

# CRUSHED BUT NOT DEFEATED

## The Impact of Persistent Violence on the Church in Northern Nigeria

*Executive Summary*

Open Doors
60 years of serving persecuted Christians

## Report Summary

**In Brief:** Christians are being targeted in northern Nigeria. From 2006-2014, between 9,000 and 11,500 Christians have been killed. More than a million have been affected, with many driven from their homes and 13,000 churches have been destroyed or abandoned. Between 1857 and 2014 the number of Christians grew from virtually nothing to 31.2 per cent of the population. Today, church attendance has more than halved in some of the most violent areas. In others, the Christian presence has almost been extinguished.

Perpetrators include radical Islamic groups such as Boko Haram, armed Muslim Fulani herdsmen and the northern Muslim political and religious elite. The introduction of enhanced Sharia (Islamic law) in 12 northern states in 2000 has increased discrimination against Christians. The persistent violence has led to further segregation of Muslim and Christian communities.

Christians say their biggest spiritual challenge today is to understand religious violence and to 'love your enemies'. Church leadership has failed so far to produce a coherent vision, strategy or plan to cope with the crisis. What is required from the church is a holistic vision of the Christian faith, in which personal salvation is coupled with social transformation. What is required of the Nigerian government and international community is increased attention and strategic action.

*Summary of the research report 'Crushed but not defeated, the impact of persistent violence on the Church in Northern Nigeria', Open Doors International, Arne Mulders, February 2016*

## Driven out

Violence in northern Nigeria has resulted in thousands of people being killed, including an estimated 9,000-11,500 Christians between 2006-2014.[1] Many Christian properties have been destroyed and 13,000 churches have been torn down, abandoned or forced to close.[2] Northern church leaders estimate that the average rural congregation has 50-100 members. Therefore, this significant reduction of churches has affected up to 1.3 million Christians – many of whom are now internally displaced.

In several areas, the Christian presence has almost been extinguished. In some areas of the north-east, the church has lost so many members that it is unclear how it will be able to rebuild its communities.

## Why?

Nigeria is a country torn in two. While southern Nigeria is economically stable and enjoys relative peace, northern Nigeria is troubled by the continuing targeted attacks of violent groups, social and economic insecurity, and ethno-religious conflicts.

Christians living in affected areas have borne the brunt of this violence and insecurity. Northern Nigeria is home to a substantial Christian population, estimated to be 30 million.[3] This means Christians are the largest religious minority in this mainly Muslim area. The situation has become ever more hostile towards Christians in recent decades, leading

**1** These estimates were reached using statistics from Nigeria Watch, comparing them to the population of Christians in northern Nigeria and calculating an additional percentage of targeted attacks on Christians. For a full explanation, see 'Crushed but not defeated: The Impact of Persistent Violence on the Church in northern Nigeria', Open Doors International, February 2016: www.opendoorsuk.org/ngasummary

**2** Affected congregations in northern Nigeria in the Christian Association of Nigeria church groups (2000 – 2014)

**3** Based on figures provided by Nigerian church leaders, Christian Association of Nigeria members, Open Doors International and the World Christian Database.

 ***Cover photo:*** *Naomi, victim of Fulani herdsmen violence against Christians in Kaduna and Nassarawa State, Nigeria*

to growing marginalisation and discrimination, as well as widespread attacks – which have escalated in the last 15 years.

Although Nigeria is a secular state with a constitution that guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the reality in northern Nigeria is radically different. This applies not only in the 12 far northern states which introduced Sharia in 2000, but also in the non-Sharia Middle Belt states where Islamic law has not been formally implemented.

Research by Open Doors International shows that decades of targeted religious violence has had an even greater impact on the church in the northern region than previously expected. Social cohesion between Muslims and Christians has been severely affected. Mutual trust has broken down and Muslims and Christians have become increasingly separate, withdrawing into their own communities in towns, suburbs and distinct rural areas.

## *Drivers of violence*

The different expressions of targeted violence against Christians in northern Nigeria have a common denominator: that of defending the interests of northern Muslims, Muslim identity and the dominant position of Islam in society.

