

Boko Haram, Peace Work, and the Brethren Faith

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Destruction and havoc caused by Boko Haram in Nigeria is no longer news. In the past, many books, articles, and speeches have been presented on Boko Haram from various perspectives. I think that I am in the best position to speak about Boko Haram, peace work, and the Brethren faith because I was affected by, and have experienced, all three. In addition to this, I have encountered many others who have been directly affected by Boko Haram.

For the sake of those not familiar with Nigeria, let me give a brief background that will help with the context. Nigeria is a country in Africa—more specifically West Africa—and it is the most populous Black nation in Africa. According to the Worldometer's elaboration of the latest United Nations data, The population of Nigeria was 217, 233, 620 as of Monday, September 5, 2022.¹ Also, Nigeria is a Federal Republic consisting of thirty-six states and its Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The states are grouped into six geopolitical zones: the North Central (NC), Northeast (NE), Northwest (NW), Southwest (SW), Southeast (SE) and South (SS). There are over 525 native languages spoken in Nigeria and the official language of Nigeria is English, the language of former colonial British Nigeria.² There are two major religions in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam, and their practice varies regionally. There is also a less prominent third, which is the African traditional religions. Although both Christianity and Islam are practiced throughout Nigeria, the north of the country is dominated by Muslims and the south by Christians.

A surplus of conflict stems from this divide. Although some religions are fighting over doctrinal differences, most of the conflict stems from more secular causes like “a desire for political power, a struggle for resources, ethnic rivalries, and economic competition.”³ Other causes of religious conflicts include “marginalization, oppression, and government influence, uneven distribution of wealth and resources, division in government, nepotism and socio-religious bigotry.”⁴ The International Christian Concern, a NGO devoted to supporting Christianity in the world, described Nigeria as the “world's scariest country in which to be a Christian,” in a report on May 15, 2022.⁵ This is because of the persecution that has been going on in Nigeria, even before the presence of Boko Haram.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY

The popular literal translation of Boko Haram derives from *boko*, which is a Hausa word for “formal western education or form of knowledge,” and *haram*, an Arabic word for “anything unlawful and forbidden.” When mixed or joined together, Boko Haram is translated as “western education is unlawful, forbidden, or sinful.” The main message of this name is that group does not tolerate Western teachings and that they have been completely against them from the time that the teachings came over in the early nineteenth century. Boko Haram is the local name for the Jama’atu Ahl As-Sunna Li-D’awati Wal Jihad given by the residents of Maiduguri, Borno State. Eventually the name was adopted by all. The residents gave the group this name because of its strong aversion to Western education, which the sect members consider to be corrupting Muslims.⁶

I come from the aforementioned Borno State, and in this area Boko Haram is currently occupying and controlling parts of the government. It is affecting the economy, the politics, and the security of the area and we are even seeing these effects spreading countrywide. I have not been able to even access my home in about ten years, and many do not even know all that is happening there. Adeoye Afolabi states,

Insurgency is a threat to the economic, political, and social security of a nation. It is a major factor associated with underdevelopment because it discourages both local and foreign investments. . . . It reduces the quality of life, destroys human and social capital, damages relationship between citizens and the states, undermining democracy, rule of law and the ability of the country to promote development. . . . [The] desire of human beings to satisfy his inordinate ambition of lust for power . . . has often led to the irrational use of violence against the state, private organizations, and the general public with the ultimate objective of achieving selfish goals.⁷

This attribution can also be applied in the case of Boko Haram within Nigeria.

Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented cases of terrorism inspired by this Islamic group in its recent history. The activities of Boko Haram have created loss of lives, destruction of property, dislocations, and terror, particularly in some parts of northern Nigeria. Christians have been exposed to the atrocities of Boko Haram as they have become targets, their churches burnt down, schools taken over, hospitals demolished, and homes destroyed. An unimaginable number of Christians have been killed. In the eyes of Christians in Nigeria, Boko Haram has an agenda of a deliberate war on them as they seek to foster their Islamic caliphate dreams. These attacks are not limited to just Christians, as Muslims or anyone not following their ideologies have been subject to danger as well. Because we are seeing abductions of both Christians and Muslims, it is known that Boko Haram is not on good terms with anyone.⁸

