

"FROM THE CALL TO THE CAUSE"

"And David said, Is there not a cause?" 1 Samuel 17:29

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY OYINKANSOLA BADEJO-OKUSANYA, SAN,
FCIArb

33RD PRESIDENT OF THE NIGERIAN BAR ASSOCIATION

AT THE SWEARING-IN CEREMONY HELD AT THE CHIEF JUDGE'S CEREMONIAL
COURT, RIVERS STATE HIGH COURT COMPLEX ON FRIDAY 28th AUGUST,
2026.

PROTOCOLS

Today, I stand before you with a heart full of gratitude, a profound sense of humility and responsibility, and an unshakable faith in the future of our profession.

Twenty-four years ago, in August 2002, I attended my first Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Bar Association as a newly called lawyer. At that Conference, I watched Chief O. C. J. Okocha, SAN, JP, hand over the baton of leadership to Chief Wole Olanipekun, SAN, as President of this great Association.

I was at the very beginning of my journey. I could not have imagined that, twenty-four years later, I would stand before the same Association to accept the responsibility of serving as its 33rd President.

Life has a way of turning moments we barely understand into milestones we can never forget.

That new wig in 2002 did not have a grand plan to become President of the Bar one day. She simply wanted to learn, to work hard, to serve and to make a meaningful contribution wherever she found herself. She just wanted to be the best lawyer she could possibly be.

The road from that first conference at Ibadan to this moment has passed through private practice, branch service, public service, justice-sector reform, national committee service, and many seasons of learning and labour. It has brought triumphs, disappointments, mistakes, growth and grace.

And so, I receive this mandate today with deep humility. Scripture reminds us that *"unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."* I understand, therefore, that this mandate is not a prize to be possessed, but a trust to be discharged.

I know that I did not arrive here alone. No one ever does.

First and always, I give thanks to Almighty God, whose grace has sustained me through every season of this journey.

I thank my dear mother, whose presence here today means more to me than words can adequately express. I thank my husband, Oluyomi, the wind beneath my wings and my greatest cheerleader. He opens the window wide so I can fly. My wonderful son, Olaoluwakiitan, my ever so supportive sister and brother - Jumoke and Tunde representing Rotimi, Dolapo, Tunji, Funmilayo, their children and every member of my family.

You carried the demands, the absences and the sacrifices of this journey with extraordinary patience and love. Whatever history records about this day, you will always know what it cost; and how much of that cost you quietly bore with me.

To my friends, colleagues and supporters across the country; to my campaign team and my extraordinary BBOLD Tribe- thank you. You believed, worked, travelled, called, persuaded, prayed and gave of yourselves. This mandate carries your fingerprints.

I thank my partners and colleagues at ALP NG & Co for their understanding, encouragement and support. I acknowledge my mentors, the elders of our profession, the women who blazed trails before me and all those whose example taught me that service, integrity and courage still matter.

I thank especially, my leader, Mr. Augustine Alegeh, SAN. What many do not know is that he took a chance on me. I went to see him in February 2022, just as I went to see as many past presidents and leaders from my zone, the West. As I could, He was not the only one I went to see. But he was the only who gave me a chance. Others dismissed me, he didn't. They told me it wasn't my turn. He told me to keep working. And I knew he was going to be watching me, so I worked very hard. In May 2024, a whole two years after I first spoke to him; two years of hard consultations across the length and breadth of the branches, I got a confirmation from him that I would get his support and I was grateful. I knew what it meant.

I am grateful to you sir. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for your support. I am glad I did not betray your trust in my ability. May God continue to bless and keep you in many more years of service to the Bar.

To every lawyer who voted for me, I am deeply grateful. To those who preferred another candidate, I extend the same hand of fellowship. I will be President not only of those who voted for me, but of every member of the Nigerian Bar Association. The Bar is still my constituency.

I acknowledge my co-contestants. Their participation enriched the contest and demonstrated their willingness to serve our profession. I invite them, their supporters and the ideas they championed to become part of the work ahead.