The perpetrators of that violence include radical Islamic groups such as Boko Haram. They also include Muslim Fulani herdsmen and the northern Muslim political and religious elite.

Some Christians have made matters worse, contributing to the conflict due to their own tribalism, political agendas, hatred, retaliation and violence. Not all Christians have responded well to conflict and violence. This has prompted at times violent reactions from Muslims following aggression carried out by people they considered to be Christians. Muslims have also acted out of frustration at feelings of socio-economic marginalisation in Plateau state.

## *Boko Haram*

The Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009 with the stated goal of turning Nigeria into a purely Islamic state. By mid-2014, it became clear that this was having a devastating impact on the church in northern Nigeria.

The insurgency peaked on 24 August 2014, with the establishment of the Gwoza Caliphate and subsequent large-scale violence in the three north-eastern states (Borno, Yobe and Adamawa). People were killed, wounded and traumatised. Women and girls were raped, kidnapped and forced into marriage. The numbers of people internally displaced and fleeing to neighbouring countries rose dramatically.

Boko Haram and other radical Islamic sects – with alleged political backing[4] – are recruiting impoverished Muslim nationals from neighbouring countries to wage jihad. They are reportedly recruiting child soldiers from Niger,



James, from Adamawa State, is a victim of Boko Haram violence. They tried to behead him but hit his shoulder instead of his neck.

**4** World Watch Monitor, 'The man who talks to Boko Haram', March 2015: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/03/3786031/

Chad and Cameroon.[5] Unemployed Muslim youth are joining well trained Muslim fighters from these countries. Their reward is not wages, but booty – women, property and land.

The victims include many Christians. Attacks on churches, Christian property, homes, shops, schools and clinics have caused widespread chaos. Many Christians have relocated to safer areas, leaving few remaining in the trouble-spots.

As Christian communities dwindle, Muslims, including some from neighbouring countries, come to occupy the vacated areas or buy damaged property at knock-down prices.

## *Fulani attacks*

Attacks on Christian farmers in Middle Belt states by Muslim Fulani herdsmen are another expression of violence. Through the centuries, there has been antagonism between farmers and nomads over land.

In northern Nigeria, the Muslim Fulani roam with their cattle in search of pasture and water. Increasing desertification has driven them gradually southwards, resulting in conflict with the non-Muslim farmers in the mainly Middle Belt states. Along with the herdsmen, there has been a mass migration towards the south, putting pressure on access to land, jobs and government funds. This socio-economic conflict has adopted a distinctly religious undertone with local sources convinced that Christian communities face greater levels of attack than their Muslim neighbours.[6]

Many local tribes resisted Islam for centuries and became Christian as a result of missionary activity in the 20th century. Clashes between the Fulani and these tribes intensified from 2011, especially in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections. The local government areas of Jama'a, Kachia, Kagarko, Kaura and Sanga in southern Kaduna were particularly badly affected, with some villages raided three times between January and May 2014.[7]

Many have been killed or injured and many houses and churches destroyed. The Fulani seize land and property. Their supporters have taken over the farmland of the original Christian population and are kidnapping Christian schoolgirls to marry them to Muslim men. Some observers believe the Fulani are being used as a tool by politicians to dominate Christian areas and eliminate the Christian physical and political presence.[8]

## *Examples of persistent violence*

### Lassa

Lassa, in southern Borno state, is home to the Margi tribe. Many Margi converted to the Christian faith in the 19th century.

Boko Haram violence reached Lassa in 2012, targeting churches, missions, schools, police stations, Christians and government personnel. Many people fled to hide in the forests.

The church in the region is greatly impacted by the violence. In total, 36 of the 50 church districts have closed, along with 1,359 churches; and 356 pastors, 346 assistant pastors and 1,390 church workers have become unemployed. Many Christians have fled abroad or relocated to safer areas.

