When Places of Worship Become Targets: Inside the Kidnapping of Two Nigerian Congregations

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On the evening of 18 November 2025, gunmen who had spent days moving unnoticed around Eruku town closed in on CAC Oke-Isegun from the open bush behind it, midway through an evening praise service. Within minutes, the church was surrounded, both doors forced, and thirty-nine worshippers, children as young as five among them, were being marched toward the forest. One young woman slipped away in the dark. The other thirty-eight, the youngest barely out of nursery school and the oldest a grandmother, spent five nights in captivity before a ransom reportedly near ₦350 million secured everyone's release alive.

Four months later and roughly a hundred kilometres south, the same method returned. On the morning of 22 March 2026, Rev. Sunday Timothy Omole was finishing the last chorus at ECWA Omugo when a woman in the congregation screamed that she'd seen armed men outside. Within minutes, gunmen who had already surrounded the building were marching eleven worshippers, his own wife among them, into the forest.

Eruku's ordeal ended with everyone coming home. Omugo's has not. Eleven weeks after the attack, five of the eight worshippers who remained in captivity are confirmed dead, among them Rachel Oluwaremilekun Omole, the pastor's wife. Three more are still held, their health, by the one escapee's account, "seriously deteriorated."

Theo-Sight's field team spent four days in April 2026 visiting more than twenty communities across Kwara South, interviewing over 130 people- survivors, pastors, monarchs, and vigilantes, and documenting bullet damage, graves, and community-built defences with GPS-tagged photographs. What they found is not two isolated tragedies, but one replicable method being used against Nigerian churches again and again.

One Playbook, Two Congregations

Both churches back directly onto open, unfenced bush, a detail every witness at both sites raised without being asked. Both were attacked during a scheduled, publicly known gathering, guaranteeing the community would be present, unarmed, and predictable in time and place. Both opening ransom demands were set far beyond what a rural church council could plausibly raise: ₦100 million for Eruku's 38 captives, ₦1 billion for Omugo's 8.

And in both cases, the kidnappers used strikingly similar language to justify what they were doing. A kidnapper at Eruku told a survivor: "If one does business,

shouldn't he make a profit?" Four months later at Omugo, negotiators heard almost the identical logic, along with a chilling detail: that the attackers claimed to buy their bullets from the very soldiers and vigilantes deployed against them.

"We Never Knew It Was Gunshots"

Eruku's ordeal didn't begin on 18 November. Weeks earlier, gunmen had abducted eighteen people from a wedding party; local vigilantes fought to bring most of them home, at the cost of one woman's life and two vigilantes badly wounded. In response, the community held a seven-day interfaith prayer programme, Christian and Muslim, pastor and imam, praying side by side for safety. Several survivors now believe that gathering itself was being watched: "We even felt like they took pictures of us," one said.

Two days later, gunmen struck. The church's own security guard took the brunt of the attack, was shot, then beaten with wood and metal when the bullets didn't kill him fast enough. He died en route to help. One elderly woman was dragged out and singled out by name; the gunmen insisted, over her family's objections, that she had a wealthy child in Ilorin worth ransoming. "So you would know someone told them," one respondent said.

Negotiations for the group's release were carried entirely by community volunteers over four agonising days of silence, not by security agencies, though the state government publicly credited "the hands-on approach" of federal intervention, without disclosing what, if anything, had actually been paid. Field testimony puts the real figure near ₦350 million. Eruku's congregation, once around 150 people strong, now numbers as few as thirty on an ordinary Sunday. No trauma support has ever been offered to survivors, though they say they would welcome it.

"I Just Ran. I Said It Out of Fear."

Omugo had already survived five prior attacks before the one that took so many lives. A perimeter fence and police post, built and paid for entirely by the community's own development association, because the government hadn't, was finished just one week before the fatal attack. "As they were concluding it, the incident happened," Rev. Omole recalled.

When gunmen surrounded the church that Sunday morning, Omole fled into the bush rather than face a man reaching for a gun. "I used to say that anytime they come, I will not run from them, but I do not know, I just ran. I said it that day out of fear," he admitted, a rare, unguarded moment of honesty about what surviving a massacre actually looks like.

Inside the church, gunmen stripped worshippers of their phones to cut off any call for help and specifically hunted vigilantes, elders, and community leaders. Eleven

were taken. Three were abandoned along the route, including a baby dropped from his mother's back and a woman in her seventies. Eight remained. The kidnappers openly discounted the ransom for the older captives "because they are old." Omole personally drove ₦20 million and a truckload of demanded goods- rice, fuel, cigarettes, and a prescription opioid the gang wanted to get high on, into the forest himself, because no one else would. It wasn't enough. The captors kept the money and the hostages and raised their demand to ₦300 million more.

Soldiers arrived two to three days after the attackers had already withdrawn. When officers later publicly claimed credit for a captive's release, Omole disputed it to their faces: "I was the one who organised the vigilante who went to look for her, and you went to release a press statement that you were the one who released her."

A Method, Spreading

This is not confined to two churches. In the wider Oro-Ago district alone, more than sixty churches have closed, and more than twenty-seven pastors have been displaced with their families, many now worshipping out of borrowed classrooms. The same network is reported to have threatened to "wipe out" every town in the district except Ilorin itself.

What This Means, and What Must Change

Nigeria's constitution guarantees the right to worship freely, to life, and to protection from inhuman treatment. Nigeria is also bound by international law protecting freedom of religion from private interference, not only from interference by the state itself. None of these protections requires an attacker's motive to be proven religious. They require the government to protect the place, the time, and the community in which worship happens. When a congregation cannot gather without an armed escort, and no consistent protection follows, that right survives on paper while collapsing in the forest behind the church.

Theo-Sight's recommendations are direct and achievable: an independent investigation into ransom flows and the bullet-supply allegations raised at both sites; disruption of the informant networks that precede nearly every attack; a requirement that the government disclose, honestly, how releases are actually achieved before claiming credit; and funding for the perimeter fencing, lighting, and police posts that rural churches are currently paying for themselves.

Eruku rebuilt its altar and held service again the following Sunday, under armed guard, proof that recovery is possible. Omugo's pastor still cannot bury his dead. The difference between those two endings was not the community's faith or resolve. Both raised extraordinary sums, negotiated for days, and carried losses no rural church council should have to carry alone.

Theo-Sight documented these attacks so they cannot be forgotten or minimised.