The election is over. The work belongs to all of us now. There are no victors and vanquished in the Nigerian Bar Association. There is only one Bar, one profession and one shared responsibility to leave both stronger than we met them.

I offer my profound appreciation to my immediate predecessor, Mazi Afam Josiah Osigwe, SAN, and the members of his administration. He has handed over an Association whose institutional voice is strong, whose finances are healthy and whose commitment to proactive engagement is firmly established. I thank him for his service, for the assistance extended during the transition and for the solid foundation upon which we can now build.

I also thank the outgoing National Executive Council, the Electoral Committee of the Nigerian Bar Association, the members of our respective Transition Committees, and all who worked to ensure an orderly transfer of responsibility.

I thank the wonderful men and women whom God has entrusted to lead with me – the new NBA National Officers. We call ourselves the Dream Team and we are confident that what we believe, we will be. I congratulate you all.

I thank the Government and people of Rivers State; the Honourable the Chief Judge and members of the Judiciary; our host Branches; the Annual General Conference Planning Committee; the Local Organising Committee; our sponsors and partners; and everyone who has extended such generous hospitality to the Nigerian Bar Association here in the Garden City.

To every delegate who travelled from near and far to be part of this Conference and have stayed on to witness this ceremony, and to the members of the press who continue to report the affairs of our Association, I thank you.

Leadership of the Bar is a relay, not a solitary race. Every administration receives something to preserve, something to improve and something unfinished to complete.

My inauguration as the 33rd President of the Nigerian Bar Association here in Port Harcourt is especially significant.

Thirty-five years ago, events in this city culminated in a truncated election process and the proscription of the Association. That crisis forced the NBA to look inward and fight for its survival. It brought out the best in courageous members of our profession, and we owe a debt of gratitude to leaders like Asiwaju Adegboyega Awomolo, SAN, Oba Adelodun, SAN, Chief Richard Ahonaruogho, SAN, and others who, at great personal sacrifice, fought for the survival and restoration of our Association.

Dame Priscilla Kuye became the first woman to lead the NBA in 1991. Today, thirty-five years later and in an extraordinary turn of history, in this same city of Port Harcourt, I have been sworn in today as the 33rd President to lead our Association.

My prayer is that this moment will be recorded in the annals of our Association not merely as a watershed, but as a catalyst for lasting change.

It has taken thirty-five years. But history is not made only when a barrier falls. History is made when those who pass through the opening widen it for others. I therefore accept this honour not as a trophy for one woman, but as a door held open for every person whose competence may once have been overlooked, whose voice may have been dismissed, or whose aspiration may have seemed too bold.

I am now the second woman to hold this office. By the grace of God and by the choices we make together, I will not be the last, and it will not take another thirty-five years.

But this presidency cannot be defined by gender alone. **I did not seek this office simply to make history. I sought it to make a difference.**

The journey of the NBA since 2002 tells the story of a Bar continually reaching for greater relevance.

Chief Wole Olanipekun, SAN promoted the institutional voice of the Bar. He formally registered the association as a corporate body with CAC and established the Section on Business Law and the Section on Legal Practice. **Chief Bayo Ojo**, SAN advanced justice-sector and professional reform by amongst others, replacing the 1979 Rules with the 2007 Rules of Professional Conduct. **Dr Olisa Agbakoba**, SAN established SPIDEL and changed the motto of the NBA from *ubi jus ibi remedium* to Promoting the Rule of Law, consistent with the Association's aims and objectives. **Arakunrin Oluwarotimi Akeredolu**, SAN of blessed memory embodied a courageous and socially responsive Bar. He amended the constitution to enable elections to be held before the annual general conferences and gave life to the Human Rights Institute established under Olisa Agbakoba, SAN. **J.B.Daudu**, SAN strengthened the emphasis on knowledge, regulation and professional standards and established 9 new branches bringing the number of branches to 100. **Okey Wali**, SAN championed inclusion, ethics and the expansion of professional