**5** BBC News, 'Niger hit by Nigeria's Boko Haram fallout', April 2014: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27111884

**6** Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Alypse Ben, 'Violent Conflict in Divided Societies: The Case Study of Violent Conflict in Taraba State (2013 - 2015)' November 2015, research for Open Doors International: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org

**7** Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Alypse Ben, 'Migration and Violent-Conflict in Divided Societies: Non-Boko Haram Violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria', March 2015, research for Open Doors International: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/3777637

**8** Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Alypse Ben, 'Migration and Violent-Conflict in Divided Societies: Non-Boko Haram Violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria'

## Tudun Wada Dankadai

Tudun Wada Dankadai is a city in Kano state. One million of Kano's 9 million inhabitants are indigenous Christians.

In 2007, Christian secondary school students were accused of producing a drawing of Mohammad. All the Christian students were attacked and driven out. Eight churches were burned down and their members forced to flee. Other than some southern Christian police and businessmen, no indigenous Hausa Christians remained in the city.

Since 2007 the Christian minorities in the villages around Tudun Wada Dankadai have been severely marginalised. Christians are not allowed to buy land or build churches on native land. All mission schools and hospitals have been taken by the government and Christian children are denied scholarships for study. Christian girls are frequently abducted and forced to marry Muslim men.

Local sources report that Christian businesses have been closed down and Christians are seldom hired as government workers. Christian youth have to be home-schooled, or assume Muslim names in order to be allowed entry to government schools or must relocate to schools in the Middle Belt. As a result, many Kano Christians are migrating to the Middle Belt.

## Jos

Jos city in Plateau state has experienced repeated crises since 1994. Fulani herdsmen have attacked majority-Christian villages in rural areas south of the city. In August 2013, 51 Christian men were killed in Bolgang, Magama, Karkashi and Kuka villages in Langtang South area of Plateau State. Their homes were burnt down and their families were left without a place to live. The violence in Jos and Plateau State has resulted in thousands of Muslims and Christians being killed, wounded and displaced. Public property was destroyed, mosques, churches and schools attacked, cattle stolen and whole villages ransacked. These clashes were primarily about access to economic resources and land, but religion was also widely viewed as an additional motivation.

Jos is the capital of Plateau state and the centre of power and business. To control the city is to control the state. If the Muslim Hausa-Fulani gain political control of Jos city, they would eventually also have full control of Plateau state.

# *Context for violence against Christians*

The people of Nigeria still struggle with the idea of the nation state. Their primary identity is drawn from their tribes, ethnic groups, regions and religions. Religion and ethnicity shape the identity of the main groups in northern Nigeria, and are manipulated by politicians in order to divide and rule.

In the context of this report which looks at the impact of persecution on the church, the three drivers of persecution against Christians in northern Nigeria are the northern Muslim political and religious elite, radical Islamic groups and armed Fulani herdsmen. This, within the existing culture of violence in Nigeria, particularly affects the Christian minority. These dynamics are firmly rooted in the past.

Northern Nigeria is a British colonial construct. The colonial administration worked with the existing governing structures, such as the local Muslim Hausa-Fulani emirs. The emirs' rule was extended to include large parts of the Middle Belt states, which had previously been excluded from the Sokoto Caliphate of the 19th century.

Colonial policy initially prevented missionaries entering Muslim-dominated areas in the far north. All the inhabitants of the Muslim emirates were considered to be Muslims. This prohibition meant that the limited missionary resources

were channelled to the non-Muslim emirates, resulting in much church growth there.

## *Northern Muslim political and religious elite*

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the Muslim Hausa-Fulani remained in power in the northern region and strengthened their hold over political structures to become a northern political and religious elite. The position of Christians in northern Nigeria deteriorated further after independence.

Nigeria was ruled by Muslim northerners from 1979 until 1999. But when democracy was established in 1999 under Christian president Olusegun Obasanjo, the northern elite became alarmed that their political, economic and religious dominance could be in danger and the Islamic character of their society at risk.

## *Sharia states*

Muslim participation in politics is traditionally strong in Africa owing to their belief that religion and state (*din wa dawla*) are one and undivided.

To secure this belief, enhanced Sharia was implemented in 12 northern states in 2000. This gave rise to fear among Christians and precipitated the present crisis.

