

**Chairman, NBA 2024 Annual General Conference
Planning Committee, Mrs Oyinkansola Badejo-
Okusanya**

**2024 NBA-AGC: ‘A
Conference Like
No Other!’**



Once again, Nigerian Lawyers will converge for their Annual General Conference (AGC). The AGC, which is the flagship event of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), will hold in Lagos from August 23-28, 2024. Over 16,000 Lawyers are already registered for the Conference and prepared to storm Lagos, the nation's commercial capital. The theme of this year's AGC is **“Pressing Forward: A National Posture for Rebuilding Nigeria”**. **Onikepo Braithwaite and Jude Igbanoi** engaged the **Chairman of the Annual General Conference Planning Committee (AGCPC), Mrs Oyinkansola Badejo-Okusanya** on their level of preparedness for the Conference, and what Nigerian Lawyers should look forward to at this year's Conference, which she and her all female team have tagged ‘A Conference Like No Other!’

Madam AGCPC Chairperson, the 2024 Nigerian Bar Association Annual General Conference (NBA-AGC) which is scheduled to take place in Lagos from August 23 - 28, is themed “Pressing Forward: A National Posture for Rebuilding Nigeria”. This appears to be more or less the same theme as the 2023 NBA-AGC “getting it Right, Charting the Course for Nigeria’s Nation Building”. What informed such a similar choice? Is it that the outcome of the 2023 Conference didn’t have the desired effect, hence, the need to focus on it again? Should we not be more concerned about building and reforming our legal profession and the administration of justice sector instead?

Thank you very much. This is an interesting question, or rather questions, because you asked several questions in one! First, what informed such a similar choice – I would say as a preliminary comment, that we did so because it made perfect sense to do so. Continuity is the bedrock of sustainability. The NBA is a responsible corporate citizen, and we are concerned with sustainable nation building, as we very well should. Last year, when a new administration was sworn in with a ‘Renewed Hope’ agenda, the President of the NBA, Mr Y.C. Maikyau OON, SAN and the Chair of the Conference Planning Committee, Mazi Afam Osigwe, SAN thought it wise to choose a Conference theme that reflected the state of the nation, and prescribe the “getting it right” mindset that we all need to have, to move from hope to reality. A road map, if you like.

One year later, the President thought it wise to reinforce that prescription. Just as Rome was not built in a day, so also Nigeria will not be rebuilt in a year; but, it is important to remind ourselves to press on, because it is so easy to get discouraged in the face of challenges, and find it difficult to continue on the hard path to regeneration.

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So, whilst maintaining the “getting it right” mindset, we must also continue to press forward. That is the narrative the NBA is trying to push with these two themes back-to-back, and just as the sessions at last year’s Conference reflected the theme, it is the same with the carefully curated sessions that will feature at this year’s Conference. However, there is another, more profound angle to the choice of this year’s theme. It was President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR that gave the inspiration for it in his Address at the Opening Ceremony of the 2023 Conference. Mr President charged all Lawyers to press forward for a change of mind, a change of attitude and a change of approach to governance. For YC Maikyau, a man of great faith, this was further buttressed by the words in Philippians 3:14 in the Bible – *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus,*

The theme has also found expression in the use of the Eagle in the Conference logo. To quote Mr Maikyau, *“We have, in the conception of this theme, found the traits of the Eagle an ideal prescription, which, if imbued with renewed hope, will shape the posture of Nigerians towards the recovery, reformation and repositioning that we dearly yearn for our dear nation”*. That is why you will see that in the Conference logo, an abstract depiction of an Eagle is holding the NBA logo aloft, in recognition of our role as promoters of the rule of law and our responsibility to provide direction. The words ‘pressing forward’ are in italics, to depict forward movement, and the word ‘forward’ is in black, to emphasise the forward-looking stance we must adopt in rebuilding our nation. This also shows the level of thought and attention to detail, that is going into every aspect of the conference.

Building and reforming our legal profession and the administration of justice sector, are issues that the NBA as an Association is constantly engaged with. The AGC, on the other hand, looks at a much broader picture. The themes of the Annual General Conferences, reflect the pivotal role the Association plays in nation building. This year’s theme and consequent focus, is no different

Is it true that for the first time in history, the AGCPC is an all-female one? How has it been working with an all-female team?

