

# Learning to Love Boko Haram

## A Nigerian Peace Church Responds

by Peggy Gish

**In 2009, Boko Haram militants** entered Monica Dna's home in the middle of the night. Monica watched them behead her husband and slit the throats of two of her three sons. Then, turning to her, they slashed her left arm as she raised it in defense, cut her throat, and left her for dead.

A neighbor found her still alive and took her to the hospital. Six years later, after numerous operations to repair her throat and her arm, she needs still more surgery. She tells me, though, that dealing with the trauma of the attack and the loss of her husband and sons is harder than recovering physically. She manages to endure, she says, because of the strength she receives from Jesus. Much comfort and support has also come from other displaced widows and friends who have found a home in Jos, the town in central Nigeria where I met her.

Her story is one of thousands emerging from Nigeria, where more than 1.5 million people have been displaced by violence in areas subject to attacks by the Islamist militant organization Boko Haram. The group was first formed in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, as a movement opposed to government security forces and Western influence – boko haram is often translated as “Western education is forbidden.” In March 2015, the group's leader Abubakar Shekau formally pledged allegiance to ISIS, and since then Boko Haram's official name has been Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqīyyah – “West African Province” of the Islamic State. Around twenty thousand square miles of territory are under its control.

When the militants started appearing a decade ago, people here tell me, they would first enter towns claiming to be looking for a mosque to pray in. Soon after, they started giving out money to help Muslims develop their businesses; many took this money without understanding Boko Haram's goals. Next they attacked a few churches and individual Christians. With time they unveiled their plan of overthrowing the government and creating an Islamic state. In 2009, they launched a campaign of assassinations, bombings, and abductions targeting both Christians and non-cooperating Muslims, leading Nigeria's president in 2013 to declare a state of emergency in the three northeastern states – Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa – where the group is strongest.

In April 2014, Boko Haram gained the world's attention when it abducted 276 girls from their school in the town of Chibok in Borno. Of the abducted girls, 178 belong to Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN), the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Founded by American missionaries in 1923, EYN has since become the largest Christian denomination in northeastern Nigeria.

As a Brethren church, EYN belongs to the Anabaptist family of churches, which traces its roots to the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation and also includes the Amish, the Hutterites, the Mennonites, and the Bruderhof. A fundamental tenet of Anabaptism for almost five centuries has been Christian pacifism – a conviction for which Anabaptist churches have often paid dearly, targeted repeatedly for refusing to perform military service or to take up arms in self-defense during times of unrest.

EYN, as an African branch of this tradition, is now having its commitment to nonviolence tested like few Anabaptist churches have for centuries. Throughout 2013 and 2014, EYN congregations suffered heavily from Boko Haram violence. As of June 2015, over ten thousand EYN members have been killed, and more than 170,000 members, including 2,092 pastors and evangelists, have been displaced within Nigeria or in neighboring countries. Boko Haram has destroyed 278 church buildings and 1,674 preaching points. Of the denomination's fifty church districts, only seven are functioning. In October 2014, militants even destroyed EYN's national headquarters in Mubi, Adamawa, so the church set up temporary headquarters in the relative safety of Jos, where many displaced members have gathered.

Other Christians in Nigeria have responded to Boko Haram's violence by taking up arms against the group; some congregations have even formed militias. By contrast, EYN members have largely remained true to their nonviolent convictions. As their stories attest, this faithfulness despite persecution has allowed them to witness to the peace and forgiveness of Christ's way, even toward their enemies.

**In late March 2015**, I left my farm in southeast Ohio and arrived here in Jos as a representative of the Church of the Brethren in the United States. My task was to support the members and leadership of EYN in their crisis-response programs. Working in Palestine and Iraq with Christian Peacemaker Teams over the past thirteen years, I had experienced the terrible suffering of ordinary people in war and military occupation. Only six months earlier, in Iraq, I had listened to countless victims of the militant group ISIS share their horror and pain. Now my heart was broken open once more by those suffering similarly here in Nigeria.

Displaced families and individuals started coming in large numbers to Jos and other safer areas of Nigeria in the spring of 2014. When possible, they went to live with relatives. Still, thousands of once

self-reliant people ended up in displacement camps; others camped outside on the grounds of church buildings. The EYN denomination has bought land near Jos and Abuja, the national capital, in order to build temporary housing. In the meantime, many EYN families have opened their doors to the traumatized newcomers.

