

On the fault line: Christian-Muslim encounters in Nigeria

by [Eliza Griswold](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue



The face of global Christianity isn't changing—it *has* changed. The average Christian is no longer a white American or European but a poor black woman in sub-Saharan Africa.

No single nation represents this shift in the face of global Christianity more powerfully than Nigeria. Home to 140 million people, it is Africa's most populous nation. Nearly half of its people are Christians. It is also a nation where Christians are often in conflict, sometimes violent conflict, with Muslims.

Pastor James Wuye is one of the finest Christian leaders I met in Nigeria. Graced with a warm chuckle and a preacher's gift for spinning stories, Pastor James—as he is known—is a vocal and charismatic evangelical leader. He lives and works in the northern Nigerian town of Kaduna (which means crocodile). Like Nigeria itself, Kaduna is almost evenly split between Christians and Muslims.

The River Kaduna divides the town's two faith communities. Christians live in neighborhoods called Haifa and Jerusalem, Muslims in neighborhoods called Afghanistan and Baghdad. As Pastor James explains, on a local level being a Christian or a Muslim is what gives people the right to vote in elections and is what safeguards basic rights. On a global level—as the neighborhood names reflect—religion allows those isolated and living in poverty to ally themselves with movements on the world stage.

Pastor James has a visceral understanding of what it means to be a Christian in a land where Christians and Muslims are often at odds. One of his arms was cut off in an attack by Muslim thugs more than a decade ago. At the time, Pastor James was the leader of his band of Christian warriors.

The leader of the Muslim militants was a man now known as Imam Nuryan Ashaffa. He is an eloquent religious teacher—and now Pastor James's interfaith partner. These two religious leaders, former blood enemies, are working together to bring peace to Kaduna as well as to other violence-stricken communities in Nigeria.

The story of their reconciliation centers on each man's faith. One Friday at prayer, the imam heard a sermon about the Prophet Muhammad being pelted with stones when he went to preach in a village called Taif. According to tradition, the archangel Gabriel appeared to the wounded prophet and asked if he'd like to take revenge on the villagers. Muhammad said no, he would forgive them instead.

A newfound desire for reconciliation drove the imam to seek out his nemesis, Pastor James, and to find a way to make peace. Pastor James was at first wary of the imam. But he decided that God was calling him to work with the imam to rebuild the community. The two founded the Interfaith Mediation Center, which seeks to resolve crises between these rival groups.

The Interfaith Mediation Center is located in Kaduna's tallest building, a broken-down high-rise built for an era of prosperity that never arrived. Owing to a lack of electricity, the elevator rarely works. When I first visited several years ago and climbed the stairs to the IMC office, I knew I'd arrived when I saw a plastic sign that read Peace Hall.

Waging peace entails teaching former opponents how to reread their own holy books and go beyond catchphrases about killing unbelievers. It involves showing that the scriptures teach peace and love of neighbor.

"Our secret is spiritual intimidation from the holy books," Pastor James explained.

Neither the pastor nor the imam has strayed from strict interpretation of their respective traditions. Both are fundamentalists, believing that the other is destined for hell if he doesn't convert to the other's faith. But they work toward peaceable coexistence.

Pastor James tries to reach his fellow Christians, who range from Catholics to Pentecostals to Anglicans. Sunday morning in Nigeria offers a veritable smorgasbord of old and new traditions. (The breadth of beliefs is so wide that there is even room for a syncretic religion called Chrislam, an amalgam of the two faiths that frequently are antagonists.)

Over the past decade, confrontations between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria have led to bloodshed. The violence has been at its worst in the region where the two religions meet—in Nigeria's Middle Belt, the horizontal ribbon of land that runs across the middle of the country and lies mainly between the latitudes of the seventh and tenth parallels, 500 to 700 miles north of the equator.

Nigeria's Christian-Muslim encounter is driven by geography and eons of human migrations. The Middle Belt roughly coincides with the edge of Africa's dry north and the beginning of the sub-Saharan jungle. Most of Africa's roughly 400 million Muslims live to the north of this line, and the majority of the continent's more than 300 million Christians live to its south.

The patterns emerging along the line, especially in Nigeria, raise unnerving questions. Is the current violence a harbinger of the future relations between Christianity and Islam? Is this what will happen in places where swelling populations clash over land, water, oil and political power?

In Nigeria, as in some other countries where Christians and Muslims collide, religious difference has contributed to longstanding fights over who has the right to land, education and basic services. In some neighborhoods of the Middle Belt capital of Jos, religious identity—whether you're a Christian or a Muslim—even determines whether your community gets electricity or running water.

