

Pastor engages interfaith leaders to resist extremism in Nigeria

Abare Kallah is bringing together both Christians and Muslims harmed by Boko Haram.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [July 5, 2017](#) issue



Abare Kallah (left) and Soraya Deen. Photo by Celeste Kennel-Shank, *Christian Century*.

In northeastern Nigeria, devastated by the extremist group Boko Haram for eight years, it would be easy—understandable even—to see Christians as the only ones suffering.

Abare Kallah resists that temptation, even as militants have killed many of his fellow pastors, burned churches, and kidnapped hundreds of women and girls—infamously, the Chibok schoolgirls, most of whom are Christian. More than 100 of the girls remain captive as Kallah and others work for their release.

In all, Boko Haram has displaced more than 2.6 million people and murdered thousands, including Muslims who would not comply with its extremist version of Islam.

“I see conflict without any border,” Kallah said. “It affects the church, it affect the Muslims, it affects the larger community.”

For that reason, he wants to respond in a way that engages all people of faith in Gombe, the state where he lives, and to move beyond simply receiving relief materials.

Kallah is partnering with [the Omnia Institute for Contextual Leadership](#), an organization formerly called the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education. Omnia is now a global effort and is assisting Kallah in training clergy in northeast Nigeria to resist extremist ideologies and to see how their own theology may contribute to such thinking.

“Since the emergence of Boko Haram, the Christians and the Muslims have been fractured,” Kallah said during a recent visit to Chicago, where Omnia is based, to talk about the work he and Omnia are doing in Nigeria.

Both religions have extremist elements, with pastors sometimes making inciting statements and spreading false teachings, said Kallah, who is a leader in the largest denomination in northern Nigeria, the Evangelical Church Winning All.

Most clerics lack adequate education, he said. “They are so local they think that the world around them is all there is.”

To address this, Omnia offered an initial training event in March in Gombe, bringing together 400 government officials and religious leaders. Seventy imams, pastors, and lay leaders—men and women—spent four days learning peacebuilding skills. Participants have formed local interfaith groups to work on joint projects.

The second event for Omnia trainers will take place July 30–August 5. Thirty leaders from the first cohort will receive training in teaching these skills in their congregations, with Kallah continuing to work with them. A second cohort of 70 will receive basic training.

Kallah strives to correct harmful beliefs without attacking the person. For example, at a burial attended by thousands of Christian and Muslims, a pastor preached that all of those gathered were condemned to death unless they accept Christ as savior. Afterward, Kallah told the pastor, “You have preached well, but you need to observe some of these areas: one, read your audience any time you are speaking. We were

not in a church, we were in an open environment.”

Kallah asked the pastor to quote John 3:17, but the pastor could not. Kallah then reminded him that it proclaims that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Instead of pushing people away, the pastor could draw people closer, Kallah advised. “If you’re taking Jesus as your role model, then don’t look at somebody as a condemned person. Try to bring hope out of that person.”

In such ways, Kallah and others strive to heal divisions. The religious leaders who gathered for training in March had the chance to ask each other theological questions and then listen, said trainer Mohamed Elsanousi, who directs the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers in the Washington, D.C., office of Finn Church Aid.

“In the absence of such engagement, there is a lot of misconception and misunderstanding,” he said.

He guided the clergy in looking at their faiths side by side.

“I shared with them the importance of religious freedom in the Islamic faith,” Elsanousi said, “based on the prophetic tradition and the recently released document which is called [the Marrakesh Declaration](#), the Islamic theological foundation or basis for the right of minorities to practice their religion freely.”

The document was the fruit of [300 Muslim clerics and scholars meeting in January 2016 in Morocco](#) to revive the Prophet Muhammad’s Charter of Medina. The Nigerian leaders asked Elsanousi, who attended that meeting, why the 1,400-year-old charter was not widely in practice today. He explained the difference between what has evolved in various cultures and what is essential in the faith, and he encouraged them to examine their own culture.

“Unless we do similar engagement at the grassroots level like this, we will not be able to actually address the issues that we face,” he said.

Also at the March event in Gombe, Soraya Deen provided training in nonviolent communication. Deen, based in Los Angeles, is the founder of the Muslim Women Speakers Movement and cofounder of the interfaith effort Peace Moms. One exercise involved looking at images of people and learning how we make assumptions about

a person's emotions—such as thinking someone is angry when they may not be. She told participants to “find your heart before you find your voice.”

She also met with Muslim women, encouraging them to read scripture and study theology for themselves. In late July she is convening a women's conference, inviting Nigerian activists to share their struggles. “Our stories can change policy,” she said.

During her previous visit to northern Nigeria, she was struck by the abject poverty. “We can't just do interfaith dialogue without economic justice,” she said. “We have to solve this problem from many fronts.”

Kallah also stresses the need to address the high rate of youth unemployment and is seeking partners to teach entrepreneurship to youth, which will lessen their vulnerability to recruitment by extremists.

Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari has had military victories against Boko Haram, but his soldiers have been accused of human rights abuses. Similar allegations haunt him from his time as military dictator in the mid-1980s.

When he was elected president in 2015, his running mate was Yemi Osinbajo, a pastor in Nigeria's largest Pentecostal movement, the Redeemed Christian Church of God. In June, local news reported that Osinbajo and other Christians joined Muslims for iftar, the meal breaking Ramadan fasting, telling the gathering, “Any time people operate along the law of unity, they will achieve more.”

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