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**The Imam and the Pastor:  
Attempts at Peace in Nigeria  
using Interfaith Dialogue**  
Jinelle Piereder

We are grateful to God that we have learned this ability to hear one another, and create a safe space to dialogue. Without which, we would always be assuming things from afar. And you can kill somebody based on assumption. We have learned a bitter lesson.

- Pastor James Wuye, *The Imam and the Pastor*

Nigeria is burdened with a history of violence that is particularly entrenched in conflict between Christian and Muslim groups. These clashes seem endemic, with the Plateau and Kaduna States experiencing some of the worst violence. More recently, the disenchanting Islamist group Boko Haram has been responsible for numerous brutal attacks and hundreds of deaths in Yobe State and Borno State (Johnson, 2013). Religion is only one factor in these conflicts; other factors include ethnic divisions, disputes between locals and migrants, land ownership, class conflict, and the burden of a colonial past. Efforts have been made by local administrators towards conflict resolution, but different aspects of these proposed solutions have been rejected by the Christian and Muslim communities. Since 1995, however, a new effort has taken place in Kaduna, Plateau, and other areas, with notable success and growing international recognition. This article examines the work of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye in the field of peacemaking via interfaith dialogue in Nigeria. More specifically, this article focuses on a five-day interfaith workshop for Christian and Muslim youth held in Kaduna in 2003. Led by Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye, the workshop focused on confronting and revising religious stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices among the youth. Following the founding of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Nigeria in 1995, Ashafa and Wuye gradually gained the attention of the international community regarding their faith-based peacemaking strategies (Smock 17).

After establishing some historical context for the current conflict in Nigeria, this article introduces the personal histories and belief systems of Ashafa and Wuye.

The focus then turns to the five-day youth workshop in Kaduna with a focus on the goals of the conference, the experiences of the participants, and the short and long-term results of the event. The next section highlights some successes and critiques of this workshop, and of Ashafa and Wuye's approaches. Finally, the current context of Nigeria is examined in order to provide insight into the challenges and gaps for this kind of peace work in the future. The goal of this article is to demonstrate that in conflicts where religion is a significant factor, it is perhaps more effective to use both religious and secular peacemaking strategies rather than ignoring the former. Even if religion is not the main source of conflict, religious peacemaking offers unique elements that conventional conflict resolution strategies do not necessarily provide. According to David Smock, "[w]hen communal identities, particularly religious identities, are key causal factors in violent conflict, traditional diplomacy may be of little value in seeking peace or conflict management" (1). For example, a religious environment may be especially conducive to expressions of apology, repentance, and forgiveness. While religion is often seen as part of the problem and an instigator of conflict, Ashafa and Wuye offer a case that demonstrates religion can be part of the solution (Bennett, 2012).

## **I. History and Context**

In situations of Muslim-Christian conflict, religion tends to overshadow other factors that contribute to these disputes. While there may be tensions between religious groups, the conflicts themselves are usually grounded on much more. In fact, the conflict in Nigeria is based more in colonial burden, territory disputes, ethnic divide, poverty and injustice than religious difference or intolerance. Religion is simply one of the easier identifiers in a country where 50 percent of the population is Muslim, 40 percent is Christian, and 10 percent identifies with other indigenous traditions. Nigeria is incredibly diverse and complex, with a current population of over 160 million, composed of nearly 350 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages (Johnson, 2013). During the Colonial period, Muslims were put in charge of the North, while the white Christian colonists and missionaries ruled the South. Even after Nigeria's independence, this North-South divide deepened, perpetuating cycles of violence (Bennett, 2012). The Niger Delta, Kaduna, and Plateau States, or the "Middle Belt", are where the predominantly Muslim North meets the predominantly Christian South (Reuters, 2013).

One of the main conflicts is between Muslim nomadic herders and Christian farmers – the two groups clash as herders travel through farmland. Furthermore, climate change and an ever-growing Sahara desert also means herders have to travel further south for resources. The oil-rich Niger Delta is also a source of tension as the

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resource is developed by mostly transnational companies, with little profit trickling down to Nigerians (Markoe, 2012). Additionally, religion is frequently used to incite violence in an effort to fight political or ideological battles, as is the case with Boko Haram. The group, whose name colloquially translates as ‘Western education is sinful’, is an Islamist group that operates predominantly in northeast Nigeria, and upholds the vision of a fully Islamic State. Nigerian analyst Chris Ngwodo calls Boko Haram, “a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos” (Johnson, 2013). As with many extremist groups, their reasons for existing are based on experiences of poverty and injustice (Johnson, 2013). President and Founder of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, Georgette Bennett, put it as follows:

For Christians, how does a gospel of love turn into a gospel of hate toward fellow countrymen in Africa? For Muslims, how does a religion of peace get turned into a mandate for murder in Iraq, the Sudan, Nigeria and elsewhere? The answer: religion, misused for political purposes, makes a combustible mixture that distorts religion’s core values and leads to mass destruction. (Bennett, 2012)

In 1992, a violent conflict broke out in Zongon Kataf, Nigeria; this is where our main actors, the Imam and the Pastor, came onto the scene.