One such family is Janata and Markus Gamache, who currently care for fifty-two displaced people in their household. At night their living room is filled with women and young children sleeping on mats, while the older children sleep in the fenced-in yard and the men camp out under the trees. Most of the cooking is done in the back yard over a wood fire, in large pots resting on stones. Guests help with cooking, shopping, buying firewood, cleaning, household repairs, and working in the family's poultry business. Janata organizes the task force and sees that all the chores get done.

"Of course the work has increased," she says, weariness showing in her eyes. "We have to sanitize the rug and other parts of the house often to prevent illness. Buying all the food and supplies at an economical price, having seventeen children here, and sharing one bathroom are all challenging. When it gets too noisy in the evenings, I go outside, just to have a time of quiet." With some of the areas in the Northeast becoming more stable, Janata foresees her household gradually shrinking in numbers as some return home – but not very soon. "We have not been able to close our hearts to those in need," she says. "It's our Nigerian custom, but more importantly, it's what God asks of us: to care for people who have lost their homes and family and have nothing. And God is our main source of strength."

**For Musa Ishaku Indawa**, an EYN member now living near the Cameroon border in Yola, the troubles started in November 2013. That's when Boko Haram attacked Ngoshe, his hometown in Borno, damaging churches, burning ten houses, looting, and stealing cars. They also killed Musa's uncle and four other church members. "Everyone was living in fear," Musa remembers. "Some stayed in town, while others stayed out in the bush. But before the attacks, Christians in my home area [75 percent of the population] had been living in peace with our Muslim neighbors."

Five months later, in April 2014, Boko Haram militants returned and besieged the town, driving out the Nigerian military. "From 7:30 that evening until 2:00 in the morning, there was no let-up of shooting. I was worried for my wife who had given birth just weeks before, but I decided we had to leave. I held our baby to my chest, bent down, and we ran, trusting our safety to God. We saw only one militant as we fled to the mountains. Many others ran too."

When some time had passed, they went back home. "But during a church meeting in early June, we heard shooting, and everyone ran to the mountains again. Boko Haram looted and burned more houses and churches; more church members were killed. The militants also surrounded the mountains, killing more than a hundred men and abducting women and children. Eventually, our family was able to leave and go south to Mubi, where I rented a farm and started farming. Then, after Boko Haram seized the nearby town of Michika, we left Mubi and traveled farther south, to Yola. After nine months on the mountain, my mother came out, and we found out that my father was dead. Now my mother is in Yola with us. Yet even now, people are still hiding in the mountains; some have died of hunger.

"We can't live for Christ without going through difficulties," Musa adds. "Throughout this time, I continually prayed and trusted that if God wanted us to survive, he would protect us and give us the strength."

Like Musa, Rifkaty Bitrus and her family fled to the mountains when Boko Haram attacked Ngoshe. But in her case, the escape failed. The militants pursued them and abducted Rifkaty and her two daughters, ages one and four, along with many other women and girls.

At the Boko Haram camp, they were kept in a locked and guarded house. They were not harmed, but were forced to do jobs such as pounding palm oil and fetching water, with the gate locked behind them when they returned. "They called us 'unbelievers,'" she says, "and threatened to slaughter us like cows if we didn't convert to Islam. We had to wear the Muslim veil, but none of us converted."

After three weeks, Rifkaty managed to escape at night without the guard noticing. She helped her four-year-old daughter over the wall, then climbed over it again with her baby on her back. With fifteen other women, they hid in the mountains and made their way over the border to Cameroon. There she reunited with her husband, and they have come to live at a camp near Jos. Rifkaty is grateful that she's alive, but does not know if her family members who stayed in Ngoshe survived.

Some EYN members risked their lives to save their neighbors. In February 2014, Ibrahim Dauda knew he had to do something to help his neighbor, a woman who was bleeding severely after her unborn child had died. In spite of the dangers from nearby Boko Haram forces, he took her across the border to a hospital in Kwaza, Cameroon. Because he didn't have enough money for the operation that she needed, he gave the doctor what he had and, leaving his identification papers and church membership card at the hospital, told them that he would return with the rest of the money.

Six Boko Haram militants stopped him at the border. Ibrahim explained that he needed to go home to get the money for the woman's surgery. They let him go. Expecting them to wait for him to return with the money, he came back by a different road. He paid the hospital, and the woman lived.

