

Nigeria's Christians Risk Death to Evangelize Muslim-Controlled North

Church leaders in the nation say Muslim radicals want to rid Nigeria completely of Christian influence

Knowing they could face torture or death, hundreds of Nigerian Christians attending a leadership conference in early January knelt in front of a massive stage and told God they were willing to take the gospel into hostile Muslim regions of their divided nation.

"The hour has come for Nigeria, Africa and the world to recognize Him as their God!" shouted Mosy Madugba, organizer of Global PrayerQuake 2003, an event that attracted more than 8,000 church leaders to an indoor sports arena in the Nigerian city of Port Harcourt. During six days of training, attendees focused on how to share Christ with Muslims, who are currently fighting for control of the northern half of Africa's most populous nation.

Although some of the world's largest churches are in southern Nigeria, 12 of the 19 states in the north have imposed Shariah, or Islamic law. In recent years, Muslims have gone on bloody rampages, killing thousands of Christians, burning churches and even slitting the throats of children gathered for Sunday school.

In March 2000, an estimated 5,000 Christians died, and 356 churches were torched during one weekend riot in the northern state of Kaduna.

"Islam is trying very hard to win our cities," declared Steve Olumuyiwa, one of more than a dozen Nigerian evangelists who addressed the Port Harcourt conference. "Hundreds of Muslims gather in the streets of our cities, chanting from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. We must take on this challenge."

On the last day of the conference, held Jan. 5-10, former Muslim occultist Isa El-Buba knelt on a Nigerian flag and dedicated the nation to Jesus Christ as thousands cheered from the rafters of the cavernous arena. He was joined on the platform by another Nigerian evangelist, Abu Bako, who was forced to flee to nearby Ghana a few years ago after Muslims marked him for assassination.

Shaba Adams, who also preaches in the north, told Charisma that Christians in southern Nigeria are paralyzed by a materialistic gospel. He is calling them to awaken to the threat of Islam before it is too late. While pastors are being beheaded and disemboweled by Islamic radicals in the north, believers in the south are "just thinking of themselves," Adams said.

Based in the northern city of Jos, Adams told Charisma the international community must face the grim reality of a growing Muslim threat. "Where are the Christian lawyers? Where are the Christian journalists? We need people to be advocates for us," he said.

Although Nigeria has a Christian president, Muslims in the north hold on to political power at the state level and reportedly receive aid covertly from the governments of Libya and Saudi Arabia. Islamic mercenaries from Chad and Niger frequently participate in armed raids in cities such as Kaduna and Kano, and al-Qaida operatives also have been active there,

pastors said.

Lagos-based pastor Ladi Thompson said Muslims “believe they will completely Islamize Nigeria.” As founder of an activist organization called The Macedonian Initiative, Thompson is raising awareness of the threat both in his nation and abroad, partly because he believes local media outlets have been influenced by Muslims in the north.

Thompson’s work in Nigeria is groundbreaking because there are so few Christians addressing human-rights abuses that have occurred in the north. The Macedonian Initiative () is rebuilding burned churches, placing orphaned Christian children in families, and aiding a group of 11 nurses from Bauchi state who recently lost their jobs because they refused to wear Muslim clothing at work.

Soon, Thompson said, he plans to exhume the bodies of Christians who were slaughtered by Muslim mobs and buried in unmarked mass graves. He hopes to document a holocaust that most people don’t know about.

“The Western world has been blind to the threat that Islam represents,” Thompson said. “Nothing has prepared us for the challenge we face.”

J. Lee Grady in Port Harcourt, Nigeria