


Missiological response to the effects of Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria

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Since the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the country has witnessed diverse forms of violence, terrorism attacks, kidnapping and banditry, among others. The activities of Boko Haram have led to the loss of lives and properties, and displacement of people from their ancestral homes. People have lost their source of livelihood, family members and loved ones. This article provides the church's response to the insurgency activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria from a missiological perspective. The study adopted the descriptive research design to gather the needed information. The primary data were gathered through interviews with some identified pastors currently serving in Northern Nigeria. Moreover, secondary data were gathered from books and journals about the examined topic. The effects of the insurgency, as discussed in the article, are socio-political, educational, economic and religious.

Contribution: Missiological responses discussed in the article include friendship evangelism, one-on-one evangelism, children evangelism and diaspora ministry. The article concludes with some recommendations, among which are continuous battle in the place of prayer, unrelenting and strategic evangelism in the North, among others.

Keywords: missiological; insurgency; Boko Haram; Northern Nigeria; Islamic fundamentalism; religious crises; friendship evangelism; diaspora ministry; children evangelism.

Introduction

Islamic fundamentalism, which promotes jihad and terrorism, varies from country to country, but with one overriding purpose of all in Allah's name for Islam's sake. Nigeria, as a country, has had its share of the activities of these Islamic fundamentalists, with Boko Haram as the major sect creating various forms of havoc in the country, with their operation more rampant in the northern part of the country. The emergence and activities of the Boko Haram have caused devastating damage to virtually every aspect of the populace's life in the northern part of Nigeria, which the church cannot overlook but address.

Against this background, this article examines the emergence of Boko Haram, considering their beliefs and practices. It also discusses the effects of their activities on the socio-political, economic, educational and religious life in Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, the article discusses the missiological response to the Boko Haram insurgency and its effects. It also provides recommendations and concludes with a summary of the study.

Overview of Boko Haram insurgency

In modern times, the 'Muslim world found itself on the defensive whenever it came into contact with Christian power, political or commercial' (Hiro 1989:3); hence, diverse Islamic fundamentalist groups have emerged over the years in this contemporary world. These include: Al-Qaida in Iraq; al-Shabaab (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen) in Somalia, East and Central Africa; Taliban in Afghanistan; ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province) and Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, which is the focus of this article.

Nigeria has had its share of various Islamic-influenced religious crises. However, the emergence of Boko Haram has opened up a new phase of crisis as it plunged into a full-fledged fundamentalist movement in the country. The group came to the limelight at the dawn of the 21st century, around the same period when the nation returned to the democratic form of governance. Andrew Walker (2012:3) traced the origin of Boko Haram to a group of radical Islamist youth worshipping at the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri at the dawn of the century. He further submits that by 2002, when they were yet to be known as Boko Haram, a section of this youth group declared that both the government and the Islamic

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establishment were intolerably corrupt and irredeemable. They embarked on hijra, moving from Maiduguri to a village called Kanama in Yobe state, along the Nigeria-Niger border. They set up a separatist community run on hard-line Islamic principles under the leadership of Mohammed Ali. The group had a conflict with the police in December 2003 that lasted into the New Year of 2004 as the army besieged their mosque; this led to the death of their leader, Mohammed Ali, and 70 others (Walker 2012).

Boko Haram means, 'Western education is forbidden', which by implication condemns Western education and all associated with it, such as Christianity, civilisation and democracy, among others. The group members operate under cover and are bent on ensuring that Christianity gives way to Islam. In contrast, democracy, on the other hand, gives way to Sharia (Akanji 2013:26). Meagher (2014:1) notes that economic marginalisation, failure of governance, extremist operations and security failures are the four factors behind the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. The economic factor is traceable to poverty, unemployment and extreme inequality between the northern and southern parts of Nigeria. At the same time, the failure of governance is being manipulated through national religious polarisation instigated by the political elites. At the base of Northern Nigerian society are poverty, unemployment and rapid rural-urban migration. In addition, millions of traditional itinerant Koranic students are increasingly being subjected to deprivation and neglect (Meagher 2014:1–2). All of this has laid the foundation of a breeding ground for ready-made recruits into the Boko Haram sect.

Boko Haram initially came into existence as a protest against poor governance and corrupt practices of the northern leaders, which the movement tried to curb through their demand for an Islamic state that strictly adheres to Sharia law. However, the group's cause changed into a terrorist movement in 2009, when their charismatic founder, Mohammed Yusuf, died in police custody, and 700 of his followers were killed in a clash with the police that same year. Moreover, the movement became a more aggressive terrorist organisation in 2010 under its new leader, Abubakar Shekau, as more violent attacks on churches, schools, bars and Muslim critics were supported with new tactics such as kidnapping and suicide bombing (Meagher (2014:2–3).

