

# Nigeria: From rivalry to brotherhood

In recent years, Nigeria has been plagued with alarming frequency by violence between its Muslim and Christian communities. One of the worst-hit regions has been Kaduna State. The cofounders and national coordinators of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum of Kaduna in 1995 are two men with deep roots in the opposing communities, both of whom have turned away from violence and militancy action and instead embraced nonviolence, reconciliation, and the advocacy of peaceful relations between their communities.

Once they were bitter rivals, but now they consider themselves brothers. In fact, at one time, they each tried to have the other killed. James Wuye and Muhammed Ashafa are living proof that people can change, and that the urge for revenge can be replaced by an urge to foster reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Pastor James Wuye readily acknowledges that he was a militant in his youth. For that, he paid a price – he lost his arm during this struggle of communal violence in 1992. Imam Muhammed Nurayn Ashafa was a militant as well. During that same eruption of unrestrained violence in 1992, he lost his teacher and two sons.

For both men, coming to terms with terrible loss forced reflection, and reflection brought transformation. “Both began to question the cost of violence and turned to the Bible and the Koran, where they found passages showing commonalities between Islam and Christianity and calling on believers to be peacemakers”, writes *Christian Science Monitor* reporter Mike Crawley

(2003). Yet, “when the pair first met face to face in 1995, distrust lingered. At the urging of a civil society leader, they agreed to try to work out some sort of understanding, and they say the resulting dialogue helped them to overcome stereotypes and misconceptions and gain respect for each other.”

They staged a public debate – no easy task in such a charged atmosphere – and this early effort at dialogue has since become an ongoing exchange through the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum. Each of them has made a quantum leap – from violent

youth leader to successful nonviolent mediator of Muslim-Christian conflicts. Now, they listen to the each other’s sermons. In fact, together they have

published a book, *The Pastor and the Imam: Responding to Conflict*, which examines the perceptions of Muslims and Christians about each other, explores the commonalities at the root of the two faiths – and the differences – and then describes the efforts, at first tenuous and later more confident, to forge a common effort to promote understanding between the communities.

Kaduna State is the seat of Nigeria’s northern elite, including senior military, religious, and traditional figures. Its population of approximately 3.5 million is divided more or less equally between Muslims and Christians. Kaduna has also, unfortunately, been at the epicenter of intercommunal conflict – conflict that has only worsened since the Kaduna state government’s declaration of its intent to introduce *shariah* law. This declaration sparked an outbreak of violence in late February 1999, and subsequent anti-Muslim reprisals in various southern towns, that left an estimated two thousand people dead, eighty thousand displaced, and many private homes and business premises looted and destroyed.

With its mix of ethnic and religious groups, Kaduna continues to be one

---

**Once they were bitter rivals,  
but now they consider  
themselves brothers.**

---

of the most conflict-prone states in the country. The various communities compete for a greater share of the limited socioeconomic resources and for politi-



*Imam Muhammed Ashafa and Pentecostal Pastor James Wuye share the view that civil-society organizations can do a better job of defusing potentially violent situations than security forces. Photo: Tore Samuelsson/LPI*

cal power, each feeling itself politically and economically marginalized. In that environment, religion is, in a sense, “perverted” as it is invoked in the political arena, and youth are exploited by those who seek to gain personally from the conflict.

### **Tensions and poverty**

Ethnic and religious differences have been a source of tension throughout Nigeria’s turbulent post-independence history, which has been marked by decades of military rule. The third and most recent attempt at instituting democracy in the federal republic has been under way since 1999.

Pastor Wuye stresses that during the long periods of military rule, ethnic and religious tensions have tended to increase. Official appointments to federal posts have often been made on the basis of patronage as opposed to merit, which has favored Muslim northerners who have been quite

dominant in the Nigerian military. Thus, Christian clerics have preached against what they perceive to be injustice in the trend of federal government appointments under military regimes.

Another factor that has contributed to Nigeria’s ethnic tensions has been the country’s poor progress toward economic development. In spite of its abundant petroleum and natural gas reserves, the United Nations Development Program ranked Nigeria as 151st of 174 countries, evaluated in terms of human development. Imam Ashafa also notes that when the bubble that was Nigeria’s oil economy burst in the 1980s, there was an apparently related increase in ethnic conflict with religious undertones. In view of such linkages, observes Pastor Wuye, one can reasonably conclude that “most of the problems in Nigeria do not come from religion but economics and social conditions”.

Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye share

a view that civil-society organizations – such as the Interfaith Mediation Centre that they set up – can do a better job of defusing potentially violent situations in Nigeria than security forces. According to Pastor Wuye, the Interfaith Mediation Centre uses a multitrack approach to address issues of intercommunal violence. “We ‘deprogram’ people by making them aware of what the other side is thinking.”

