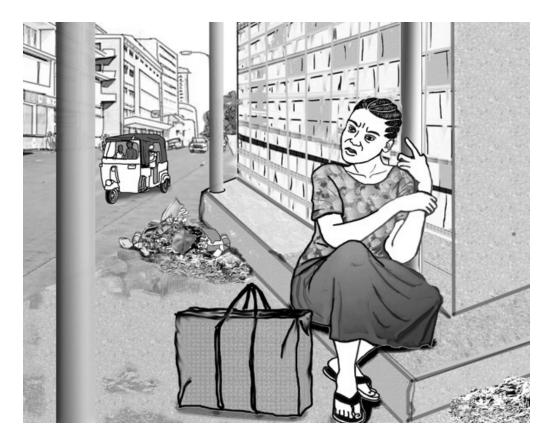
enrolling her in the new school. This was the evening her ordeal with her uncle started; from that day her uncle forced her to have sex with him almost every night.

Ronke was deeply shocked and tried to avoid Alawo by locking herself up in her room whenever she was at home. But this did not stop him. She could not escape his violence. She gave in to his advances, feeling more and more powerless and numb. She had no choice, since he threatened to stop paying her school fees and send her back to the village with wicked lies that she was a disobedient and rude girl. What else could she do? She could not bother her mum who had many problems of her own anyway. She believed without uncle Alawo, she wouldn't be able to continue her education. This was her only goal in life at the time.

Five months after the first rape, she discovered that she was pregnant. Alawo forced her to go to a quack who gave her pills to initiate an abortion. While taking the pills alone in her room, feeling abandoned by everyone in this world. she suffered a lot of pain. The pills did not produce the desired effect: Ronke had to repeat the painful process twice again before she lost the pregnancy. On her third attempt, she developed serious cramps and she bled the whole day.



Full of fear that he may start molesting her again, Ronke requested her uncle to give her permission to go home to her village and be with her mother. Uncle Alawo allowed her to leave, threatening her that if she told anybody about "their secret", he would kill her – nobody would believe her story anyway. However, Ronke decided not to go to her mother, since she felt so ashamed and she did not want to disappoint her. She decided to remain at the bus station where homeless children hung around. At least there, she was free from uncle Alawo's violence.



I am Imam Abdullah and I have just visited Ibrahim in jail. I knew his parents well. Here is Ibrahim's painful story.

IBRAHIM'S STORY

Ibrahim was a 14-year-old boy when members of the Boko Haram entered their village. On this sad day, he worked at the field and returned home in the evening with his younger brother Muhammed only to find their village destroyed: Their hut burnt down, their property looted, and his mum and dad shot dead.

Their corpses lay on the ground in front of the wreckage of the



hut that used to be their home. Ibrahim's heart froze at the sight of his killed parents and destruction of his family's homestead. He swore to himself that he would do everything in his power to take revenge against the perpetrators of the evil acts.



After burying their parents, their paternal uncle took in the two boys to live with his family. But Ibrahim wasn't able to accept someone else's decisions over him – except those of his dad who was no longer alive. He fiercely revolted against his uncle and when he did so, he was often punished severely for his disobedience. His uncle hoped to teach him discipline by flogging him so that he would finally "adjust", as he called it, but the boy just jeered at him and showed no sign of pain or fear. Ibrahim's mind and body seemed numb to physical pain, since the worst pain that can happen to a youth had already befallen him on the day his parents were murdered.

Two years later, the Boko Haram again attacked the neighbouring village and his uncle's family together with Ibrahim and Muhammed fled to an Internally Displaced Persons' camp. At this camp, life was worse than ever before; the whole family suffered lack of decent food, water and other necessities of life; their situation was really scary.



Ibrahim made "friends" in the camp with young boys who, like him, were also frustrated and angry. They drank self-brewed alcohol together and engaged in violent conducts. Whenever he was drunk, he would fight anyone who came across his path at the wrong time or who did something that ran contrary to his views. One evening, a young man in the camp accused him of not paying his gambling debts. He shouted bad words at Ibrahim, saying that he was a good-for-nothing youth and that he was cursed by the death of his parents. Ibrahim's anger against life and against everybody in the world seemed to explode inside of him and he so severely beat up this young man that he broke his cheek bones. The camp leader called the police who arrested him and put him in a cell at the nearby police station.



OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE: THE WOUNDED HEARTS OF NIGERIA



MAMA NGOZI'S STORY

Mama Ngozi was a beautiful and successful business woman who processed fruits for delicious juice that she took to the city to sell. The city stores requested more and more juice since customers loved the unique taste and quality of her home-made fruit drink. She was blessed with three boys and two girls and a husband who loved her dearly and supported her, but he passed away some years back. After his death, she continued to till the family land, which gave her and her family some safety and consolation.

Everyone admired Mama Ngozi in the village for her dress sense, pleasant personality and business acumen. However, some people were also jealous of her. "It is not for nothing that this woman is so beautiful and successful ... she must be a witch to be this great," some said negative things about her and speculated about the possible origin of her success. Rumours like these encouraged Mama Ngozi's brothers-in-law to decide to grab her land and her fruit trees. So, they further spread malicious reports about her.



One day, Mama Ngozi's youngest son, Elijah was playing with his friends at the river, where he accidentally fell into the river, hit his head against a rock and started bleeding. Mama Ngozi and her children were called to come urgently, but in vain. When she held her dead child in her arms, her heart broke into a thousand pieces. This was the worst moment in Mama Ngozi's life.

However, instead of comforting her with soothing words, the village people started spreading lies, saying that she might have used spiritual means to cause the death of her son, so that she can become even richer and that perhaps even her husband's death was due to Mama Ngozi's witchcraft.

Mama Ngozi was so devastated on hearing these cruel rumours. Out of desperation, she paid a high fee at the prayer house and agreed to be flogged as the villagers considered such acts necessary for her "cleansing". They hoped flogging would make her admit that she was a witch. She did not know what she had done wrong to deserve the bad treatment in the hands of her people. How could she or anyone for that



matter have admitted to committing acts that she knew nothing of? She couldn't understand why her people could be so cruel to her in spite of her grief at the unfortunate death of her son.

Despite all her efforts and her sacrifice, the community leaders took a harsh decision. They decided that she either surrendered herself to be executed or banished from the village with her family for being a witch. As no one was bold enough to speak in her defence or lend her a helping hand, Mama Ngozi had to pack her bags and baggage.



OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE: THE WOUNDED HEARTS OF NIGERIA



I am Chief Oluwatosin, a traditional leader in my village. I have known so many stories like Amirah's where people argue that women's rights are against the traditions. I don't believe that our culture supports hurting women unjustly. Therefore, I have become engaged in the quest to end violence against women in my village. Please listen to Amirah's story.

AMIRAH'S STORY

Amirah and Jacob have been married for three years. Coming from a poor background and being raised by a single mother, Amirah was only 15 when she got married to her husband Jacob who was already in his late 30s. Jacob was a friend of Amirah's uncle who had arranged the marriage.





Jacob was kind and caring in the first few months of their marriage. A year after the wedding, he lost a lot of money as one of his business partners betrayed him by investing their money in the "wrong people". This was the time when their first child, a daughter, was born. Jacob started coming home late and complaining about almost everything that Amirah did in their home. He complained that she was careless in the way she looked after the house and the food she prepared was tasteless. The fact that their child cried a lot was attributed to her; hence he called her a "useless mother". He pushed her around,

especially when he came home drunk in the evening, forced her to cook food for him at midnight and to have sex with him afterwards. There was no one she could report her predicament to; her uncle had threatened her on their wedding day not to even think of leaving her marriage, since, according to him, it was her only chance in life.

Since she had low self-esteem, being young and feeling totally dependent on her husband and also having nowhere to go, she believed more and more that she was useless and did not deserve to be loved. One night, the beating and kicking got really bad; Jacob kicked her in the chest. She could hardly breathe after the incident; she feared he would eventually kill her. In total panic, she ran with her daughter to Mama Margret, her neighbour, to save her life.





OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE:

HOW CAN WE RECOGNIZE A WOUNDED HEART?



Ronke feels abandoned and no longer a part of any community. Having gone through so much lonely suffering and loss, her soul feels shattered, leaving nothing but shame and self-hatred inside of her. She can hardly look at people out of fear, that they will see the "damaged" and "rotten" person she thinks she is. She sees herself as dirty and worthless; she blames herself for her unfortunate experience. She asks herself over and over again if perhaps she has "provoked" her uncle to do what he did to her, or she is



guilty of what he constantly accused her of doing. Will anybody ever believe the story of a poor 12-year-old schoolgirl? She thinks she must be a bad and worthless person. Why else would she be going through this horrific experience if she were not so? God must be punishing her for her wrong doings.