Thurston (2016:5) submits that the ideology of Boko Haram is viewed from two perspectives: that it is opposed to democracy and that it rejects the Western form of education. Furthermore, their theology goes beyond politics and hatred for Western influence, and it encompasses religious exclusivism. Its violent practices are claimed to be a response to the decades-long history of persecution against Muslims in Nigeria. Boko Haram, hence, is the Nigerian jihadi group that pledged allegiance to the Islamic state (Thurston 2016:5–6). Therefore, politics, rejection of Western education and religious exclusivism are vital issues in the ideology of Boko Haram.

In Nigeria, the initial central tenet of Boko Haram is the fight against western education. However, the fight has gone beyond

the fight against education; it has become political, and the search for Islamic dominance has, over the years, been incorporated.

In their *modus operandi*, they target and attack churches, government buildings and security agencies such as barracks, police stations and prisons. National and international government assets, such as the national police headquarters and the United Nations building, both in Abuja, were bombed, leading to the loss of lives and properties (Akanji 2013:26). In addition, Boko Haram's leaders have consistently used religious rhetoric to explain the campaign of violence and justify the sect's brutality, score-settling and provocations. The religious messages of these leaders have greater appeal than is often assumed (Thurston 2016:6). Hence, their followers accept and follow their teachings.

Walker (2012) asserts that Boko Haram is an Islamic sect that believes a group of corrupt, false Muslims has seized politics in Northern Nigeria. It wants to fight them and the Nigerian government and create a 'pure' Islamic state ruled by Sharia law (Walker 2012:1). Before the return to democracy in 1999, Sanusi (2007:177) states that 'for the more significant part of Nigeria's history, and particularly during the long period of military rule, the nation had been ruled majorly by Muslim officers of the northern extraction.'

From 2011, Boko Haram activities became violent and destructive, with the bombing of public places and churches in the Northeast almost weekly and various attacks on schools (Walker 2012:1). Boko Haram operates as a 'state within a state', with its cabinet and religious police, and it runs a large farm. Although the group's financial source is not ascertained, there were claims that the group receives donations from some wealthy people within and outside the country. They also robbed banks, cash-in-transit convoys and successful businesses in Maiduguri and Bauchi, their stronghold, claiming that the Quran permitted them to do so, as their loot is considered the spoils of war (Walker 2012:3,5).

They attack and kill anyone who criticises their hard-line ideology and operation; an example was the killing of Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmoud Adam, a regular preacher at the Ndimi mosque in Maiduguri, who was assassinated in Kano. Their activities are felt all across the North, as cases of attacks, bombings, kidnappings and killing of Muslim and Christian civilians indiscriminately are recorded across the three geo-political zones in the North, with states such as Bauchi, Yobe, Borno and Plateau being the most affected. Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, was also not left out (Walker 2012:3–4). Boko Haram's operation has gone beyond the fight against Western education; it has become political, and the search for Islamic dominance has, over the years, been incorporated.

Effects of Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria

The emergence and activities of the Boko Haram sect have caused devastating damage to virtually every aspect of the

populace's life in Northern Nigeria. In this section, the insurgency's socio-political, educational, economic and religious effects will be examined.

Socio-political effects

The Boko Haram insurgency has taken its toll on the socio-political structure of Northern Nigeria, particularly in the Northeast of the country. Agbiboa (2022:3) submits that following the intensified offensive attacks of the military against Boko Haram, thousands of Nigerians have fled to the neighbouring countries of Cameroon and Chad. Many are living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, while some others have relocated to neighbouring states. Prior to the current insurgency, Ovaga (2012:33) submits that there has been peaceful co-existence among Muslims, Christians and other religious adherents. Unfortunately, the Boko Haram insurgency has brought disintegration, discrimination and a lack of trust among relations. According to Luka Waneye (pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 07 May 2022), across the northern region, Muslims are no longer comfortably discussing family issues with their Christian brothers and sisters. Family and social ties among relatives and neighbours are now being broken, and there is acrimony and suspicions among people who have lived together for ages. The family structure has been significantly affected, as many families are no longer complete, and some now have to live with the trauma of losing their loved ones.

