

Appendix 42:

We Reject Violence Against Christians
The Light Bearer

April, 2006

by Rev. Dr. Pandang Yamsat

World Press Conference

Gentlemen of the Mass Media,

Who We Are

The Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) was established through the dexterous and sacrificial service of four British missionaries under the then Sudan United Mission (SUM), now Action Partners, who came to Nigeria in 1904 and pitched their first station at the foot of the famous and imposing Wase Rock in Plateau State on October 8 of the same year. The team was led by Dr. Karl Kumm, and Ambrose Bateman, John Burt and Lowry Maxwell belonged to the team.

Through the mustard seed that was planted in Wase, though without success in that town, God has faithfully watered it into a formidable church that is today well established covering 26 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. COCIN is being founded in Benin, Niger and Chad, Republics.

The church runs a holistic ministry, which includes evangelism, missions, education, health services, rural development, HIV/AIDS care and the most recent, COCIN Economic Empowerment Programme. Thus COCIN has 12 secondary schools, dozens of primary and nursery schools, 12 theological institutions, a university in the pipeline and several hospitals and health centres.

We also hereby state that the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), as an evangelical denomination has no doctrinal resemblance whatsoever with another grouping called: the Church of Christ.

About This Conference

Gentlemen of the Media, it has become necessary to address you today in view of the recent happenings in our dear country, Nigeria, as far as its religious countenance is concerned. We are doing this consistent with the approach long adopted by the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) and in line with the democratic spirit that has come to stay in our dear country. The silence of Christians over unprovoked attacks on us is such that it is sin and no longer patience. To speak out against acts that have always targeted at Christians in Nigeria to suffer grief and losses as if they are second-class citizens in the land of their birth, or as if they are responsible for all the problems Muslims face in the world should be seen as a duty for even the good of Muslims of this country.

We therefore wish to state unequivocally that COCIN is not holding this press conference on behalf of other churches in Nigeria, but on her own right because we are fully convinced it is God's will for us to do so.

Just A Brief Review

A careful look at the history of religiously-induced riots in Nigeria shows that from 1956 till date, we have had about 44 so far. In all of these, Christians have been at the receiving end. There is also no doubt that from the re-introduction of democratic governance in 1999, religiously-inspired violence has markedly intensified, the most obvious and longest running being the destruction of lives and property that followed the introduction of sharia law in Zamfara in October, 1999. In just seven years of democratic rule, there have been at least nineteen (19) religiously-induced violence against Christians in the northern states of Nigeria!

The analysis too shows that reasons for unprovoked attacks on people who are non-Muslims range from intolerance over a Palm Sunday procession, display of the Christian Cross, students' union government elections to Miss World and now a cartoon.

In all these, there has been unparalleled loss of lives and property, not to talk of the settled uneasy calm and deep suspicion among practitioners of the two main religions, Islam and Christianity.

The Maiduguri, Potiskum, Bauchi and Kontagora Mayhem

Gentlemen of the Mass Media, the worst form of violence on Christians in Nigeria occurred in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital on Saturday, February 18, 2006. In one fell swoop, two families had twelve of their children and a mother burnt alive when their houses were set ablaze with them right inside. Indeed, in the case of the seven children of Mr. Joseph Tukwa in Bolori, the attackers stood at the door with machetes and other dangerous weapons ready to send the children back into the inferno anytime they attempted to come out.

A Catholic priest who did not believe that violence was his lot was quickly relieved of his life and his body set ablaze.

From our statistics, over 50 Christians were killed; dozens wounded and over 30 churches, residences of ministers and other church property burnt completely, with some also looted.

In all, at least 14 denominations were affected. COCIN, our own denomination, lost six church buildings, five houses of pastors, a generator and vehicles. Many houses of Christians were looted and burnt. Their businesses were thoroughly looted and what could not be taken away was set on fire. Once again, Christians found themselves displaced by a conflict they had neither participated nor instigated in the first place.

What Was The Problem In Maiduguri?

Those who were eyewitnesses reported that there was a demonstration by Muslims who were protesting the infamous caricature of the Prophet Mohammed in far away Denmark by a newspaper.

We make bold to ask: what has Denmark got to do with Nigeria's Christians? What has a cartoon in a secular newspaper in common with the practice of Christianity in Nigeria? What was the sin of Christians in Maiduguri that they had to go through that unprovoked bloodletting? To make it worse, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Borno had condemned the cartoon in support of Muslims, yet they suffered destruction by the same Muslims! Are we to believe that support for Muslims' cause cannot even save Christians from their attack? Are we truly to believe the Hausa slogan which says, *Sabuwa da kaza ba ya hana yanka?* Are we to say that the good effort of the Plateau, Kaduna and Bauchi States governors who set up Inter-religious Councils will yield no meaningful results?

Bauchi

In almost quick succession, Bauchi answered, where about 20 people were killed, dozens wounded and churches, businesses and houses of Christians looted and burnt. In some cases, the property of Christians was thrown into wells, while they themselves had to take refuge in police and military barracks.

Potiskum

Potiskum in Yobe State also joined in the orgy by destroying nine churches and shops of Christians as well as killing and wounding many believers.