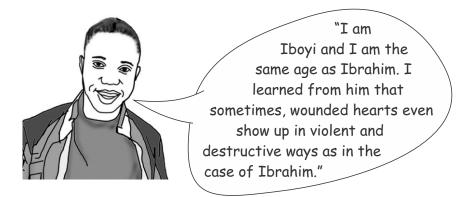
Since she feels dirty inside her body and soul, she becomes obsessed with washing herself several times a day with strong detergent. Her skin starts bleeding from the excessive cleaning, but her feeling towards herself does not change. She cannot wash away the shame and no matter what she does, the feeling of being "damaged" remains in her spirit.

Ronke's life on the street is full of hardship and fears, and sometimes she even carries deep fears when everything seems okay. She reacts suspiciously to noise around her and she is always in great fear that bad people could harm her – or that her uncle could find her and take her back to his house to continue the evil acts he used to do to her.

Her nights are terrible with all the noise on the street, and the little sleep that she happens to catch is often interrupted by nightmares in which she dreams of being raped.





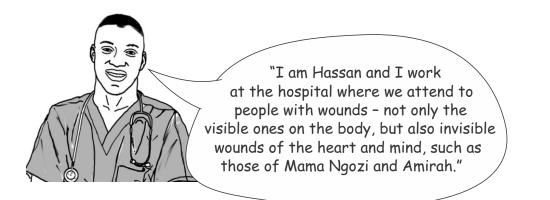


Ibrahim is so deeply shocked and shattered from losing his parents that his pain manifests in violent acts. He attacks other youths violently when they make fun of him or call him names. His heart is ready to punish everyone around him and perhaps the whole world for having destroyed his hope in life.

Drinking too much alcohol and using drugs, that are known for causing serious health problems, is a clear sign of Ibrahim's deep pains. He wants to calm himself down and he

does not find any other means other than drugging himself to sleep. He imagines that during the few hours that he is drunk, he will forget his problems, including his fears. However, when he wakes up the next morning, things are worse than before as nothing ever changes through alcohol consumption. He wakes up feeling weak and hopeless. So, the cycle of drinking and numbing resumes, creating more pain for him and other people around him.





Mama Ngozi suffers from horrible recollections of the events that led to her banishment and she imagines she may be "running mad", because her memories don't seem normal. They make her feel as if all negative experiences of the past are happening in the present. When she walks close to the river where her son died, she starts trembling heavily as she recalls the voices of the people shouting in confusion on the day her son drowned in the river. It feels so shockingly real! Her mind always wanders to the scenes of horror that changed everything in her life.





She feels lost in her thoughts and cannot stop thinking of her situation: What has she done wrong that make people to hate her so much and want her to leave her home? Sometimes she sits for hours thinking and rethinking what really happened to her and the offence she seems to have committed to make her "deserve" this terrible punishment.

Amirah feels depressed and trapped in her thoughts: What is her fate now? Is she to go back to her husband and endure more violence, at least for her daughter's sake? She doesn't want to bother her poor mother again who has already suffered so much since Amirah's birth. Isn't suffering part of what it means to be a woman; bearing pain and enduring one's husband's violent acts? As her uncle had



said: she is the only daughter of a single mother; hence she should not expect too much from life. She does not feel like mixing with other women or participating in social gatherings or activities in her community because of the deep pain in her heart and her feeling of hopelessness.

She feels more and more disconnected from the world and even from her little daughter whom she thinks she cannot be a good mother to. The little girl cries a lot, she experiences cramps and seems to feel her mother's pain, but Amirah feels unable to comfort her. She sometimes gets angry when the little girl does not stop crying. The more anxious Amirah gets about her future, the more her daughter seems to react nervously as if she feels the world is not a safe place for her.





OUR STORIES OF PAIN AND HOPE:

WE CAN HEAL TOGETHER



he wounded hearts – whose condition, mental health experts refer to as "trauma" in technical language – need our commitment as a community, neighbours, friends and family members. We, and not necessarily doctors or psychologists, are responsible for creating an environment that brings about peace of mind and recovery. This is a great contribution to the future of our community. Caring for others is a way of bringing justice and safety to people's lives, including ours too.