## II. The Pastor and the Imam

The son of a soldier in the Biafra war, James Wuye, was born in a small town in Zamfara State. As a child, Wuye was brought up in the Baptist Church but attended Catholic schools and was baptized as a Catholic (Marshall, 2011). Wuye claims that after an adolescence involving heavy alcohol consumption and womanizing, he felt a call from God, via a sermon, to change his life. Wuye went on to pursue a Bachelors and Masters of theology in Kaduna, and eventually became a Pentecostal minister in the Assemblies of God Church, and vice president of the Christian Youth Association of Nigeria. In the late 1970s, Wuye became a Christian activist, and in response to what he understood as religious persecution, began a Christian youth militia group in 1992 (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006). In contrast, Mohammed Ashafa came from a very strong religious background. Born in Mani Katsina State, Ashafa is the 13th generation of Imamship in his family. In the late 1970s, this generation of Imamship was astutely aware of the Iranian Revolution. The Saudi ‘brand’ of Islam concerned with societal purification was especially present in Nigeria at the time. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had a strong influence on Nigerian Muslim youth. In con-

trast to his father's generation, which was traditional *Sufi*, these Islamic trends were *Salafi* and much more concerned with social and political practices than merely the spiritual elements of Islam. Ashafa eventually became the first Secretary General of the Muslim Youth Council, which pressed for Sharia law and Islamicization, and the leader of a combat center defending the "real" Islam against Christians and "false" Muslims (Marshall, 2011).

In 1992, Wuye and Ashafa fought on opposite sides of a conflict in Zongon Kafaf. During the clashes, Wuye lost his right hand, and Ashafa lost his 70-year old spiritual mentor and two cousins (Smock 17). Wuye expresses, "My hate for the Muslims then, had no limits" (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006). For years, the two young men plotted revenge against each other, but they did not meet face to face until May 1995 at a UNICEF meeting at the Governor's house (Marshall, 2011). A mutual friend challenged them to make peace when he said, "[t]he two of you can pull this nation together, or you can destroy it. Do something" (Bennett, 2012). Ashafa's epiphany came after hearing an Imam talk about the power of forgiveness, stating:

Yes, it is written in the law that you can invent an evil equal to the evil done to you. You have right to take a redress. However, the Koran teaches further. That it is better to turn the evil to that which is good. The Muslims who are here today: you refuse to forgive those who hurt you, those who persecute you. How can you be an embodiment of Mohammed? (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006)

Wuye's epiphany came later after a pastor told him, "[y]ou cannot preach Christ with hate. Christ is love, and the message he carries is love. If you will truly do this work, you must learn to forgive them for every hurt against you or against anyone that you have loved" (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006). Through several meetings and exchanges when Ashafa came with a team to visit Wuye's mother in the hospital, Ashafa and Wuye gradually built a foundation of trust and mutual respect, and helped found the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in 1995.

Ashafa and Wuye's relationship, however, is not without its challenges. While they have gained increasing support, there are still religious leaders and communities who question or condemn their actions and motivations. Moreover, although sometimes they do not talk for days out of frustration, Wuye states, "We are like a husband and a wife that must not divorce. If we divorce, our children will suffer. And because of our children, which is the global community, the Nigerian youth, and Christians and Muslims, we cannot separate" (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006). The IMC, now with over 10,000 members, reaches into the militias and trains Nigeria's youth, wom-

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en, religious figures and tribal leaders to become peace activists. They also lead Muslim and Christian youth in rebuilding the mosques and churches they once destroyed through violence (Bennett, 2012). An interview with the two men provides insight into how they understand and follow their faiths now. For Ashafa,

[t]he essence of Islam is faith, tradition, to shift people from hate to love, from hate to cooperation. It started from Muhammad in Mecca when he insisted that there are no slaves and no masters, we are all equal before God. When he had victory over Mecca, instead of transferring hate, he transferred love to the people of Mecca. Instead of vengeance, he transferred the hand of cooperation. (“The Imam and the Pastor: Cooperating for Peace”, 2008)