Kontagora

Kontagora in Niger State also showed intolerance towards Christians with the burning of 15 churches, one belonging to COCIN, and killing a Christian.

We have observed that in all these unprovoked attacks, there have been deliberate attempts to not only wipe off anything that has to do with Christians and their faith, but also that whoever survives will be economically deprived through the destruction of their business. So, for the Christians, it will be: No church; no worship, no home and no business.

Response By The State

The Maiduguri and Bauchi crises once again underline the age-long feebleness with which tragedies of this nature are sometimes handled. For example, victims of the Maiduguri mayhem have disclosed that for the four hours that the mobs held sway, there was not a single policeman in sight. We find this unacceptable and inexcusable.

Other well-known government responses are: the setting up of investigating committees; promises to rehabilitate victims and the payment of compensations to the victims.

But we ask: how much can the states compensate for lives lost, wounds sustained, businesses dislocated and peace shattered? How much can the states compensate for the injustice done against a people who are traumatized over issues they know nothing about? How much can be given to Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Tukwa and the family in Gwange who lost their 12 children in the fires ignited in their homes by these mobs?

Besides the fact that compensations can never restore lives taken or build absolute trust, promises to pay compensations have always largely been unfulfilled. Most often too, reports of such committees are never implemented and the ground is once again laid for the next tragedy.

The fact that nothing is usually done with these reports shows that these attacks are but calculated attempts to reduce the population of Christians in this country by Muslims even by those of them who are governors. This is clear by the declaration of Sharia Law in states governed by Muslims.

We are looking up to the chief securities and accounting officers of the Sharia states in the North to give Christians equal rights as Muslims have in such states. The fact that these governments and previous ones have not, for example, permitted the teaching of Christian Religious Knowledge and programmes in their schools, television and radio stations says a lot about the position of their governments on Christianity and Christians.

It is this cold attitude towards Christians and their activities that has often developed into these terrible, sad and barbaric killing of Christians in such states, for no wrong committed against them by Christians.

The crucial question is, how has the latest violence helped to resolve the problem of the “Denmark Cartoon” as perceived by Muslims?

Our Conviction On The Way Forward

Gentlemen of the Mass Media, what has happened has already happened, unfortunate as it was. However, we in COCIN owe this nation the duty to further prick the conscience of Nigeria and call for collective action to make this country safer for all peoples and all religions.

COCIN is therefore placing the following before the federal, state and local authorities, as well as religious and community leaders and people of goodwill:

1. The Federal Government should set up a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the crises in Maiduguri, Bauchi, Kontagora, Potiskum, Katsina, Enugu and Onitsha;

2. The Federal Government should set up a special committee to look at the security lapses, as recorded in Borno, for example.

3. The governments concerned should urgently compensate those who lost their houses and business so as to reduce unemployment and frustration, while places of worship should be rebuilt with state funds;

4. Faithful prosecution of those arrested as well as those found to be involved in the crises by governments of the states concerned;

5. We reject the well-rehearsed cliché that such violence against Christians is perpetrated by “miscreants and hoodlums,” or “political opponents.” This is escapist, deceptive and always a way not to take concrete action against perpetrators who in all cases are known. Governments where Christians are attacked must always be bold and sincere enough to call a spade a spade and act with the fear of God in their hearts.

6. COCIN also rejects the assertion concocted and promoted by some religious and political leaders and as reported by the media that the attacks against Christians were purely political or mere reactions at a cartoon of the prophet. For if it were political, these violent reactions would have been directed against government establishments, politicians, party offices, the embassy and interests of Denmark as well as people generally. But this was not the case, as Christians and their interests were exclusively the targets of these attacks as in similar reactions in the past.

7. Islamic leaders should carry out a radical and effective re-orientation of their members and even some of their teachers, to let them know and imbibe the age-long traditional and modern ways of responding to crises affecting their faith rather than using violence. And they should not only condemn the act of violence by their adherents but come out to show publicly that they are against it by coming out to stop the perpetrators of violence from among their followers;

8. All religious leaders should not allow politicians to play politics with religion, and political leaders should always prosecute the religious body that initiates or sponsors any attack rather than see all religions as guilty;

9. State governors whose population have low levels of tolerance towards Christians should always provide adequate security for the Christians feeling threatened;

10. Freedom of religion should be adequately promoted and safeguarded by all Sharia states by the Federal Government through ensuring the

provision of land to build churches, broadcast of Christian programmes in all State Media and the teaching of Christian Religious Knowledge in schools.

Gentlemen of the Mass Media, we are convinced that in this dear country of ours, there is sufficient space for everybody. It is not to anybody's long-term good to make Christians feel they do not belong here or are second-class citizens.

COCIN will continue to pray for the peace and progress of this nation and its leaders as well as uphold the laws of the land to enable all of us to practice our faith in peace, Muslims, Christians and etc.

We hope that political and security leaders will play their own roles faithfully too. We in COCIN are committed to do our part, as commanded in our Holy Scripture.

Thank you very much and may God bless you all. Amen.

(Text of a World Press Conference addressed by the President, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), Rev. Dr. Pandang Yamsat, on Friday, March 17, 2006, at the COCIN Headquarters Church.)