Despite the substantial Christian presence in these Sharia states and other Muslim-dominated areas, Christians have long been marginalised, discriminated against and targeted by violence. Enhanced Sharia accelerated that process of marginalisation. As a result, many Christians migrated to safer areas, leaving those who remain increasingly vulnerable.

Many non-Muslims in northern Nigeria became Christians in the 20th century. The church has grown from being virtually non-existent in 1857, to some 30 million (31.2 per cent) today. Christians now form the majority in six northern states. Rapid church growth is seen to threaten the interests and identity of the established northern Muslim powerbase and the predominance of Islam in the region.

## *Identity crisis*

In Nigeria, religious and tribal identity are often inextricably interlinked. Intertribal rivalry has been increasing. Three large tribes dominate politics in the country. In northern Nigeria, the Muslim Hausa-Fulani are in the majority.[9]

This issue is complicated by a history of slavery. The economy of the 19th century Sokoto Caliphate was based on slavery, with the non-Hausa-Fulani treated as objects and made to convert to Islam by force. This legacy has engendered resistance to Hausa-Fulani dominance in the spheres of religion, economics, culture and politics. This tension continues to impact intertribal relations.

Southern Christian Olusegun Obasanjo, became president in 1999, and was succeeded by a Muslim president, Umaru Yar'Adua. Yar'Adua was succeeded on his death by his vice president, southern Christian Goodluck Jonathan, who was later given an electoral mandate in 2011. With this succession, the northern Muslim elite feared that power was shifting to the Christian south, along with access to Nigeria's substantial oil revenues.

The 2011 post-electoral crisis resulted in many Christians being killed, along with



Portrait of Habakuk, victim of Fulani herdsmen violence against Christians in Kaduna and Nassarawa State, Nigeria.

**9** The other two tribes are the Igbos and Yorubas.

Muslim members of the opposition party. Some observers believe northern politicians conspired to incapacitate the Goodluck regime, by encouraging the Boko Haram uprising and the increasing attacks by Muslim Fulani herdsmen in the Middle Belt states.[10]

A new All Progressive Congress Party was formed under northern Muslim Muhammadu Buhari, who gained power in the March 2015 presidential elections. Although Buhari has taken on Boko Haram, very little is done about the Muslim Hausa-Fulani violence against Christians in northern Nigeria. This problem seems to be neglected and the violence continues.

**10** See: World Watch Monitor, 'The man who talks to Boko Haram'; Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Alypse Ben, 'Migration and Violent-Conflict in Divided Societies: Non-Boko Haram Violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria'

## IMPACT ON CHURCH LIFE

*The following is based on 102 interviews with members of 44 congregations representing the five denominational church blocks of the Christian Association of Nigeria.*

- Church attendance and membership have more than halved in some of the most violent areas in northern Nigeria, but have increased in the Middle Belt states where many Christians have relocated.
- The church has declined in influence and resources as poverty has increased.
- Eighty per cent of respondents said feelings towards Muslims had become more negative due to the persistent violence. They confessed to struggling with feelings of suspicion, fear and distrust. Outreach to Muslims has been curtailed severely, due to fear of violent attack. Christians are afraid to enter Muslim-majority areas for fear of targeted violence. The persistent violence has led to a further segregation of Muslim and Christian communities.
- Three out of four Christians in northern Nigeria now consider the future to be bleak.
- Three out of four respondents say it has become more difficult for Christians in northern Nigeria to get promotion at work or to find government employment. Respondents believed people with Christian names would be refused employment or promotion.
- Christians say the biggest spiritual challenge is to understand religious violence and to 'love your enemies'.
- The main emotional challenge is to cope with the trauma inflicted by the persistent violence, as many have experienced, seen or heard about brutal violence in their communities.
- The main social challenge is to overcome mutual distrust, fear and hatred between Christians and their Muslim counterparts.
- Significantly, Christians who refuse to be driven out show an increased commitment to their faith and churches. Sixty-five per cent say their personal faith has increased. Seventy per cent say the number of committed Christians in their church has grown.
- In some areas, there seems to be a new dynamic in which Christians are campaigning for their freedom through participation in politics.