**Nearly five centuries ago**, in February 1527, a group of religious reformers met secretly in Schleitheim, Switzerland, and unanimously adopted seven points of faith now known as the Schleitheim Articles – a document that would come to define the movement known as Anabaptism. One of these articles called for absolute nonviolence: “Christ teaches and commands us to learn from him, for he is meek and lowly of heart....He himself forbids the violence of the sword.”

Just days later, the man who likely penned these lines, Michael Sattler, was captured, together with his wife Margarethe. After prolonged torture, he was burned alive; she was drowned, and several of their companions were beheaded. Over the next few decades, as many as three thousand others would be executed, by both Protestant and Catholic rulers, for refusing to abandon their Anabaptist faith.

Today’s Nigerian Anabaptists, shaped by this heritage of nonviolence and martyrdom, now find themselves carrying it forward. In fact, since 2013 more than three times as many Anabaptist Christians have died at the hands of Boko Haram than were killed in all the persecutions of sixteenth-century Europe.

Faced with this reality, not all have held fast. EYN members tell me that some of their congregations have given up teaching Christian pacifism. Many know of church members who, when threatened by Boko Haram or having witnessed the torture or murder of family members, chose to abandon their church’s teachings and used weapons in self-defense or retaliation. Others left the church because they did not want to adhere to nonviolence, or joined other denominations that have formed Christian militias. Some sought to save themselves and their families by converting to Islam.

But remarkably, such cases seem to remain exceptions: most EYN members and churches have remained true to their peace heritage. This was evident at EYN’s annual conference in May 2015 in Jos, a gathering known as the Majalisa. At one of the sessions, a delegate from an area hard-hit by Boko Haram challenged the church’s pacifist stance. All the other delegates responded by clearly affirming the church’s commitment to nonviolence.

This gospel ideal might sound laudable in a denomination’s statement of faith. But in the face of terrorist violence, how is it lived out in practice? Amado Bello, pastor of an EYN church in Maiduguri, the state capital of Borno, tells me he was visited several times by small groups of men who introduced themselves as Boko Haram militants – possibly to test him, or possibly to kill him.

“Because I was raised Muslim,” he says, “I know how they think and how to calm them down and make peace. I always spoke with respect, treating them as fellow human beings, trying to understand them.” Each time, he asked about their problems and prayed with them. When they left, he sent a church member to accompany them out a back way so the Nigerian military wouldn’t kill them. “I do this because I love you,” he told them.

One day, he spoke with the man who washed his car about his concerns for the young men in Boko Haram. “When the Nigerian military finds them, it kills them right away,” he told him, “but if I were a political leader I would pardon them if they would agree to stop fighting. I wouldn’t kill any who were captured, but have them brought to me. I would listen to them, try to understand, and do something about the problems they’re angry about.” At the time, he didn’t realize that he was talking to a Boko Haram commandant.

Sometime later, while driving with his family, he was stopped and surrounded by a large Boko Haram contingent. Bello expected to be killed, but one militant looked into the car window and recognized him. “He’s a good man,” he told the others. To Bello, he said, “You may pass.” Expecting a spray of bullets at any moment, the family drove on without incident.

**We take what Jesus said** about forgiveness seriously,” I’m told by participants at an EYN workshop for trauma healing and reconciliation. These workshops are based on the understanding that if trauma is not dealt with, it will perpetuate the cycle of violence in Nigerian society.

Ibrahim Dauda, the man who faced down Boko Haram in order to help his sick neighbor, is participating in such a workshop for a second time. “I know the people who stole my cows, goats, generator, motorcycle, and things in my house,” he tells the group. “When I came to my first trauma healing workshop, I was bitter and not ready to forgive Boko Haram. I believed that justice should be done before I could consider forgiveness. Now I can forgive. I even called Boko Haram members and told them that I have forgiven them. They were surprised; some of them thanked me. When you forgive, you have new freedom.”

“It’s not easy,” adds Gabriel Vanco, from Uba in Borno “All my life’s work – my poultry farm, twenty-one cows, my harvested crops – was stolen. It’s hard to go home and see your clothes being worn by one of your neighbors or your furniture in his house, but we must forgive to be free of the burden of hatred. And it’s only by the grace of God that we can do it.”

Reconciliation will be desperately needed if communities in Nigeria’s Northeast are to rebuild. While episodes of violence between Muslims and Christians aren’t unprecedented in the region, before Boko Haram the two faiths had mostly coexisted peacefully. Now the bitterness of many survivors is hard to miss. “None of our Muslim friends helped us during the attacks,” one woman tells me as we stand at the site of a burned-out church building near Mubi, the town where dozens died in Islamist attacks

in 2012. "Some helped Boko Haram carry them out. Now there's no trust between Muslims and Christians here."