Wounded hearts need healing to make our communities strong. Otherwise, we may risk children growing up and becoming wounded too. This happens when they are not being cared for by their families; when they witness their parents and peers display violent acts; and when they grow up thinking that fear and mistrust are the only ways of surviving in their community. Emotional wounds are the consequence of violent acts on the next generation; it is a very high price indeed.

People with wounded hearts need our sensitivity to their pain: They need to feel safe and be in control so that their minds and hearts can calm down. They need to feel empowered and capable of doing something meaningful with their lives; they need assurance that a good future awaits them in spite of their painful experience. They need connection and acknowledgement from others to discover their true self in spite of their suffering. This is what we need to do to grow together.

What does this mean in concrete terms? First, the violence has to stop. Our nervous system, our bodies and our hearts are not made for the constant stress for survival, trying to flee or fighting one another. We need to be able to calm down and feel safe. We cannot heal if violent acts continue unchecked around us. Safety also means being in control of decisions concerning one's life.

In Ronke's case, her life has been so out of control that even if we feel "we" as adults, professional social workers and helpers have the right solutions, it is up to her to make up her mind. She must decide whether she wants to go back home to her mother, accept the shelter she is offered, or remain in the streets. It is painful for us as social workers when children, for instance, reject our offer of a safe and better alternative to their present state.

Such rejection is not because they are difficult or unruly young people, but it is usually because they no longer believe that adults will not harm them. We need to let Ronke know that we respect her feelings and her needs. We may not know what is best for her, but we can help her find her way in life in spite of her pain. We also need to learn to respect her feelings unconditionally and appreciate her need to be in control of her life.



Furthermore, we need to listen to Ronke's hopes and life's aspirations. Ronke endured all the violence and the shame brought on her through her uncle's abuse for one thing; her ambition to go to school and finish her education. It is for these reasons that we have to find a way to get her back to school. Helping a wounded heart to feel strong again and become empowered is a form of healing. We need to get the commitment of people who are in charge of schools and who are committed to going the extra mile to assist children who have suffered in life.



Safety is something that Amirah also needs. Very often, the first person that a woman undergoing domestic violence meets is a health worker who examines her body and helps mend her broken bones and dress her wounds. We need nurses and doctors who know not only the physical signs of violence, but who can also read the invisible wounds inside a person. Such professionals are able to undertake care work with compassion and non-judgmental attitudes.

Male personnel, especially, have to be careful with the patient's need for safety and handle signs of stress with caution. They should not forget that perpetrators of intimate partner violence are mostly men. So, men need to ask a female patient whether they prefer to talk to a female colleague and in any case to be sensitive to observing signs of pain and stress in their female patients or clients.

It helps to show understanding when a patient exhibits difficulty in sharing their experience, to acknowledge their suffering, and to offer information on available help. Health workers should always endeavour to make their patients feel that they are in control of what happens during the conversation and examination. They should not forget that wounded hearts need to take control of their lives in order to heal properly. So even if a health worker has a lot of good ideas on what may help their patients, the patient should always be allowed to decide on what they consider best for them.



We need to convince the community that we are all committed to stopping violence in marriages and families. We need to convince Jacob to stop the abuse against his wife and make him aware that he is not entitled to doing whatever he likes with his wife. Amirah is not his property; she has rights too. Likewise, their daughter has the right to grow up in a home that is free of violence. We need to help Jacob to recognise that he will be a happier person, too, if his wife and child do not fear him. Violence does not only wound those who endure it, but it also shatters those who mete it out against others. Husbands need to learn that male strength is better shown through responsible acts such as caring and understanding and not through terrorising fellow citizens. This is what benefits everyone in both the home and community.



Also, Mama Ngozi's community has to be made to realise that it is injustice to put a community member through stigmatisation because she may be different from the others. They should know that everybody is born with talents and strengths; hence there is no reason for people to be envious of one another, as envy can be destructive. Religious leaders of all denominations should be encouraged to stop disseminating the notion that lack of material success is a result of a curse or witchcraft. They should be educated to know that no religious or cultural practice should be used to destroy anyone's life. We can be faithful to our traditions without contravening our fellow citizens' human rights.





Furthermore, we need to re-connect to people who feel pushed out of our communities and offer them compassion and comfort. Sometimes this implies asking for forgiveness, which is quite hard for people to do, yet immensely helping to achieve healing for everyone.