Yes and no. Yes, for the first time in the history of the NBA, the **leadership** of the AGCPC, that is the Annual General Conference Planning Committee, is all female. There are four of us occupying the top positions of the Committee. I am Chair, Amina Suleiman Kaoje is the Alternate Chair, Laura Alakija is the Secretary and Chika Okojie is the Alternate Secretary. But, no, the AGCPC is not all female. We lead a one hundred-member strong AGCPC, made up of an almost equal number of men and women

“...this is not the first time that a woman is chairing the Conference Planning Committee. Mrs Funke Adekoya, SAN chaired the TCCP (as it was then called) 14 years ago, for the NBA Annual General Conference at Kaduna 2010. Regrettably, this is the first time since then, so we are grateful to the YC Maikyau Administration for making this bold statement to, for, and about the Gentle(wo)men of the Bar. On our part, we will not disappoint”

Another correction worth making is that, this is not the first time that a woman is chairing the Conference Planning Committee. Mrs Funke Adekoya, SAN chaired the TCCP (as it was then called) 14 years ago, for the NBA Annual General Conference at Kaduna 2010. Regrettably, this is the first time since then, so we are grateful to the YC Maikyau Administration for making this bold statement to, for, and about the Gentle(wo) men of the Bar. On our part, we will not disappoint. As for the experience, I have had nothing but pleasure working with my colleagues in the top team. We each bring our strengths to the table, and God has continued to give me the wisdom to lead them and the larger Committee effectively. The members of the Committee are such dedicated and committed Bar men and women, that I hardly even feel that I am chairing a 100-member Committee! I owe them a debt of gratitude for lightening the load, and making me look so good! I am particularly grateful to the Senior Advocates on the Committee. Ours is a profession that rightly places a premium on seniority, and to have members of the Committee that are Senior Advocates deferring to “Madam Chair”, is extremely gratifying. I am grateful to them. In fact, their exemplary dedication to the Bar has contributed in no small measure to other members doing the same. I could not have asked for better company.

What are the highlights of the Conference? Who will deliver the Keynote Address? Who are some of the other Speakers and the topics they will address? What are the topics of some of the breakout sessions?

Our internal Conference slogan, is that we are planning “**a conference like no other!**” What this means is that, no detail is too small; no stone is left unturned to ensure that we bring this slogan to life. So, every aspect of the Conference will be a highlight. From the historical significance of the venue and its surroundings, to the sporting and other social activities, to the level of detail that has gone into curating the sessions, choosing the resource persons and just simply ensuring that attention is paid to everything that will result in a memorable Conference experience for both physical and virtual delegates. Our promise is that, there will be something for everyone.

That being said, the Keynote Address will be delivered by none other than Dr Mrs Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, herself, a woman of many firsts; the significance of which was not lost on us in narrowing down our choice of Keynote Speaker to her. And, we were extremely grateful to God when she accepted at very short notice.

We also have confirmations from the former President of Ghana, John Dramani Mahama, and the President of the African Development Bank, Dr Akinwumi Adesina. We are awaiting confirmation from the Vice President of Ghana, Mahamudu Bawumia. They will be speaking broadly on the future of Africa and role of Lawyers, at the law at plenary sessions. One other session that is particularly exciting to me is one we have titled – “The Glass Ceiling is Shattered!”. In that session, we will feature all the Eleven female Bank MDs in Nigeria on the same stage, sharing their leadership journey and prescriptions for pressing forward. I am really looking forward to that. We have received confirmations from all but three of them. Several other Speakers in our other sessions have confirmed their attendance, and in the coming weeks, they will be featured on our various social and online media platforms and in the traditional print media.

The first iteration of the Conference programme is ready, and will be uploaded in the week starting the 22nd of July, so watch that space!

The Conference is just a few weeks away, but many Lawyers are complaining bitterly about the choice of venue for the event, Tafawa Balewa Square on Lagos Island. Why there, and not somewhere in Victoria Island, for example? Apart from the challenge of parking space, TBS is said to be a den for hoodlum activities. How do you intend to address these challenges, and allay the fears of Lawyers?

It is unfortunate that the popular impression of Tafawa Balewa Square is one of informal commercial activity and the attendant environmental eyesores, and as you say, nefarious acts by some youths in the area. Aside from the fact that the choice of the venue was an obvious one, given our numbers, Tafawa Balewa Square is so much more than the reputation it has acquired, and one of our aims with this Conference, is to educate and inform delegates and the public at large about its historical significance. So, we are producing write-ups about Tafawa Balewa Square; including the fact that the lowering of the Union Jack and the hoisting of the Nigerian flag for the first time took place there, the person after whom it was named, and even the history of the surrounding buildings.

This is an area steeped in history, and, as you know, you can hardly divorce history from the law. Every Lawyer intrinsically has an interest and in fact, has no choice but to be interested in history. Every Lawyer would have studied history in one form or another, on his/ her journey to becoming a Lawyer. We are excited about the choice of the venue and the possibilities it presents.