opportunity. Under his watch, the Young Lawyers Forum was formed, and the NBA members web portal was launched. **Augustine Alegeh**, SAN gave the Association enduring institutional tools and practical modernisation. He completed the NBA House project, introduced electronic voting by universal suffrage, a health insurance scheme, established new Branches and introduced uniform bye-laws for all the Branches. **A.B. Mahmoud**, SAN called on us to build a Brave New Bar. He developed the NBA Strategic Plan and professionalised the NBA Secretariat for improved effectiveness. **Paul Usoro**, SAN's administration was notable for prudent management of the Association's financial resources. He also revived the NBA Women Forum, which had been inactive for a few years. **Olumide Akpata** paid close attention to lawyers' welfare, providing COVID-19 palliatives, free stamp and seal, and free yearly subscriptions to electronic reports for young lawyers. He also created the Lawyers with Disability Forum. **Yakubu Maikyau**, SAN reminded us that justice is the foundation upon which society must stand and actively pursued improvement in the remuneration of judicial officers and the amendment to the Rules of Professional Conduct, resulting in the RPC 2023. **Mazi Afam Osigwe**, SAN pressed for transformative change and created new space for young lawyers. His proactive Bar has led to a Bar that is committed to solutions and a strong voice in the defence of the Rule of Law.

Each carried the baton forward. Each answered the demands of his time. Each left us gains to preserve, lessons to absorb and unfinished work to complete.

Today, a new question confronts us: **What must the Nigerian Bar Association mean in the daily lives of Nigerian lawyers?**

It is not enough for the NBA to be respected in public if its members feel unsupported in private. It is not enough for us to issue strong statements on national affairs if the young lawyer cannot earn a dignified living; if the small-firm practitioner is overwhelmed by the cost of practice; if the law officer, in-house counsel, academic, lawyer with disability or colleague in a small Branch feels invisible; or if any lawyer is harassed in the course of lawful professional duty and has nowhere effective to turn.

The strength of the Bar must be felt not only in the corridors of power, but in the chambers, courtrooms, offices and homes of our members.

That is the mandate of this administration: **Members First. Always.**

We will build a Bolder Bar that works for everyone - a Bar that helps its members earn better, live better and practise better; a Bar that moves lawyers from surviving to thriving.

This is more than a slogan. It is the standard by which you must judge us.

A lawyer who is economically vulnerable is not truly professionally free. A lawyer who cannot afford the tools of practice cannot compete. A lawyer who works without fair reward, protection or opportunity cannot fully serve the cause of justice. **Economic dignity is not separate from professional dignity. It is essential to it.**

We will pursue a realistic and sustained framework for fair remuneration. We will support lawyers with practical tools for pricing, business development, technology adoption, specialisation and access to emerging areas of practice. We will strengthen pathways to jobs, mentorship and opportunity. We will work with Branches, institutions and partners to reduce the cost of legal practice and expand access to finance, knowledge and markets.

We will not pretend that the NBA can command prosperity into existence. But we can remove obstacles. We can create opportunity. We can insist on fair standards. We can use our numerical strength to negotiate benefits that individual lawyers cannot secure alone. And we can build structures that allow talent and hard work to translate into a dignified professional life.

We will build a Bar of belonging: Every Voice, One Bar. Young and senior. Women and men. Advocates and solicitors. Public and private practitioners. Law officers, academics, in-house counsel, members of the Armed Forces and security services, lawyers in alternative careers, and colleagues living with disabilities. Large Branches and small Branches.

Inner Bar and Outer Bar. **No lawyer will be invisible, and no voice will be dismissed.**

We will modernise the National Secretariat into a responsive service institution. Technology must simplify membership, not frustrate it. Payments, stamps, enquiries, continuing professional development and access to benefits must become easier, faster and more transparent. We will set service standards, publish performance indicators and report to you regularly, because **leadership is not a title. It is an obligation to deliver.**

We will invest in the knowledge and future-readiness of our members. Artificial intelligence, digital commerce, data protection, energy transition, cross-border practice and new models of dispute resolution are already reshaping legal work. **We will not allow Nigerian lawyers to become spectators in the future of their own profession.**

And because delivery must begin immediately, allow me to identify some of the first steps we will take.