The focus on the “global war” on Christians has been shifted to Nigeria due to its high mixed Christian-Muslim population. It has been described as an “Islam-Christian nation,” or as “Saudi-Arabia and the Vatican rolled into one.”⁹ For some, Nigeria is a “religious jungle, with so many religions and

sects canvassing more or less noisily for adherents.” Nigeria has been acclaimed as one of the most religious nations in the world that has impressive records of “multiple fronts in the global war on Christians,” and has also witnessed intense religious conflicts and crises. It is seen that “just as Africa leads the pack in terms of Christian growth, it has also become one of the primary fronts in the global war on Christians.”¹⁰

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF BOKO HARAM ON THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Social gatherings and activities are banned or cancelled due to fear of attacks either with guns/machetes or with bombs. People move in the Boko Haram controlled or stricken areas with fear of being attacked anytime or anywhere. The educational level of the Boko Haram-stricken states has dropped drastically as many students have been kidnapped, tortured, raped, and even murdered while in school or on their way to school, and many schools have been destroyed. This has led to a high number of school dropouts in the northern states. The Boko Haram menace has led to a steep rise in poverty, which has also delayed the promotion and graduation of many students in schools. As of this time (September 2022), our universities have been on strike for the past seven months. This is playing into what Boko Haram wants since they are against westernized education.

Boko Haram has shattered many people's lives. The number of widows, orphans, and the fatherless has risen at a high rate. Many survivors of Boko Haram attacks are facing psychological trauma, homelessness, etc. The Christian leaders of northeast Nigeria have noted the traumatic experiences of people who have been internally displaced by the insurgency. Some displaced people have migrated to Cameroon. Dr. Rebecca Dali of the Center for Caring, Empowerment and Peace Initiatives (CCEPI) and Dr. Kanadi Gava of Women’s Network Safe Space Ministry work a lot with victims of Boko Haram, especially women and children (Figs. 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2. Support for Vulnerable Women and Children by Women’s Network Safe Space Ministry. Photos with permission from WNSSM.

THE RELIGIOUS IMPACT OF BOKO HARAM ON THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Boko Haram's insurgency has posed a great security challenge to Nigeria as a nation. This has prevented many Nigerians from exercising their rights of freedom of worship and movement all over the country due to fear of attack from members of Boko Haram. This is particularly true in some parts of Northern Nigeria, where "Boko Haram has taken over through planting of bombs as well as a brutalized attack on innocent souls."

The Boko Haram attacks on churches continue to affect the numerical growth of the Church. In the New Testament, Hebrews 10:25 states that "You should not stay away from the Church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the day coming." And typically, we are seeing that "Many people prefer to be at home with their families where they believe there are relative peace and safety than to go to the Church when they know the Church is the target of the insurgents." This is where *Ekklesiyar Yanuwa a Nigeria* (EYN) as a Church was seriously affected. The EYN President told a conference in Yola that "the church lost over 8,000 members, had over 25,000 people displaced, lost church buildings and private property, etc." The EYN stated that

Boko Haram has destroyed a total of 1,125 of its church buildings and other structures over the years of insurgency. These include its headquarters office complex, which has been rebuilt, a church auditorium which is yet to be fully reconstructed, and an adjacent pastor's residential quarters where reconstructions work is yet to start.¹¹



Figure 3. EYN Church Garkida, Gombi LGA, Adamawa State razed by Boko Haram. This is one of the Churches destroyed. I had the opportunity to visit the place.¹²

Boko Haram's assault on religion has been affecting worship as we have seen, but not to the extent that they may have hoped. They bomb and destroy churches and cities, yet people still gather to worship whether or not there is a building there. The commitment to faith and the commitment to worship has been the most incredible thing to see. People have been incredibly resilient in these times when it comes to worship.