Educational effects

Education in the hands of the missionaries assumed a wide range of roles (Sanneh 1983:127), and it had been a means of transforming the African society (Agbeti 1996:147) of the 20th century, with the effect being felt in Nigeria as a country. However, since the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria at the dawn of the 21st century, the education sector has significantly been affected by the kidnapping of school children and various attacks on primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Walker affirms that schools were set on fire, as 12 public schools were burned down during the night in Maiduguri in March 2012, and as many as 10000 pupils were forced to quit schooling (Walker 2012:1). This has led to the shutdown of some schools, students abandoning their education and some kidnapped students still being held captive after many years. One of such instance is of the Chibok girls kidnapped in April 2014, where 276 girls were kidnapped and only 194 girls were rescued, while the parents of remaining 82 girls are still waiting for their return till date.

Olagoke (pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 04 May 2022), in an interview conducted by this researcher, submits that the effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on education is evident as schools are closing down, particularly those in the rural areas and on the outskirts of the towns and cities. Furthermore, boarding schools are becoming a thing of the past because of the fear of kidnapping of students and staff.

The school operational system has also been affected, as schools can be closed at will without prior notification. Sometimes, school hours have been reduced to allow pupils and students to return home before dark. Olagoke further affirmed that in Kaduna state, schools are presently open from Monday to Thursday:

[F]or fear of being attacked, northern parents are no longer eager to register their children in most schools in the North. That is why parents of northern origin are sending their children and wards down to the southern parts of this country for their education. (Ovaga 2012:33)

In contrast, southerners are also unwilling to send their children to the north for education.

Religious effects

The writer is aware that the Boko Haram insurgency has had devastating effects on both Christianity and Islam in Northern Nigeria; however, writing from a Christian perspective, the writer gives more attention to the effect of this sect on Christianity. The introduction of Shari'a law in 12 out of 19 northern states in Nigeria in the year 2000 led to a new dimension to the persecution of Christians in the affected areas, as they are being subjected to live under Islamic rules. This development provided a suitable environment for the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency, which is now fighting for an Islamic state in Nigeria. There are massive killings of Christians, bombing and destruction of church buildings, and many other acts of violence (Gaiya 2004:77-78).

To this end, Akanji (2013:30) submits that the group's continuous killing of Christians and various attacks on them and their churches in Yobe, Borno Plateau, and other northern states are detrimental to the Church as Christians are practically moving out of the northern cities to other parts of the countries. He further notes that some Christians are returning to traditional religion to seek power for protection. In many northern states, several churches have closed down, and Christians have fled; in some other communities, Christians are forced to convert to Islam if they desire to remain. Many are afraid of going to church, going out for evangelism is more or less a suicide mission, and all-night prayer is becoming a thing of the past, as the sound of worship at night could easily attract the terrorists (Akanji 2013). All these are seen as indications that Christianity is at the receiving end of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria.

Buttressing the state of Christianity in Northern Nigeria, Olagoke, among others, in an interview conducted by this researcher, submits that the Boko Haram insurgency affects both Islam and Christianity, with the latter being the most affected. He noted that in some villages such as Maiginya in Igabe Local Government of Kaduna state, among others, both the churches and the mosques could no longer hold worship

services as they have been deserted because of incessant attacks. Furthermore, in a Baptist association in Kaduna state, six Baptist churches have been closed down because the people have been displaced, and association meetings and fellowships could no longer be moved around, particularly to the villages, and this is a trend across the North (Olagoke, pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 04 May 2022). Luka Waneye also echoed Olagoke's submission; he added that rural evangelism is almost becoming impossible, and social ministries are also affected. To worsen the situation, the bandits have taken over places of worship (Luka Waneye, pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 07 May 2022). Careful observation of all these activities shows that Christians and Christian communities in Northern Nigeria are living in danger.

Economic effects

Economically, teachers and some others, such as food vendors whose means of livelihood are attached to educational sectors, have lost their means of livelihood, thereby making life difficult for them and all those who depend on them. Traders who carry their goods to the villages and surrounding settlements cannot move freely to sell their goods. Farmers have lost their farms and produce as they can no longer work freely on their farms (Olagoke, pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 04 May 2022). The resultant effect is that more people are being pushed into poverty, and there is food scarcity and an increase in food prices.

Missiological response to the challenges of Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria

Having looked at the effect of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria on the social, economic, educational and religious structure, the church cannot carry guns and go to fight the insurgency. However, the church cannot afford to be passive and continue to be at the receiving end. Hence, the writer offers a missiological response to the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents, for the Church in Nigeria must continue to have faith in the Lord without giving up.