Ashafa also emphasizes religion as a compass for one’s life, and the need to love and respect all God’s creations. Similarly, Wuye focuses on the need to live out one’s faith in their character and actions, working towards divinity. Speaking about the importance of understanding one another’s faiths, Wuye states:

We are not preaching compromise... We are preaching that people should accept that they differ and they can do nothing about that but accept the reality. Now, in accepting the reality you explore the basic tenets of each other’s faiths: While that is done, mutual respect will grow, but also you begin to love, respect and listen to the other one. (“The Imam and the Pastor: Cooperating for Peace”, 2008)

In the film *The Imam and the Pastor*, Ashafa says about Wuye, “[e]ven though he’s not a Muslim, I like him. I would give my life to protect his honour and dignity. This is what Islam taught me to do. And I live by these principles.” Likewise, Wuye states, “I love him because I’m told to love my neighbour as myself. I live by that principle” (*The Imam and the Pastor*, 2006). The story of Ashafa and Wuye’s personal conversions to peace are part of what makes their work so effective. Both Ashafa and Wuye aim to demonstrate what they ask of their fellow believers – to forgive and to understand others.

### III. The Youth Workshop

While there are many examples of Ashafa and Wuye’s interfaith work, this article will focus on a five-day youth workshop in Kaduna that was held in anticipation of the 2003 Nigerian elections. The two religious leaders were especially concerned

about youth because they are one of the most vulnerable demographics in Nigeria due to high unemployment rates, and the general attitude that youth are merely “hoodlums-for-hire” (Look, 2012). Militia groups often use religious or ethnic slogans for recruitment; these tactics easily attract disenchanting and unemployed young people. Nevertheless, Ashafa and Wuye believe that young people have a great potential for peace work and conflict resolution (Ashafa and Wuye 21). The participants for Ashafa and Wuye’s workshop were chosen from across Nigeria, and all held positions of influence among their peers. The program had the following goals:

- transform religious youth from being in the vanguard of violence to instruments of peace by exposing them to conflict resolution skills;
- increase understanding and improve relationships between Christian and Muslim youth nationwide;
- set up a network of peace advocates among religious youth and extend religious dialogue to the grassroots; and
- establish conflict monitoring and de-escalation structures in all six geopolitical zones [of Nigeria]. (Ashafa and Wuye 21)

Religious and government officials as well as media representatives were invited to attend and observe key moments in the conference; the workshop received substantial publicity in Nigeria (Ashafa and Wuye 21).

During the first two days of the Kaduna conference, the Muslim and Christian youth communities met separately, and engaged in discussions about a number of topics, such as the rights of nonbelievers in religious communities, the concept of ‘neighbour’, respect of religious minorities, and common beliefs and practices. In the divided groups, participants were also able to express fears and expectations about meeting the other group, which proved to be an important preparation for the rest of the workshop (Ashafa and Wuye 22-23). The next three days of the conference included exercises and dialogue for the entire group of youth, focusing on incorporating faith-based principles and references from the Quran and the Bible into mainstream conflict resolution strategies. Many observers were particularly impressed with the Imam and the Pastor’s ability to quote freely from each other’s holy books. The Muslim and Christian youth were able to share positive and negative statements about the other faith group, highlighting false stereotypes and misconceptions and engaging in an ongoing facilitated dialogue. For example, Christians said that Muslims are self-centered, lazy and very aggressive, but also that they are prayer conscious, have a sense of unity, and are generous. Likewise, Muslims stated that Christians are uncompromising and blackmail Muslims deliberately, but also that they cooperate



effectively, have foresight, and are industrious. By addressing these misconceptions and stereotypes, this exercise and others allowed for open and intimate dialogue, and created a safe space to work on establishing a culture of peace (Ashafa and Wuye 23).

At the end of the five-day workshop, the participants had developed a 17-point Muslim-Christian Joint Communique regarding peace (see Appendix 1). It highlights some of the character-based causes of Nigeria's religious conflicts, such as lack of understanding, respect and patience, and emphasizes the need to practice principles of honesty, restraint and forgiveness when handling conflict. The Communique also shuns religious bigotry in politics, expresses desire to cultivate a culture of non-aggression, emphasizes freedom of religion and cross-religious understanding, and resolves to promote equity, fairness and justice. Furthermore, it calls on the media to avoid inciting journalism and recommends the establishment of an interfaith media monitoring unit and a central interfaith body in Nigeria. Finally, the Communique expresses concern over the failure of security services to respond effectively to early warning signs of religious violence, and commits Muslim and Christian youth to cooperate with the government in exposing perpetrators of violence in the name of religion (Ashafa and Wuye 23-24).