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Ibrahim must take responsibility for his wrong behaviour. He has no right to violently attack and wound another person, even if his behaviour is understandable given the horror that he experienced. If we want to be sincere, the prison cell is hardly the best place to achieve healing and become a more balanced person. It is necessary to make him feel accepted. He needs to come to terms with the loss of his parents and heal from the bitterness against himself and his community.

We can teach him other ways to deal with emotional burdens than violence. He should be made to participate in joint activities, especially sporting activities that can help him to release the tension and fears in him. Such positive connections with other young people will help him to rebuild his self-confidence and contribute to healing.

He also needs to feel "useful" and "needed" by his community as people respond positively to the potential, they see in him. By helping wounded people, we feel connected and more capable of dealing with stressful situations. In fact, helping others can also support us in overcoming the feeling of



powerlessness. The ability to find meaning in life is very important. When Ibrahim feels that he is a part of a bigger community, he will also be less prone to using drugs or engaging in violent acts.

Many young people in our communities who have lost their roots lose their sense of connection and this often leads them to develop criminal behaviours or join gangs or even rebel groups. They want to "punish" adults for not providing them with a good life; they feel betrayed for not having a prosperous life due to the "wars" around them. It is important to see these young people as merely reacting to the abnormalities they grow up with.

Therefore, the harm they do to others should not be minimised by such acknowledgements. We need to believe in their strengths even in the midst of all the negative behaviours they show and not think that trying to "discipline" or "educate" them will help them come to terms with their pain. We owe our young people the chance for a new beginning in life.

One thing that may come at the end, but is of equal importance to our well-being is that as helpers, we also need care: self-care.

Supporting broken-hearted people in their journey towards recovery and hope is fulfilling and gives us a sense of meaning and belonging as human beings. However, this pain inevitably comes along with feelings of destruction and powerlessness. The more we get into a deep-felt connection, the more we are likely to feel the suffering and pain of the victims of violent encounters.

It is important to note that we cannot be sensitive to the needs of the wounded hearts by neglecting our own hearts. Sometimes, our culture or religion makes us to forget about ourselves and immerse ourselves in the service of others. Women, especially, tend to place themselves always at serving others, but this is not necessarily healthy, because with time, our encounters with victims of pain and suffering could make us bitter and unloving.

A community that cares for its members is a community where members learn to take care of themselves too. Self-care is not an expensive or difficult task; it entails adopting the attitude of gentleness towards our need to listen, not only to others, but also to ourselves. This is what our community should do to show care for everyone. So just watch what we are doing in order to take care of ourselves.

And what are you doing that keeps you healthy and committed?

Wounded hearts can heal, but this depends on all of us as a community of health workers, family members, religious leaders and individual members of the community. Healing cannot be achieved without the cooperation of all stakeholders.

So, let us join hands to heal our community and our nation.









For more information and for services contact the following organisations:

De Marillac Centre for Street Children Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul: 92 Abel Jumbo Street, Mile 2 Diobu, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, **Tel**: 08033952706

FJDP Catholic Diocese of Makurdi: No 2 Ahmadu Commassie Road Wadata Makurdi, Benue State, **Tel:** 08024343647

Hope for the Village Child Foundation: Jacaranda, Kaduna, Kaduna State, Tel: 08032893242, 08036696187

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Bauchi: No 1 Stadium Road St. John's Catholic Cathedral, Bauchi, Bauchi State, **Tel:** 08138293928

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Ekiti: 1, Catholic Bishop's House, Ajilosun Street, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Tel: 08035174192

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Ibadan: Inside St. Patrick Catholic Church Compound, Opposite Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS)Basorun, Ibadan, Oyo State, **Tel:** 08169724115

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Jos: No. 80 Zaria Road, Opposite Pama Motors, Jos, Plateau State, Tel: 08036574291

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri: Opposite Musa Usman State Secretariat, Maiduguri, Borno State, Tel: 08137970059

JDPMC Catholic Diocese of Osogbo: Catholic Bishop House, Oke-Ayepe Osogbo, Tel: 08035135062

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Pankshin: Jos Road, Pankshin, Plateau State, Tel: 08039570507

JDPC Catholic Diocese of Shendam: Tunkus Road Shendam, Opposite Bishop House, Catholic Diocese of Shendam, Plateau State, **Tel:** 08034519307

IJDPN Catholic Diocese of Yola: No. 5 Gashaka Street, Jimeta-Yola, Adamawa State, Tel: 07061335640

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