Friendship evangelism

Friendship evangelism is an effective means of reaching the world with the gospel of Christ. Affirming this, Daryl Donovan asserts that the most effective means of reaching the world is reaching out to those nearest to someone. Moreover, Christians should be willing to build relationships with people who do not yet know Christ (Donovan 1998:187). Christians can make friends with non-Christians, and by their Christ-like attitudes and interaction, their unbelieving friends can see them as far better friends. People's biggest problem is not the absence of a friend but a true friend who is loving, honest and gentle (Sanusi 2007:173). The writer believes Christians should be loving, honest and gentle friends to their neighbours, through which they can show Christ to the world.

Christians should make friends with unbelievers 'because they are made in God's image. Nevertheless, we must be careful. The pursuit of friendships in the world should not be at the detriment of basic and important scriptural principles' (Menikoff 2018:3). The writer, therefore, is of the view that Christians living among the Muslims, whether in the North or any part of Nigeria, should not relent in making friends with their neighbours.

To rescue the lost, one has to get close to them and be involved in their lives. It requires an intentional sacrifice in today's busy world and takes time to achieve. It is not easy to rescue people without being intentional about it. Therefore, effectively reaching people for Christ requires friendship by entering their world, as Jesus did, as evident in his interaction with the lost people of his time (Menikoff 2018). Friendship evangelism is a competent missionary approach to evangelising any group of people.

One-on-one evangelism

As much as it is difficult and unadvisable for one to venture into the camp of Boko Haram to go and evangelise them, the church should not relent in reaching out to the unsaved individuals in Northern Nigeria, for by so doing, they are carrying out the mandate of the Master. When men are converted and discipled, the kingdom of darkness will be depopulated, and this will help reduce the number of people who might be potential recruits for Boko Haram and its related activities. Adekunle submits that the problem of Boko Haram and other vices in present-day Nigeria 'is because those involved in all these vices are yet to be reached by the missionaries and therefore, they did not have Christ in their lives' (Adekunle 2021:19). When an individual comes to Christ, his or her life will never remain the same. It is a reality that crusades and other public religious gatherings are becoming target spots for an attack by terrorist groups; this calls for the church to seek better strategies for reaching the Northerners for Christ through one-on-one evangelism.

Children evangelism

The practice of Almajiri in Northern Nigeria, where children are left on the street to cater for themselves, has provided a breeding ground for potential terrorists. Hence, the church should proactively reach the Northern Nigerian children with the gospel, education and care, and take the children away from the street. In this context, Foluke Ola (2013) states that:

In some cases, the church must become 'the parent' taking care of children in its locality. There may be the need to cook for street children who have nowhere to live, provide health care for sick kids, and a shoulder to lean on for children in need of counselling. Provide schools that parents can 'afford' to send their children to. The church needs to invest in child evangelism. (p. 41)

The children of yesterday are today's adults; similarly children under the age of 12 years now will increase the percentage of adults in the next 10–15 years. If they are

educated, reached with the gospel now and raised as Christians, then the church would have been able to reduce the potential future recruitments into Islamic fundamentalists.

Diaspora ministry

Diaspora ministry is another potent missiological response to the effects of the Boko Haram insurgency. Carefully observing today's society shows that many people from Northern Nigeria, mainly the uneducated, are trooping towards the South for employment. While some serve in the city as security men, others get involved in petty trading, and many others are in the villages serving as labourers on farms. Ortiz noted that we are finding the world in our neighbourhoods, for God is intentionally bringing the people to the city so that the gospel of Christ can impact more people as the church reaches them right there in the city (Ortiz 2002:49).

Hence, churches in the South can begin to reach out to these people, disciple and train them, and they, in turn, will serve as missionaries and/or evangelists and church planters to their brothers and sisters. The writer knows that the Baptist denomination is already involved in this. They should intensify their effort, and others should key into this ministry opportunity, for the mission field is now with us in our urban centres.

Intensify our efforts in doing good

Apostle Peter instructed the early Christians, and by extension, Christians of all generations, to 'Be prepared to answer everyone who asks you to give the reason for your hope' (Pt 1 3:15 NIV). Similarly, he states, 'It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men' (Pt 1 2:15 NIV). Chapman relayed the story of a Christian organisation in Pakistan, as told by J. Dudley Woodberry, of how the Christian organisation imported thousands of sandals for children in a local Afghan refugee camp in Peshawar. However, beyond just giving out sandals, they first washed the feet and dressed the wounds of those children. A few months later, a teacher in a local grade school asked the pupils in her class, 'Who are the best Muslims?' To the question, a girl responded and said, 'The Kafirs', meaning 'the unbelievers'—referring to the Christians. The surprised teacher asked why the girl gave such a response. However, the girl responded again, 'The mujahidin killed my father, but the Kafirs washed my feet'. Truthful witnesses concerning Christ should be backed with loving actions that portray God's love in practical ways (Chapman 2017:128). The church should intensify its evangelism and social ministry in Northern Nigeria, both at the IDP camps and the destabilised communities.