## CHRISTIAN VOICES

According to 80 per cent of respondents, the number of Christians who persevere despite personal loss and trauma has increased. Many Christians face daily the challenge of life and death: they hold on to God, persevere in their faith, live out the Bible, and experience miracles.

*"The Christians are selling their houses in Muslim-dominated areas and relocating to other places that are more accommodating. My husband and I will never leave the Muslim-dominated environment because God has been faithful; He is our protector and one of the many ways we can show them love is to live among them."*

*"Many Muslims want to become Christians, but they are afraid of being killed or pressured by fellow Muslims."*

*"We see the need for political empowerment so we are going into politics in large numbers and we are more aware."*

*"The violence has awoken the members and they now see greater need for prayer… For me it has greatly increased my faith in God."*

*"The church is aware of the religious-related violence but not fully prepared to withstand it… Love for the persecutors is very difficult: the church must work on that."*

*"The violence has developed hatred in Christians, so they need healing to love their enemies."*

*"The few who remain have suffered the personal loss of loved ones and property. We believe that God is the giver of all things and he will replenish all that has been lost at the appropriate time. We are encouraged because we know Christians worldwide are praying for us."*

# *Responses and perspectives*

Church leadership at national and regional level has so far failed to produce a coherent vision, strategy or plan to cope with the crisis. Churches confronted with violence for the first time have been surprised, shocked and paralysed. There has been little in their theology, background or experience to prepare them.

Some Christians describe a struggle with an innate passivity. This may be coupled with a legacy of pietism from the missionary movement from the West that emphasises the individual believer's responsibility to follow Jesus and prepare for heaven and disregard their earthly circumstances. While Christians have taken an individualistic approach to their faith and to the conflict, Muslims stand as a well-organised community.

However, if the state fails to provide sufficient protection for its citizens – as is the case for the Christian minority in northern Nigeria – merely being peacemakers and loving one's enemies will not solve the Christians' plight.

What is now required is action from the state and for the church to develop a holistic vision of the Christian faith, in which an emphasis on personal beliefs is coupled with a commitment to social transformation and united political engagement.



Christians hold a service in the ruins of their burned-out church in Rikkos, Jos.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## *To the church*

The challenge facing the church in northern Nigeria is much greater than previously thought. It will have to find a way to exist in areas where the Christian presence has become virtually extinct. It will have to deal with trauma as a result of continued violent attacks. It will need to provide leadership and guidance to Christians on how to deal with and respond to the violence. Christian communities in Sharia states especially face the challenge of having to withstand the pressure of an environment that marginalises and discriminates against them.

Nevertheless, there is still a large Christian presence in northern Nigeria which could unite and stand strong, together with the Christians in southern Nigeria. To do so, the northern church will have to find a way to avoid turning in on itself and instead face the following challenges:

- The church across Nigeria needs to develop a concerted response in terms of vision, planning and action to deal with the impact of persistent violence.
- It will have to find ways to support affected Christians, to work towards peace and to promote social cohesion.
- The church will need the help of the Nigerian government at federal, state and local levels, and the international community in working for the renewal and transformation of the Christian community, as well as the wider society in northern Nigeria.
- The church must come up with a vision and strategy for the future. It must find solutions that will address the crisis at all levels: spiritual, emotional, socio-cultural, economic and political.
- Policymakers in churches, government and society must unite to formulate a comprehensive response to end the violence and to restore a situation in northern Nigeria where Muslims and Christians can once again live together in freedom.