The project that the two men launched, which consists of both the Muslim–Christian Dialogue Forum and the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre, aims to prevent the recurrence of violent conflict and to contribute to an increase in the level of trust and tolerance between Christians and Muslims in Kaduna State. With trust, tolerance, and an absence of violence, reconciliation can begin through the development over time of collaborative relationships and cohesive peace constituencies in both communities. At the same time, as such reconciliation takes root, the communities’ capacity to resolve conflicts will also be enhanced.

Five specific objectives have been identified:

1. To reestablish relationships that have been damaged due to recurring violence over the last five years
2. To minimize the reoccurrence of violence amongst various groups in the community
3. To initiate programs and projects that require and encourage the involvement of Christians and Muslims (including dialogues, workshops, cultural events, and the establishment of a resource center)
4. To enhance interreligious relationships and cooperation within the state
5. To support and build the capacity of local partners who are involved in peacemaking

The center organizes a range of activities to bring together religious leaders, policymakers, technocrats, small-business owners and traders, grassroots participants including women, youth, and religious leaders, and other

stakeholders. The inclusion of women is especially important because of the role women play in educating children at home. Engaging youth is vital because it is youth, in fact, who are often the perpetrators of violence. (Nigerians, observes Pastor Wuye, tend to be fiercely passionate about their faith. For many Nigerian youth, religion is everything. He draws an important distinction - that one can be "religious" without being "godly".) Because operators of businesses and traders have a vested interest in peace and stability in the community, they are viewed as valuable potential partners in the peace and reconciliation process.

Some of the activities that take place include programs focusing on dialogue among the various constituencies, intensive problem-solving workshops for women and youth groups, annual cultural events, capacity-building training programs for local community leaders and members of civil society, and programs designed to address the trauma that citizens have suffered as a result of the violence.

One of the most significant achievements of the center has been the drafting of the "Kaduna Peace Declaration," which is an articulation of a common vision to put in place effective machinery appropriate for building and sustaining long-term peaceful coexistence between the Christian and Muslim communities. The document was carefully formulated so as to be broadly acceptable and realistic in its goals, and the potential signers were encouraged to review it together with their constituents. In August 2002, some twenty senior religious leaders signed the Kaduna Peace Declaration and declared that each year, 22 August would be observed as Peace Day in Kaduna State.

### **Criticized beauty contest**

Since the signing of the Kaduna Peace Declaration, grassroots efforts to maintain peace have continued, but the challenges have remained as well. Any incident runs the risk of turning into a crisis. In November 2002, for example,

protests over a newspaper article connecting the prophet Mohammed to the Miss World beauty pageant caused much tension. Both Pastor

form the conflict in the region through rudimentary arbitration and mediation methods utilizing official Track One approaches - governmental agencies

---

## **Ethnic and religious differences have been a source of tension throughout Nigeria's turbulent post-independence history.**

---

James and Imam Ashafa, in union with transformed religious leaders, drove around affected neighborhoods on a bus and arranged to have them appear on television to appeal for calm. The intervention only was made possible because of the commitments made in the Kaduna Peace Declaration, which was an important factor in containing a volatile situation.

Religious leaders who have signed the declaration are also credited with helping to control violence and vote rigging during elections at both the state and federal levels. In addition, they have, on numerous occasions, intervened in conflicts in the schools, when minor arguments threatened to turn into major incidents. Indeed, some instigators are intent on using schools as a breeding ground for religious conflict. To stem this tide, the Interfaith Mediation Centre, in collaboration with signers of the Kaduna Peace Declaration, has embarked on a program to provide conflict resolution training to religious instructors and secondary-school officials. The consultative approach of the center stands in stark contrast to the approach of the federal Nigerian government, which has attempted to achieve peace by viewing conflict, especially in Kaduna, as a question of law and order. This has systematically failed and attracted international criticism. On the other hand, at the state level, it can be said that the Kaduna state government has played a somewhat more constructive role. It has tried to trans-

and government-sponsored dialogue. Such efforts have changed the conflict's dynamics but not contributed to resolving it. Nonetheless, Kaduna State's efforts have been somewhat promising in view of the fact that the state has attempted to address the fundamental structural causes of the conflicts. This work has been informed by intensive research and consultation with local partners, especially the Kaduna Peace Committee, an organization with extensive knowledge of the conflict dynamics and issues at stake in Kaduna and the greater north, and familiarity with parties to the conflicts.

One other important result of the cooperation between Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye has been a successful initiative to bring together two warring communities of Plateau State, the nomadic Fulani cattle rearers and the native Beroms. To settle long-standing disputes, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye arranged to hold talks and actively facilitated a mediation process. In 2003, the two parties made a start on engaging in a healing process and exploring pragmatic solutions to the conflict.