Being courageous for the cause of Christ

In AD 107, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was arrested, and on his way to Rome, he wrote a letter to the Christians asking them not to use their interest to get him released. He was ready

to face death. He considered his suffering and death as an opportunity to share in Christ's suffering (Foster 1972:75). Revelation 12:11 says, 'And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto the death' (KJV). Christians in Northern Nigeria and beyond should remain courageous in the practice and defence of their faith. There is the assurance that God will grant the strength to stand firm when persecution comes.

Prayer and spiritual warfare

While the government is using military might and physical weapons to fight against the Boko Haram sect, the church, on the other hand, can back them up by engaging in spiritual battle, for the battle against the Boko Haram is beyond physical. Hence, the battle against the Boko Haram insurgency is spiritual, and the church must address it from the spiritual perspective, for the devil is always at work to ensure that he controls the world. Therefore, overcoming evil in the world requires God's help.

The church must battle in the place of prayer, for the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 10: 4–5 (NIV) that:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have the divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

In affirming the place of prayer and spiritual warfare in reaching the lost World, Carey, the father of modern mission, notes that the first and the most essential duty of all Christians in reaching the World for Christ is fervent and united prayer. With the coming together of the Christians in holy solicitude and prevailing prayers for God's kingdom on earth, not only will there be an open door for the gospel, but there will also be a mass conversion of souls, and knowledge of God will also increase (Carey 1992:101). The Church in Nigeria needs to unite in fervent prayer and fight this battle from the spiritual realm.

Security involvement

Churches must intentionally be security conscious, providing security during worship and educating their members on security issues. Retired and serving military personnel and police officers who are Christians should serve as a think-tank and guide the church in security matters. Waneye observes that the church has been silent for too long, and now is time to speak out with one voice and set up a security apparatus to defend themselves and their communities. Explaining this further, he narrated how forming some security apparatus has helped some communities to repel and overcome some attacks (Luka Waneye, pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 07 May 2022)

Buttressing this view, Olagoke corroborated the importance of setting up security posts for self-defence, not to launch attacks. He also narrated how some communities (particularly

Christian communities), with the support and backing of the church, have engaged and equipped the vigilante groups, whose leaders are usually ex-servicemen. When one of the heads of the vigilante group, an ex-serviceman, wanted to relocate for financial reasons, the church had to rally support for him, establish him and ensure he stayed back to continue to provide leadership and guidance for the vigilante group (Olagoke, pers. comm. [Ogbomoso, Oyo State], 04 May 2022). Another dimension to security is the use of technology, such as closed-circuit television, for surveillance, thereby making it easier for the church leadership and security personnel to monitor their surroundings. Hence, the church must intentionally be security conscious and engage its security architecture within itself.

Dialogue

Dialogue had been part of the Christian-Muslim relationship throughout church history; Jean-Marie Gaudoul, however, notes that it is becoming a new engagement between Christianity and Islam. He asserts that while some view dialogues as a break-away from the traditional concept of missions, others see it as just another way or name for missions. Furthermore, he states that dialogue introduces a new dimension of mutual relations, equality and partnership into the Christian approach to other religions. Dialogue stresses two significant elements: mutual relationship and exclusive reliance on God to change the hearts of people (Gaudoul 1984:333–334). In responding to the effects of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria, the Church should take the matter of inter-religious dialogue seriously. However, the writer is aware of various inter-religious activities and dialogues both at the local and national level, and it is therefore expedient that it should be sustained.

As a sovereign nation, Nigeria is a heterogeneous society comprising people of various cultural and religious beliefs. Hence, dialogue is an essential strategy for peaceful and harmonious co-existence among the people to curb the adverse effects of religious fanaticism, such as Boko Haram. However, evangelism and discipleship remain the mandate Christ gave the church, which must be pursued with all seriousness and commitment.

Conclusion

It is no longer a case of whether Christians will be persecuted or terrorised. However, as the church is confronted with the threat of possible elimination, the question is how to cope with the effects of religious extremists, terrorists and political oppressors. This article has, however, examined the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria and has established the fact that the effect has been devastating on virtually every aspect of life in Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, the article discussed the missiological response to the Boko Haram insurgency and proffered some recommendations. Furthermore, the writer proposes that future researchers can work on the long-term effectiveness of the proposed missiological responses.

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Author's contribution

A.O.A. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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