



WORKSHEET



When people forget to listen...

Nigerian context

The Nigeria population is made up of 250 distinct ethnic groups who speak over 100 languages. Its population is mainly Christian and Muslim with the majority of Muslims living in the north and the majority of Christians in the South. Political power has in the past been divided between Christians and Muslims, but this system appears to be breaking down.

Nigeria's religious landscape changed dramatically in the twentieth century. In 1900, it is estimated that the population of Nigeria was 27% Muslim and 2% Christian. The rest of the population followed traditional religious beliefs. During the twentieth century Christianity grew rapidly in the South and in the Middle Belt and there are Christian minorities now in the predominantly Muslim North.

Conflicts, fuelled by religious and ethnic divides, inadequate governance and economic problems, have increased throughout Nigeria. In the Plateau State, one of the poorest states in Nigeria, its capital Jos sits along the Christian-Muslim fault-line that divides the country. Issues around unequal rights and the balance of power have repeatedly led to violence between Muslim and Christian communities. In Plateau State, at least one thousand people were killed each year in 2001, 2004 and 2008. In Kaduna state a controversy over the implementation of Sharia law led to 3 days of violence in January 2000 where Christian and Muslim youth gangs killed 2,000 people and destroyed much property.

Pastor James and Imam Ashafa's story

Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye are Muslim and Christian religious leaders respectively who live in Kaduna State. Today they work together to help others to resolve their conflicts; but they did not start out as peacemakers.

In the 1990s, Pastor James and Imam Ashafa led opposing, armed militias and were dedicated to defending their respective communities. Pastor James said he formed a Christian militia group because he wanted to protect his people "My hate for the Muslims then had no limits and no Muslim ever impressed me for whatever reason." Violence broke out in Kaduna State in the 1990s and Christians and Muslims fought each other, destroying each others' homes, crops and attacking each others' families. In fierce battles, Pastor James lost his hand and two of Imam Ashafa's close relatives were killed.

Despite this hatred for each other the two men met unexpectedly in May 1995. The meeting took place at a gathering UNICEF had organised about health issues in their communities. A mutual friend was present at the event and during a break he put Imam Ashafa and Pastor James' hands together and said "I know you have the capacity to keep the state in peace. I want you to talk."¹

Over the course of the next year Imam Ashafa initiated contact with Pastor James and slowly their relationship evolved. Pastor James came to believe that he could not preach Christ with hate in his heart

¹ <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-pastor-james-wuye-and-imam-muhammad-ashafa>

and that forgiveness was important. And, Imam Ashafa heard a similar message about the teachings of the Quran and Allah's love for all mankind and how the Prophet forgave those who persecuted him.

The Interfaith Mediation Centre

After much talking and relationship building between them the two men eventually reconciled and decided to work to bring peace to their community. As a result in 1995 Pastor James and Imam Ashafa together launched the Interfaith Mediation Center, an organization with now over 10,000 members providing interfaith training to young people in schools and universities, to women, religious leaders and politicians. The center brings youth, men and women of both faiths together in dialogue and to mediate.

"There is an understanding that it is not about being Muslim or Christian, it's not about debates between the two, or winning and losing. It is about dialogue and focusing on issues that affect both of us and how we can move our society forward." Imam Ashafa.

"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 will always be assuming things from afar, and you can kill someone based on assumption. We have learned a bitter lesson." Pastor James.

They began their work in Kaduna State by establishing dialogue between youth leaders from the two religious communities. They also offered training to at-risk youth in not only conflict resolution but also in the skills needed to gain work. After riots in 2000 they campaigned for peace using local media and helped to repair both Mosques and Churches. The Interfaith Mediation Center's work now includes a wide range of activities across Nigeria and they have also used some of their expertise abroad such as in Kenya.