The National Museum is next door, and we are arranging tours at reduced rates for delegates who wish to learn more about our ancient and more recent history. For instance, many may not know that the car in which the then Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed, was riding and was shot dead in, is on display there, amongst other interesting artefacts and displays. Walking through the museum is like a mini history of Nigeria lesson. Very interesting! Freedom Park is around the corner, Holy Cross Cathedral, one of the most beautiful examples of French Gothic Architecture and the Cathedral Church of Christ, another Gothic Architecture style, where the thanksgiving Service to flag off the Conference will take place, are all within the Lagos Island vicinity of the Conference venue. So also, the Lagos Central Mosque, and at least two of the oldest Mosques in Nigeria. We are partnering with a local tour company to arrange tours to all these places, for those who are interested.

Onikan Stadium and the J.K. Randle Cultural Centre, where we hope to have our Sporting events, are also walking distance. Our Saviour's Church, where the Governor General and other colonial officers used to worship, is across the road from TBS; Lagos House, one of the Lagos State Governor's official residences and State House Marina, the official Lagos residence of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are next door to each other, barely five minutes' walk away from the Conference venue. I could go on and on. That is the Tafawa Balewa Square and the Lagos Island I know, and which we would like to introduce to our delegates who do not perceive 2024 NBA-AGC it in this way.

As for parking concerns, remember I told you earlier that we are leaving no stone unturned, and no detail is too minute for us to consider, to ensure a memorable Conference experience for all delegates. Parking and access are always major issues, because of our sheer numbers. The NBA-AGC is the largest annual gathering of Lawyers anywhere in the world. I say that with all sense of responsibility. Last year we had 16,340 delegates attending the Conference physically. This year, we are not expecting or preparing for less. There is ample parking around the venue, and we are in discussions with private car parks for their use during the period. We also intend to use large car parks on the Marina, and bus delegates from there to the venue and back. The Blue Line CMS Marina station is also not far from the Conference venue, which means that delegates can lodge as far away as they want, so long as they can catch the train into the central business district each morning. We will arrange shuttles from the station to the venue also. We are partnering with Bolt to provide subsidised rides for delegates to and from the Conference venue, and we are receiving maximum cooperation, as we always do from the Lagos State Government in all aspects of our Conference planning, including traffic management, ambulance services, and safety and security. Specifically, regarding safety and security, we intend to involve the youth resident in the area as part of our security infrastructure. This is a tried and tested model, and we have no reason to believe that it will not work for us. Planning the logistics for a Conference this large is a daunting task, but by the grace of God, we did it to a largely successful extent in Abuja last year, and we will do it again in Lagos this year. We will, as I said, plan a Conference like no other! Delegates have nothing to fear.

Given the huge financial challenges faced by Lawyers as a result of the economic downturn, many are surprised that this year's Conference may be priced out of the reach of young Lawyers who earn very meagre salaries. By now last year, it seems that there were at least a couple thousand more registrants than there are today. Was the financial hardship given adequate consideration, when fixing this year's Conference fees? What concessions do you have for Young Lawyers?

The Conference fee hike is unfortunate, but inevitable. No one, not the least I, would have wanted to chair a Conference Planning Committee that had to make such an unpopular proposal, but, we really didn't have a choice. And, we do not need to look beyond the rate of inflation between last year's Conference and now, to understand why we had to do it. As of today, inflation stands at just under 35%. In August last year, it was 25.8%, and with the highly subsidised Conference fees, we just couldn't make the numbers.

Let's face it, our Conferences are huge! I don't know of too many conferences that boast of more than 16,000 delegates, but we consistently hit those kinds of numbers. Our numbers are both our strength and a burden, and there is no built facility in Nigeria today that can accommodate us. What this means is that we literally must build a Conference village from scratch every year. That is where the bulk of our expenditure goes, and with the inflation rate, last year's highly subsidised Conference fees or even a slight increase, just didn't make economic sense.

We did our best to convey this to members well in advance, and with all the facts and figures to support the decision, so that members would see that it was not a decision taken lightly or arbitrarily. I did a power point presentation in February, to the NBA's National Executive Council meeting in Jos, which is a body made up of all National Officers of the NBA, Branch Chairmen and Secretaries and other delegates, which was subsequently circulated amongst the Branch Chairs for internal discussions amongst their members at the Branch level. Six weeks later in April, an Emergency NEC meeting was called in Yola, where the revised recommendations were adopted and ratified by members present and voting.

So, members had plenty of time to review and deliberate, and indeed, some Branches, as well as the Young Lawyers Forum Chair, did make representations to the President and National officers, which resulted in the reviewed recommendations that were eventually adopted.

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It is true that at the close of early bird registration last year, we had close to 12,000 registered physical delegates. This year we had 9099 at the close of early bird, but there is an important distinction. This year, early bird for Lawyers 1 – 9 years post call was extended to 31 July. So, early bird registration is not over for many potential delegates, that typically make up the second largest group of delegates to the Annual General Conferences.