#### IV. Successes and Challenges

According to Ashafa and Wuye, the workshop contributed to reducing violence during the April 2003 elections, and inspired efforts to establish interfaith centres and promote peace in communities across Nigeria. Furthermore, it brought about a renewed government involvement and support for interfaith peace initiatives (Ashafa and Wuye 24). The workshop is considered a great success in the field of religious peacemaking, and has contributed to the larger success of Ashafa and Wuye's work. The religious leaders went on to use their methods in Yelwa-Nshar, Nigeria in 2004, successfully negotiating a community Peace Affirmation; a similar peace accord was also reached in the city of Jos (Smock 20). Ashafa and Wuye's methods have since been applied in Kenya, Chad, Egypt, North and South Sudan, Burundi, northern Ghana, and Sierra Leone (Marshall, 2011). The religious leaders also travel internationally giving lectures, including a visit to Ottawa in November 2011 (Initiatives for Change International, 2011). Together they published *The Imam and the Pastor: Responding to Conflict* in 1999, and in December 2006, FLTfilms produced *The Imam and the Pastor* sponsored by Initiatives for Change International, who were eager to publish the leaders' successes (IOC, 2006). The film has since garnered international attention, with screenings by World Vision and other NGOs (IOC, 2013), and, most recently, the film won the distinguished German Hessian Peace Prize in October of last year (IOC, 2013). A follow-up film, *An African Answer*, was produced in 2010



depicting Ashafa and Wuye's work in Kenya. Author David Steele has produced a facilitator's manual for the films so that others can successfully use the documentary in their own workshops (Steele, 2011). Both leaders have also been awarded the Heroes of Peace Award from the New York City-based Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding ("The Imam and the Pastor: Cooperating for Peace", 2008).

While some people take issue with upper-level interfaith dialogue (between elites or religious clergy), the kind of grassroots action embodied in Ashafa and Wuye's work has been highly applauded. By addressing personal and practical life issues and teaching conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue offers youth participants basic skills they need for better life in Nigeria (Garfinkel 4-5). Some scholars also note that Ashafa and Wuye's workshops are successful in part because the men are seen as long-term community members with both moral authority and non-sectarian goals (Hayward 5). Ashafa and Wuye's own experiences of violence and peace are the basis of their credibility (Garfinkel 5). The two faiths represented in this conflict situation, Islam and Christianity, also share a vision of social justice which workshop facilitators were able to invoke through the quotation of Biblical and Quranic texts (Smock 38).

Renee Garfinkel emphasizes the need for evaluating the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue programs in order to learn important lessons for future efforts. In doing this, Garfinkel claims there is a necessity for programs to have clearly outlined goals and mandates (2-3). Of course, the goal of Ashafa and Wuye's Kaduna youth workshop was not to put an end to all religious conflict or even all religious conflict in Kaduna. Outside of establishing conflict monitoring and de-escalation structures, the workshop achieved most of its goals, including teaching youth conflict resolution skills and helping them become instruments of peace, increasing understanding and improving relationships between Muslim and Christian youth, and setting up a peace advocate network, thus extending religious dialogue. This practical approach has given participants and their peers several tools to work towards peace (Ashafa and Wuye 21). Perhaps the largest contribution that has been made in these ethno-religious conflicts is the ability of religious leaders to re-humanize situations that have been dehumanized during times of conflict (Smock 2). The question remains, however, whether these various efforts at peace, including the youth Kaduna workshop, will hold for any length of time.

## **V. The Present Nigerian Context**

In looking at the current context of conflict in Nigeria, it is difficult to be optimistic. Incidents of violence continue to occur, and while they are largely rooted in

socio-economic injustice, conflicts are often played out with religious identity at the forefront. For instance, in 2006, caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad led to Muslim-Christian violence where more than 150 people were killed, and many mosques and churches were destroyed (Wee, 2001). Moreover, April 2011 saw post-election riots in Kaduna which turned into religious violence that left almost 700 dead (Look, 2012). More recently, the focus on Nigerian violence has turned to the Northeast and the actions of Boko Haram (Johnson, 2013). In June 2013, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan officially confirmed Boko Haram as a terrorist organization, and declared a state of emergency in Adamawa, Yobe and Borno states (ZeeNews India, 2013). In October 2013, over 260 people were killed in the region in armed attacks and military operations (Gansler, 2013). Following these events, a six month extension of the state of emergency was recently approved by Nigeria's House of Representatives (Reuters, 2013).