First, we will open the doors of service. In the coming days, a portal will be made available through which members may offer themselves for service, indicate their areas of interest and submit their credentials. **Appointments must draw from the breadth of talent within our Association and give meaningful expression to our commitment to inclusion.**

Second, we will use the collective strength of the Bar to reduce the cost of practice and improve the daily lives of our members. We are working towards highly subsidised access to electronic law reports and the reintroduction of an NBA Affinity Card, which will serve both as a payment card and as a gateway to negotiated discounts on essential goods and services like air tickets, hotels, supermarkets, pharmacies etc.

Third, we will prioritise economic and physical well-being. We will engage the Office of the Honourable Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice on strengthening awareness of and compliance with the Legal Practitioners Remuneration Order. We will also establish a committee to develop lawful and practical mechanisms for encouraging the payment of living wages to our most vulnerable members.

Discussions are also ongoing towards a strategic partnership with the African Medical Centre of Excellence (AMCE) in Abuja. If concluded as anticipated, the partnership will provide our members with access to discounted comprehensive wellness screenings and support free medical outreach programmes across the country because **a healthier Bar is a stronger Bar, and a stronger Bar is a Bolder Bar.**

Fourth, we will be transparent and accountable. Information about the departments and key personnel of the National Secretariat will be made accessible. Our digital channels and services will be reviewed. **We will communicate periodically what the Association has, what we have spent, what we propose to spend and the purpose for which**

members' resources are deployed. It is your money. You have a right to know.

These are initial steps, not the full measure of our ambition. Our commitments will be translated into timelines, responsible teams and measurable outcomes. We will tell you what we have done, what remains undone and why. **Where we succeed, the credit will belong to the Bar. Where we fall short, the responsibility will be mine.**

I am conscious of the fact that the election which brought us here generated controversy, and that technological difficulties prevented a number of eligible members from exercising their franchise. I do not accept the allegation that the outcome was manipulated or fraudulently pre-determined. I worked hard, took my message to lawyers across the country and received the mandate that has brought me before you today.

But confidence in an election is strengthened, not diminished, when legitimate concerns are examined openly. Our responsibility is not to trade accusations or remain imprisoned at the contest that has ended. It is to ensure that future NBA elections command even greater confidence that they already do among our members.

I will accordingly establish an Electoral Reform Committee, chaired by Dr Babatunde Ajibade, SAN, to undertake a comprehensive examination of our electoral architecture. The Committee will consult widely, receive memoranda and recommend the constitutional, institutional and

technological reforms necessary to improve on our existing systems and deliver elections that remain transparent, accessible, secure, auditable and worthy of the Nigerian Bar Association.

Let me make something very clear. Universal suffrage has come to stay. Our task is to make it work better.

I invite my co-contestants, Egbe Amofin O'odua, our regional Bar fora, Branches, past leaders, young and older lawyers and every concerned member to participate constructively in this process. We may disagree about the election that has passed; but let us work together to build more confidence in the elections that lie ahead.

I implore my co-contestants and members and future contestants to join me and lend their voices to condemning the increasingly distasteful practice of campaign abuse. This unwholesome practice has no place in a noble profession like ours and there will be scant tolerance for it under my watch. We will deal swiftly and decisively with any lawyer who makes abusive and insulting posts against any colleague, senior or junior. Such lawyers will be reported to the appropriate disciplinary bodies and this will be made very public, for bringing us all into disrepute in the eyes of the public who look up to us and are increasingly aghast, as all right thinking colleagues are, at the type of language that lawyers employ on social media against other colleagues all in the name of "politics".

My distinguished colleagues, our work will continue across every Branch, Section and Forum long after we leave Port Harcourt. But there is one future gathering to which I know many of you are already looking forward.

