

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE HONOURABLE, THE ACTING CHIEF JUSTICE OF NIGERIA AND CHAIRMAN BOARD OF GOVERNORS OF THE NATIONAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTE, HON. JUSTICE W. S. N. ONNOGHEN, CFR, FNJI, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2016 CONFERENCE OF ALL NIGERIA JUDGES OF THE LOWER COURTS HELD AT THE ANDREWS OTUTU OBASEKI AUDITORIUM, NATIONAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTE, ABUJA, ON THE 21<sup>ST</sup> NOVEMBER, 2016.**

**PROTOCOL**

I am delighted to welcome you all to the opening ceremony of the 2016 Conference of All Nigeria Judges of the Lower Courts which is a biennial event organized by the National Judicial Institute, in fulfillment of its mandate of continuing judicial education for all categories of Judicial Officers. It serves as a forum for Judges to come together to discuss common problems, exchange ideas and experiences for the betterment of the Nigerian Judiciary and the Nation in general.

The Conference is also proof that the Judiciary recognizes the pivotal role Judges of the Lower Courts play in the administration of justice. It is a truism to state that law is a living subject that grows daily hence, judges must continue to update their knowledge to tackle challenges that they may encounter in the course of carrying out their duties. Even though you are reputed to be knowledgeable in law, this is a platform to assess your performance as judges and to strengthen your capacity.

My Lords, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, the theme for this year's Conference: "The Lower Courts as Veritable Instruments for

Justice and Peace in a Democratic Society” is apt and topical. In recent times, there have been debates concerning the relationship between justice and peace in a democratic society. It is also common knowledge that judges of the Lower Courts are closer to the grassroots and are the gateway to the Judiciary.

Permit me therefore to state here that your role in the administration of justice cannot be overemphasized as you are given the compliment of being the first line of defence for the liberties of the citizen; the society therefore looks up to you to dispense justice according to law, and without fear or favour, affection or ill-will. Let me assure you that the theme for this Conference is broad enough to generate discussions and proffer solutions to current trends and problems in the administration of justice.

Your primary role as judges of the Lower Courts is to settle disputes that come before you in accordance with the provisions of the law. The performance of this onerous task depends on several factors such as strict adherence to the rule of law, the Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers, access to justice, integrity and independence of the Judiciary.

While acknowledging your competence in discharging your duties, we are not unmindful of the challenges you face, which hinders the smooth administration of justice and exposes the Judiciary to a lot of criticisms. These challenges are in the areas of inadequate funding/infrastructure/facilities, caseload volume, corrupt practices and

most significantly delays in relation to criminal trials, which has contributed to the congestion of our prisons.

Distinguished participants, as guardians of the rule of law, let me remind you that administering justice is crucial to the effective running and stability of a democratic society as well as the peaceful coexistence of its citizens, without which the society will degenerate into anarchy.

At this juncture, I would like to commend the Judiciary for its innovative strides in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which has become an indispensable tool in the world today. Its significance to the Judiciary cannot be overemphasized in view of its numerous advantages, geared towards efficient and effective justice delivery. Thus, ICT improves access to justice, promotes the efficiency of judicial officers and their support staff, and facilitates the sharing of information, electronic filing of briefs and other processes, and availability of legal reference materials on line among others.

It is pertinent to note that an independent, strong, respectable and responsible judiciary is indispensable to the administration of justice and to have such an institution, we must adhere to our Oath of Office as contained in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and the Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers.

As impartial arbiters, we must at all times uphold the rule of law, eliminate unnecessary delays and above all ensure that justice is dispensed promptly, without fear or favour, affection and ill-will to both parties in accordance with the provisions of the Law.

Let me also seize this opportunity to remind us that as Ministers in the Temple of Justice, we must shun all corrupt practices in order to align ourselves with the anti-corruption strides of the current administration.

I have had the privilege of going through the programme for this Conference and I am convinced that the topics slated for discussion are not only relevant but also insightful. You will be taken through sessions on: *“Accountability and Transparency in the Judicial Process: Understanding Judicial Ethics and Code of Conduct for Judicial Officers in Nigeria”*, *“Access to Justice in the Lower Courts: Re-examining the Civil and Criminal Jurisdiction of the Magistrates’ Courts in Nigeria”*, *“Enhancing Speedy Dispensation of Justice: Practical Hints on Case Flow Management”*, *“The Doctrine of Stare Decisis and Judicial Precedence: The Need for Lower Courts to be Bound by Decisions of the Superior Courts of Record”*, among others.

Distinguished participants, it is my hope that you will seize the opportunity created by this forum to brainstorm and come up with strategies to achieve the much-desired upgrade required for the smooth and effective administration of justice.

Permit me to express my gratitude to the experienced and erudite personalities nominated as Chairmen of Sessions and Resource Persons, for agreeing to share their wealth of knowledge and experience with us.

My Lords, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, I also express my gratitude to the Administrator of the National Judicial Institute, Hon. Justice R.P.I. Bozimo, OFR, the Board of Governors of the Institute as well as the Chairman and members of the Education Committee of the Board of Governors and the management and the staff of the Institute for organizing this very important Conference.

It is now my singular honour and privilege to formally declare the 2016 Conference of All Nigeria Judges of the Lower Courts on the theme, “*The Lower Courts as Veritable Instruments for Justice and Peace in a Democratic Society*”, open.

**Hon. Justice W. S. N. Onnoghen, CFR, FNJI**  
Acting Chief Justice of Nigeria and Chairman, NJI