These are the kinds of rights and services that a state usually ensures. But Nigeria is one of the world's most corrupt democracies. Although Nigeria is America's fifth-largest supplier of oil, the massive influx of petrodollars into the country doesn't

reach most Nigerians. Most of the people lack clean water and medical care. They turn to their respective religions to guarantee their basic rights. Religious groups serve as voting blocs or pressure groups—organizations that in practical ways help members survive.

Paradoxically, democracy has intensified the troubles between the two faith groups. There is no such thing as a free and fair election in Nigeria, where democracy is less about freedom than about survival. Imagine how divisive politics would be in the United States if a Democratic or a Republican victory meant the difference for the party faithful between being able to drink the tap water or not.

Since the end of military rule in 1999, religion has become a rallying cry in a fierce competition for political power. Frequently, secular events trigger these skirmishes, and global conflagrations sometimes have local impact. For instance, following the 2001 U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, violence broke out when local Muslims were convinced that America and the world's Christians had gone to war against their brethren.

Riots also broke out over the 2002 Miss World competition that was slated to be held in Nigeria (it was later moved to London). Referring to opposition to the contest by Nigerian Muslims, a Christian journalist named Isioma Daniel wrote: "The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring 92 women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Muhammad think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them." That last comment triggered riots that left more than 200 dead and 1,000 injured, while 11,000 people were made homeless.

After the 2006 publication in Denmark of cartoons that, among other controversial images, depicted the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb on his head, riots ensued in many places with Muslim populations, especially in Nigeria, where more than 100 people were killed.

"When the West sneezes, Africa catches the cold," Pastor James remarked to me. Global conflicts lead to local troubles. When a Florida pastor claims that he's going to burn copies of the Qur'an, the people who suffer are Christians in the Global South. These believers, many of whom are members of ethnic minorities, often become scapegoats for the perceived sins of the West, which is identified as Christian. When people in the West proclaim that they're at war with Islam, then Christians in Africa and other parts of the Global South become the enemies of their

Muslim neighbors, too. That's how global contagion works, and it's why, thanks to the ever more powerful airwaves, we in the West need to be careful about how we talk.

In Nigeria and elsewhere, what seem to be religious grievances almost always have secular causes underlying them. Yet I have often been silenced by the eloquence with which people speak of their experiences with God. People even pray to keep their cars safe in the absence of auto insurance. Suffering brings people in daily contact with the divine.

One morning when I visited Peace Hall, I found Pastor James standing with a group of Christian and Muslim women who were tinkering with some very newfangled hardware—which turned out to be stoves. The din was near-deafening as the women turned the knobs and peered at what looked like space-age camp equipment.

One of the things that Christians and Muslims wrestle over in Nigeria is firewood. Despite the country's vast deposits of oil, wood remains the cheapest source of fuel for many people. But in the north especially, little wood remains. Children have to walk for miles to fetch enough scraps of wood for their mothers to cook each day.

Religion is woven into this conflict over resources. The two faith groups see one another as the enemy in a race for wood. So Pastor James is piloting a program that brings Christians and Muslims together to share stoves—and thereby help ensure each other's survival.

This program is one of the strongest and simplest examples of interfaith work I've ever seen. The project has succeeded because it introduces a third element into the equation—in this case, stoves. The project also focuses on women, who are both less likely than men to commit violent acts and more committed to safeguarding resources for their children.

In many cases, it's the Christian and Muslim women who are the region's main breadwinners. For them, cooking isn't simply a means to feed their families; selling food on the street is a ready business for them. But fuel is expensive. The women spend roughly a dollar a day acquiring enough fuel to cook. The shiny stoves in Peace Hall cost about \$200 each. They pay for themselves in less than a year, but the price is still steep.

I've often thought of these women squatting on the floor of Peace Hall while Pastor James stood among them, wondering how to distribute the stoves and if the women would ever be able to pay for them.

Recently I checked in with him to find out how the pilot program was going. Very well, he wrote back. The price of the stoves had been cut in half through negotiations, so now one costs only about \$97. And the group had begun to extend its work beyond Kaduna, which was still at peace, and into the larger area of the Middle Belt, where some the worst conflicts have taken place.

Pastor James also wrote that the women had come up with a name for their collective—one that had nothing to do with either religion and made it clear that their efforts were focused on the environment. These Christians and Muslims working together call themselves the Green Women.