Although incidents of violence continue in Nigeria, efforts towards peace continue. For example, The IMC now has a weekly talk show with over two million viewers (Look, 2012). In 2009, the Nigerian Annual International Conference on Youth and Interfaith Dialogue was launched. While this conference was a dialogue between state officials, many of the attendees were, and still are, also involved in mid-level and grassroots interfaith dialogue work (ICYID, 2012). Furthermore, effective dialogue among state leaders offers a powerful model for emulation (Smock 38). For instance, a film was created to document the events at a 2010 conference for delegates and state officials in Jos (ICYID, 2012). Additionally, 156 delegates met in 2013 to discuss the role of the media towards creating a peaceful society (Uri, 2013).

Overall, Ashafa and Wuye's work has helped increase the legitimacy for religious approaches to peacemaking. Faith can have a unifying effect; a religious environment is especially conducive to apology and forgiveness, which is the foundation of restorative, long-term peace and justice (Smock 38). However, this workshop raises some further questions, such as the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions. Additionally, Ashafa and Wuye's efforts only marginally involve women. While religious violence is typically focused on males, women are also affected by the violence, whether they are victims or perpetrators. If women are predominantly in charge of raising children in these communities, one would think that mothers should be a main aspect of peace education and interfaith dialogue. It is also important for interfaith dialogue to address the larger political and economic issues that factor into the conflict; religion often overshadows some of the other central motivations for violence. In these complex conflict situations, religious leaders should have the responsibility not only to teach faith and doctrine, but work towards overall equity and justice.

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Peace can be fragile. What takes years of thoughtful work and dialogue to build can quickly be eradicated. During times of conflict and violence, what is required is a renewed and continuing commitment to nonviolent alternatives in the pursuit of peace. Religion offers a unique approach to peacemaking that encourages looking beyond personal interests or agendas toward a concept of the greater good (Garfinkel 12). While there is no guarantee that religious peacemaking will work, “[w]hat is guaranteed is that without it, diplomatic efforts have no chance of working. Religion is here to stay; ignoring it won’t make it disappear” (Garfinkel 2).

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**Appendix 1 — Training Peacemakers: Religious Youth Leaders in Nigeria**

## Muslim-Christian Joint Communiqué:

1. We identified causes of Nigeria's religious conflicts as: lack of tolerance and respect for each other's faith and practices, ignorance, failure to forgive, lack of understanding, lack of dialogue, rumor mongering, godlessness, lack of patience and restraint.
2. Resolve that in handling conflicts, both Christians and Muslims need to pray for one another, exercise patience and restraint, respect each other's faiths and holy books, be willing to forgive and pursue peace, be honest and sincere and transparent with each other.
3. Recommend that a central interfaith body be established with branches in states, local government areas (LGAs) and wards to monitor and evaluate interfaith dialogue in Nigeria.
4. Resolve to see and love each other, unconditionally and brothers and sisters, showing good-will at all times.
5. Resolve to educate and enlighten our respective adherents, especially at the grassroots, about the true tenets of the other's faith.
6. Recommend that Muslims and Christians freely continue to preach and propagate their respective religions as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution.
7. Recommend that we shun religious bigotry in politics.
8. Resolve to cultivate a culture of nonaggression at all times.
9. Resolve to promote equity, fairness and justice even at the expense of our respective communities.
10. Call on the media to avoid biased and inciting journalism and to be objective and truthful in their reporting particularly as it relates to matters of religion.
11. Recommend that an interfaith media monitoring unit be established.
12. Recommend that guidelines for interfaith dialogue be published and circulated.

13. Resolve to avoid using aggressive and abusive language [as well as] avoid finding fault and being confrontational.
14. Enforce basic human rights and redress of wrongs through compensation.
15. Resolve to ensure a peaceful and successful civilian-to-civilian transition come April 2003, for the survival of our nascent democracy in Nigeria.
16. Muslim and Christian youth resolved to cooperate with the government to checkmate and expose perpetrators of violence in the name of our faiths for punishment according to the due process of law.
17. Express concern about the failure of security services to make prompt and decisive responses to early warning signals of violent religious eruptions.

Ashafa and Wuye 21-24

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