I am delighted to announce that **the 2027 Annual General Conference of the Nigerian Bar Association will be held in the wonderful city of Abuja.**

We will gather there not merely for another Conference, but to take stock of our progress, deepen our knowledge, strengthen our bonds and prepare ourselves for the future of legal practice. Further details - including the dates, theme and constitution of the Annual General Conference Planning Committee will be communicated shortly. I look forward to welcoming you all to Abuja next August.

But even as we put members first and prepare our profession for the future, the NBA must never turn inward or lose its national conscience.

Dr Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that *"the time is always right to do what is right."* For the Nigerian Bar Association, that time must always be now.

Nigeria needs a Bar that is independent enough to speak truth to power, disciplined enough to speak with credibility and courageous enough to act when fundamental rights, judicial independence and the rule of law are threatened.

Nigeria also needs a Bar that is a responsible partner in the progress of our nation; one that acknowledges progress where it is made, encourages more to be done and contributes practical solutions to our common challenges.

We will support the Bench while insisting on the integrity and efficiency of the justice system. We will defend judicial independence, but we will not be indifferent to delay, conflicting decisions, corruption or conduct that diminishes public confidence. Respect for institutions does not mean silence about their shortcomings. True respect requires the courage to help them become better.

We will engage governments constructively, but we will not be captured by any government, party, region, religion, interest or individual. **Our loyalty is to the Constitution, to justice, to the rule of law and to the members whose mandate we hold in trust.**

We will collaborate where collaboration advances the public good. We will challenge where challenge becomes necessary. And in both, we will act with facts, fairness, discipline and boldness.

My distinguished colleagues, I know that many of you have heard promises before. I understand the weariness that comes when declarations made are not followed by delivery. And so, **I do not ask you for blind faith. I ask you to hold us to account.**

Our administration will consolidate what works, repair what does not and build what the future demands. We will not discard good ideas because they originated under another leader or another contestant. Indeed, I have studied the manifestoes of my co-contestants and found ideas worthy of implementation. Where we adopt them, I will acknowledge their source and give credit where it is due.

The NBA is larger than any presidency. Progress must be cumulative and sustained.

The task before us is substantial. But so is our capacity.

We are more than a collection of individual lawyers. We are the largest body of legal professionals in Africa. In our Branches, Sections, Forums and Committees reside extraordinary knowledge, influence, creativity and courage. Properly organised, that strength can transform both our profession and our country.

Imagine a Bar where a young lawyer in Maiduguri, Yenagoa, Ado-Ekiti or Lagos can access the same high-quality learning and professional opportunities.

Imagine a Bar where a lawyer in distress receives a prompt response, not sympathetic silence.

Imagine a Bar where Branches are empowered, appointments are transparent, technology works, professional misconduct has consequences, and every member can see the value of belonging.

Imagine a Bar whose voice carries weight because its own house is in order; a Bar that does not merely diagnose Nigeria's problems, but helps to design and deliver solutions.

Nelson Mandela told us that *"it always seems impossible until it is done."* Many of the changes we seek may appear difficult today. But difficulty is not impossibility. With the collective strength of the Nigerian Bar, what appears ambitious today can become the inheritance we leave tomorrow.

That Bar is possible. But it will not be built by the President alone.

It will be built by national officers who understand that office is service. By Branches that carry the NBA into every community. By elders who lend us wisdom without closing the door behind them. By young lawyers who bring energy, innovation and honest impatience. **By every member who chooses participation over cynicism and contribution over complaint.**

In 2002, I entered this profession and watched the baton pass to a new President. Today, that baton has come into my hands.

I receive it with gratitude towards those who ran before me, with respect for those who ran beside me, and with a solemn determination to run my own leg faithfully.

When our tenure ends, may it not be said merely that a woman became President.

May it be said that the Bar became bolder.

May it be said that lawyers felt seen, protected and empowered.

May it be said that we restored faith in what collective professional leadership can achieve.

May it be said that we helped our members earn better, live better and practise better.

May it be said that we put members first - and that we delivered.

May it be said that we left the Association stronger than we met it.

The time for a Bolder Bar is now. The work begins today. Let us build it together.

God bless the Nigerian Bar Association, and God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Thank you.