**Elements of such a strategy could include:**

1. Raising up strong leadership to cope with the challenges of persistent violence at local, regional and national level, and who can advocate for peace and security.
2. Rigorous training of pastors so that they can better support their communities to face the challenges of persecution and displacement.
3. Preparation of church members to cope with religious violence.
4. The equipping of the church to deal with suffering and to 'love your enemies'.
5. Training young people to stay calm in the midst of violence and empowering them economically to counter the scourge of youth unemployment.
6. Combating despair by providing trauma counselling and training trauma counsellors.
7. Increasing political involvement by mature Christians in a meaningful and constructive way.
8. Actively addressing the humanitarian crisis and promoting socio-economic development.
9. Taking a stand for the Christian faith and its values and speaking out against the system of patronage politics, corruption and impunity at all levels of society.
10. Establishing legal support for those facing religious persecution, including a monitoring system to document attacks.

## *To the government*

*The following recommendations are extracts from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Declaration: Nigeria Renew, Nigeria, February 2016.[11] This declaration was written in response to the findings of the Open Doors report, 'Crushed but not defeated'. It includes recommendations from CAN to the federal, state and local authorities of Nigeria and to the international community.*

We call in strong terms the attention of the Federal government of Nigeria, the governments of the northern and Middle Belt states, the Nigerian community and the international community to address this situation, to restore peace, apply justice and to bring reconciliation in northern Nigeria, so that Christians along with other citizens will experience security, equality, freedom, and prosperity, and can recover from psychological trauma and material damage.

**1. Security: We call upon…**

- The federal government to ensure that all citizens are protected, regardless of their ethno-religious affiliations.
- The international community to monitor and advocate for the security of every Nigerian to be guaranteed by the Federal, State and Local governments. Further, to pay greater attention to the regional spread of Boko Haram, take pro-active steps to contain the threat of their insurgency, and closely scrutinise and sanction the sponsors of Boko Haram.

**2. Humanitarian: We…**

- Appreciate the governmental and NGO provision of relief for the internally displaced and urge the checks and balances to ensure that relief materials reach all persons affected, regardless of ethno-religious affiliation.
- Further request that humanitarian aid reach communities in Plateau, Southern Kaduna, Nasarawa, Taraba and Benue states.

**3. Legal: We urge…**

- The government of Nigeria to put in place effective measures in order to prevent or sanction violations of freedom of religion or belief when they occur, and ensure accountability.
- The Nigerian authorities to conduct an in-depth investigation into the atrocities committed against civilians in northern Nigeria and the UN Human Rights Council to mandate a Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses in northern Nigeria.

**4. Political: We urge…**

- The Nigerian government to instigate safeguards to ensure that religion will not be used or allowed to be used to promote injustice, impunity and discrimination
- The international community to monitor the application of this principle.

**5. Economic: We urge…**

- State governments to ensure equal treatment, development, and economic empowerment of all entities within the states of Nigeria, both those local to the state and those displaced from elsewhere.
- The Nigerian government ensure needs-based assistance, rehabilitation and reconstruction is provided to victims of Boko Haram, Fulani herdsman attacks and other forms of targeted violence, regardless of location.

**6. Socio-cultural: We call upon…**

- The federal government to fully implement the Nigerian Constitution and the UN Charter on the Rights of Indigenous

**11** Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Declaration: Nigeria Renew, February 2016: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/CANdJointDclaration

Peoples, to ensure equality for all religious and ethnic communities.

- The government of Nigeria and the international community to give serious attention to the ongoing issue of violence against women, which is exacerbated in times of violence.

**7. Religion: We advocate for…**

- The strengthening of section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, whereby the Government should not expressly or by conduct through its practice and policies adopt, or appear to adopt, any official religion at the local, state or national level.
- True freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including for religious groups to establish and manage their religious institutions and practices, within the national legal framework.

**8. Education: We call upon…**

- The Federal and State governments to ensure swift reconstruction of schools in the North-East of Nigeria.
- The Federal and State governments to ensure rehabilitation of un-schooled children into education, the provision for adult education and training opportunities for the internally displaced, ensuring the implementation of a curriculum encouraging religious tolerance and pluralism – including flexibility on religious education for children from non-majority faiths.



A group of school children in Jos, Nigeria.

"This report gives us an opportunity to let the entire world know, especially the country, what the Christians in Nigeria have been going through."

**Rev. Musa Asake, General Secretary, Christian Association of Nigeria**

Open Doors
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