Early bird ended on 30 June, for Lawyers 10 years and above post call. From 9099 delegates on that day, we now have almost 11,000. That means about 2000 delegates have registered since the end of early bird, at the regular rate. When you consider the fact that many people wait until the very last minute to register (for instance almost 1500 people registered on the 30th of June, the last day of early bird registration), then it is not difficult to imagine that we could still hit and surpass last year's numbers.

One of the concessions made, apart from extending early bird for young Lawyers to 31 July, 2024, is that Lawyers from 1 - 6 years post call can attend the Conference virtually completely free of charge, while Lawyers 7 years and above post call, pay a token of N25000.00. This is a huge concession, because setting up the virtual platform costs in the region of \$30,000.00. However, an interesting development is that many Lawyers who had initially registered to attend virtually, are opting to change their attendance to physical! What this tells me, is that we have a lot to be grateful to NBA members for, for the understanding they have shown and their unwavering commitment to our annual flagship event, despite the obvious lower purchasing power that everybody is going through. I don't take it for granted.

Lagos Island doesn't appear to have adequate hotel accommodation, unlike neighbouring Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Ikeja which is on the mainland. What plan does your Committee have to ensure that Lawyers have suitable accommodation, and can move from neighbouring locations where accommodation is affordable to the Conference venue on a daily commute, safely and at reasonable cost?

We have official hotel accommodation partners and from their catalogues, they have done a very good job of identifying proximate accommodation to suit various preferences in nearby Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Lekki. As you know, Lagos Island is a Central Business District, not really a residential area per se, and as I said earlier, the Blue Line and BRT are options for delegates who choose to stay further afield; and our subsidised arrangement with Bolt and other readily available modes of transportation, are also there for delegates who will not use private cars. I think we've got this largely covered.

Every year, Lawyers experience untold hardship and logistics nightmares during onsite registration and collecting their Conference bags and materials. Last year, Conference materials were distributed to Conferees ahead of time. Will this be the case this year? How has your Committee prepared, to effectively deal with these challenges?

Given last year's experience, I'm not sure that is a fair comment. You were at last year's Conference, so you will recall that the AGCPC, which I was privileged to be the Alternate Chair of, was able to successfully distribute conference materials to all registered delegates in a seamless fashion for the first time in many, many years. We are justifiably proud of that achievement. Over 16,000 delegates are a lot of delegates, but to the glory of God, we showed that with careful planning, it can be done. Although as one of the cost cutting measures we are not giving out bags this year, delegates will still have to collect their delegate tags and we will do it in a seamless manner again by the grace of God.

What side attractions should Conferees expect at this year's Conference? All work and no play, makes a Nigerian Lawyer a dull Lawyer!

Plenty! For sports, in addition to football, scrabble, chess and table tennis and wheelchair table tennis that we introduced last year, we are introducing swimming for the first time this year. 19 teams have registered for football and over 40 delegates have registered for the other sports. The UnBarred Concert this year will feature a "Battle of the DJs", a competition strictly for delegates who have disc jockeying talent to compete for a prize. The competition will be judged on the spot by the attendees themselves using the Whova conference app. The Friendship Centre is bigger and better than ever, and thanks to the magnificent cooperation we are enjoying from the TBS Management, it will stay open till 3am daily. For the first time we are introducing the "Elders Night" at the AGC. This is a hangout for senior Lawyers with blast-from-the-past music and entertainment. I keep telling you, we are planning a conference like no other! Just watch this space!

Does your Committee have any plans to extend participation to neighbouring African Bar Associations and Law Societies? As the biggest and leading body of Lawyers in Africa, many Lawyers have canvassed this over the past few years.

Certainly! And, I believe we always have, at least as far as I am aware. We have an international delegate registration portal, and we have extended invitations to the Presidents of various other Bar Associations in and beyond Africa. In fact, the President of the Commonwealth Lawyers Association, has already confirmed his acceptance of our invitation.

How will you ensure that this NBA-AGC won't just end up being another Talk Shop? How do you intend to make the outcomes impactful?

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With the greatest respect, the NBA Annual General Conference is never just a talk shop. The communiques issued at the end of every conference, form the basis of several policy decisions and actions, which is precisely what they are designed to do. The NBA takes its role as a watchdog of society and promoter of the rule of law, very seriously. The sessions at this Conference were not only keenly debated, they were deliberately curated to reflect the Conference theme, current socio-economic realities and emerging areas of the law. The Speakers have been carefully chosen, because of their subject-matter expertise.

The devil is in the detail, and we have chosen in this Committee to leave no detail to the devil. With God on our side, come August 23 – 28, we will host a Conference like no other!

Thank you.



Contact Information

ALP NG & Co

Lagos Office

15 MILITARY STREET,
ONIKAN, LAGOS NIGERIA

T: +23417002570-9

E: ALP@ALP.COMPANY

Abuja Office

3 LOBITO CRESCENT
WUSE II, ABUJA
NIGERIA

T: +23497002570-9

E: ALP@ALP.COMPANY