### **Successful mediation**

Overall, Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye have successfully facilitated dozens of conflict resolution activities. Whereas their efforts were once confined to their hometown of Kaduna, they are increasingly working in other regions as well. Through its perseverance, the Interfaith Mediation Centre has

gathered the strength to break free from one-time interventions and extend its reach and influence across Nigeria. For Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye, it has been a long and difficult journey, from outright animosity to cautious steps to get to know each other – still holding much suspicion and mistrust – to trust and acceptance, and finally to cooperation. Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye have come to see, by engaging in dialogue, that they, as believers in their faith, are more similar than dissimilar. The greatest threat to peaceful coexistence, as they see it, comes not as a result of cultural or religious difference, but from ignorance of the humanity that binds people together.

“Erroneous perceptions affecting Christian-Muslim relationships have been a source of commotion and tears”, they write in *The Pastor and the Imam*. “They have bred assumptions, stereotypes, and suspicions. As long as we insist on passing judgment on others by the verdict of our perceptions, and refuse them opportunity to explain ... to us who and what they are, we are creating room for conflict in our inter-personal and interreligious relationships” (Wuye and Ashafa 1999:24).

The refreshing, if simple, discovery of the pastor and the imam is that they can draw strength and inspiration from the very faith that is so central to their lives, by looking to the messages of Jesus Christ and the prophet Mohammed, to eschew conflict and violence and instead pursue justice, love, and peaceful coexistence.

#### **James Wuye and Muhammed Ashafa**

This article was first published as a chapter in the book *People Building Peace II, Successful Stories of Civil Society*, ed., van Tongeren, P., Brenk, M., Hellema, M., Verhoeven, J.: *The Pastor and the Imam: The Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum in Nigeria*, pp. 226–232. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Colorado, 2005

*James Wuye and Muhammed Ashafa were among the speakers at the inter-religious Tools for Peace Conference in Sweden in 2005. See New Routes No 4/2004 and the full conference report at [www.life-peace.org](http://www.life-peace.org)*

#### **Selected bibliography**

Crawley, Mike. 2003. “Two Men Create Bridge over Nigeria’s Troubled Waters.” *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 February. Online at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0228/p07s01-woaf.html>.

Fischer-Thompson, Jim. 2001. “Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum Works for Change in Nigeria.” Public Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy in Nigeri. Online at: <http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/wwwwhp121401a.html>

Wuye, James Movel, and Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa. 1999. *The Pastor and the Imam: Responding to Conflict* (Lagos, Nigeria: Ibrash Publications, Ltd.)

Sampson, Cynthia, and John Paul Lederach, eds. *From the Ground Up:*

*Menonite Contributions to International Peacemaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000

Smock, David, ed. *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002  
United States Institute of Peace, special reports and peace works:

*Can Faith-Based NGOs Advance Interfaith Reconciliation? The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Special Report, March 2003

*Building Interreligious Trust in a Climate of Fear: An Abrahamic Trialogue*. Special Report, February 2003

*Islamic Perspectives on Peace and Violence*. Special Report, October 2001

*Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding*. Special Report, October 2001

*Catholic Contributions to International Peace*. Special Report, April 2001

*Healing the Holy Land: Religious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine*. Special Report, September 2003

## **A Surprising Meeting of Minds**

We both, in the past, had been involved in a war of words through various publications ... In these papers we expressed radical, provocative ideas from the stand points of our religions, on which we would refuse to negotiate for any reason. These uncompromising attitudes, in the past, had resulted in a tense atmosphere that did not allow room for dialogue or for any form of interaction between us. Everyone was trying to outwit the other. To the Pastor, the goal was total evangelization of the country, while for the Imam it was total Islamization. These were our positions before that fateful meeting and introduction.

Then we started talking, each of us carefully selecting his words. We were conscious that here were two “enemies” coming face to face for the first time, on a ground that was not conducive to flexing of muscles. But in our eyes, one could read hatred, anger and resentment, all covered with the cynical smiles that frequently flashed across our faces. Each was highly suspicious of the other.

To our very great surprise, as this discussion progressed, we were both startled by some discoveries. Hidden behind the turbaned Imam was a gentleman, not the violent man that the Pastor had assumed he was. Similarly, the suited Pastor was a bird of the same feather as the Imam. We found that we had a lot of things in common. From this, the idea of collaborative problem solving was initiated. At the end of that meeting we resolved to meet again to further harness this idea of responding to our conflicts.

From *The Pastor and the Imam* (Wuye and Ashafa 1999: 20)