PEACE WORK AND THE BRETHREN FAITH

EYN is known as a historic peace church. This is what EYN inherited from the Church of the Brethren when it was established on March 17, 1923. Next year, 2023, EYN will be celebrating its centenary as a church. The early Brethren missionaries taught us the scriptures and how to obey them. EYN is a church comprised of Mission 21 (Basel Mission) from Geneva, Switzerland, Ashland Brethren, and the Church of the Brethren. The tradition of the church is based on peace. The church is rooted in the Anabaptist background and works very closely with the Mennonites in peacemaking.¹³

For the Church of the Brethren, the peace stance has continued to be the official position of the church, strongly stated in Annual Conference decisions. In 1918 the following statement was issued: “We believe that war or any participation in war is wrong and incompatible with the spirit, example, and teaching of Jesus Christ.” This belief in absolute peace is what makes us a historic peace church. The EYN as a church believes that “Christ has been the Prince of Peace and that he is our peace *Eirene or shalom*.” These are the Greek and Hebrew words for Peace. They believe that “Christ has emphasized peace in all his teachings and has lived it out; he was non-violent and non-retaliatory even at the expense of his own life. It was the peace that led him to the Cross. He called on the disciples to be at Peace (Mark 9:50).”¹⁴

In 2014, EYN was completely overrun by Boko Haram. The headquarters and the seminary were taken over. All the local churches and districts were taken over. Other churches were also taken over. For that reason, the headquarters and the seminary were temporarily relocated to Jos (North Central Nigeria). EYN continued to operate in Jos and other places because of the support from the Church of the Brethren. During that time, we have seen what love means. We have understood who Brethren are. We have become one body.

The EYN has recurrently been confronted by violence. It is not easy to count the destruction of lives, property, kidnappings, herders’ attacks, and abductions between 2014 and 2022. One horrible example is the killing of Rev. Daniel Umoru’s two children and the abduction of their daughter, who was later released.¹⁵ Payment of ransom by individuals, families, and organizations has become alarming.

EYN’s peacemaking makes it uncommon among Nigerian churches. People might expect EYN members to not even greet Muslims because of the experience of persecution. But because of our peace heritage, we are acting on the teachings of Jesus to love our enemies. EYN as a church has turned the cheek several times. Its Disaster Relief Ministry supports both Christians and Muslims (Figure 4). The church provides shelter, food, clothing, water, and protection to both Christians and Muslims. The establishment of Christian-Muslim Peace Initiative (CAMPI) was supported by Mission 21 (which is an amalgamation of different bodies in Basel, Switzerland. It was formerly known as Basel Mission) and the Church of the Brethren. CAMPI believes that the new initiative of forming a peacebuilding club targeting secondary school students will help create social integration between Christians and Muslims as they

grow into future leaders with positive views of each other.¹⁶ The Peace Club is intended to help the students to grow together with respect for each other, to develop a sense of belonging and to share common values. This will also help them develop a spirit of openness and respect for each other's faith. Some of the activities of the Peace Club include staging dramas on interfaith matters, singing and dancing together, organizing peace carnivals and football matches, and working together to clean up the environment and plant trees. CAMPI also organizes inter-school peace debates and competitions to promote peace and interfaith interaction. Most of the topics of the debate are focused on common problems affecting communities such as poverty as one of the causes of conflict. CAMPI is working on organizing a fashion parade peace summit to promote a dress code and sociocultural and religious cohesion among the students.¹⁷ EYN has also been partnering with Center for Peace Advancement in Nigeria (CEPAN) a Non-Governmental Organization pursuing peace.



Figure 4. EYN Disaster Relief Ministry distributing food. Photos courtesy of DRM. Used by permission.

For the Historic Peace Churches, nonviolence is central to their ecclesial self-understanding. Their conviction on nonviolence is not necessarily that it works, but that it is the right thing to do. “These church families are aware they would not be understood by others but are so determined not to give up on their peace position.” EYN as a church is able to stand firm in her faith amidst its persecution by Boko Haram. Faith is non-negotiable. I know EYN members who died because of their faith during the Boko Haram crises. They could have stayed alive by denying their faith. But gaining one's life and losing Christ is something that cannot be contemplated. This is the position of most EYN pastors and members. In fact, other Christians in the Northern part of Nigeria also have same belief and practice. They prefer to die for their faith than deny Christ. We saw how such faith helped in expanding the gospel. We know non-Christians who accepted Christ because of what they have witnessed. Brethren's faith is very strong.

It is amazing to see believers worshiping in the rubble of destroyed church buildings destroyed, under sheds, in open space under the heat of the sun, rain, storm, and so on. This is a result of faith. Remember that this is what your early missionaries taught us.

NOTES

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