Other survivors tell more hopeful stories. When Shawulu T. Zhigila, an EYN pastor, was hiding from Boko Haram forces in Ngoshe, Muslim neighbors took him into their homes to hide and protect him. They still occasionally call him, saying they are glad he is alive.

Such acts of compassion go both ways, according to James Musa, another EYN pastor who serves as secretary for the denomination's Ministers' Council. "When we give out material aid and services, we give it to EYN members, but when possible also to others – Christian or Muslim – from the area who need it. They're all experiencing the same problems." He recounts how EYN members in Madagali, Adamawa, gave support and medicine to a sick Muslim woman who had been abandoned by her family when Boko Haram attacked the town. She told them, "From now on I will be a Christian."

**Even before the Boko Haram attacks** made him the host of fifty-two displaced people, Markus Gamache coordinated an interfaith organization known as Lifelines Compassionate Global Initiatives. Soon after he heard about the violence, he started traveling in Nigeria's Northeast seeking to encourage reconciliation. "We urge Christians not to see all Muslims as wanting to take over Nigerian society with an Islamic state and exterminate all Christians," he tells me. "Most Muslims in Nigeria also see Boko Haram as a disaster for their communities, and feel a responsibility to respond to the resulting problems of displacement, homelessness, hunger, and social strife.

"We need each other. If we are to have a peaceful society in Nigeria, Christians and Muslims must work together to bridge the mistrust and hatred. Christian and Muslim leaders need to come together and acknowledge that the problem of terrorism is two-sided, and not just point fingers at Muslims. Yet we must also work at the grassroots level. People at the top can initiate and lead, but local people must also take it up, meet face to face, and participate from the heart. Otherwise it will not work."

I ask Markus if EYN members affected by the violence support his work. "About 60 to 70 percent support my efforts," he answers, "because this work has reduced the tensions, and the church benefits. But many are afraid for me – that I'll be killed – because I help Muslims and even bring them into my home. Or they feel I am wasting my time, saying, 'These people will never change.' My wife is also afraid for me, but she believes I should continue, at least in areas where there are Christians. I feel strongly that I must continue, even if it is dangerous. And I believe that as Christians we are commanded to love and even feed our enemies."

One initiative of the Lifelines organization is the Gurku Interfaith IDP Camp, which officially opened with a joyful celebration on May 12, 2015. All of the 162 Muslim and Christian families who live here lost their homes and livelihoods in the violence. Now they are moving into the new three-room houses that they helped to build from homemade mud bricks. Each family is starting to farm on a plot of land while helping to build a school and clinic. Representing many tribes and languages, they will live together as a model for positive relationships between Christians and Muslims.

**For some members of EYN**, the work of reconciliation doesn't stop with making peace with their Muslim neighbors. They seek to reach the hearts of the Boko Haram fighters themselves.

In November 2013, Dr. Rebecca Dali, an EYN member who coordinates a relief organization, was delivering supplies in the Gawar Refugee Camp in Cameroon. A man whom she suspected to be a Boko Haram militant asked her to meet with him in private, saying, "I want to talk with you because you have the spirit of love."

Rebecca recalls: "He admitted to being a Boko Haram fighter who had killed more than thirty-two people. I asked him to give that up and follow Jesus. As I prayed for him, he wept and accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior. He said that he would need to do this secretly at first, since his life would be in danger, but in time he would be able to practice his faith publicly. I connected him with one of the EYN pastors in the camp."

Each such meeting with Boko Haram members is a risk. One day, Rebecca was on her way to Chibok to deliver relief supplies when two militants stopped her car and forced her to follow them into the bush. Walking after them, she agonized, imagining her imminent death. She silently prayed, "God, if you want me to die, I will accept it, but if you want me to keep doing this work, protect me and let me live."

Twenty militants surrounded her, and one told her, "OK, we're going to kill you. Aren't you scared?" "No," she answered. "I'm not scared. Even if I die, I know where I am going – to heaven."

"Where are the Boko Haram going," he asked her in return, "to heaven, or to hell?"

"I don't know, but I'm praying for you to go the right way. You always have a second chance. In one second, you can change your life and go to heaven."

He responded, "You're a good person. We will not touch you." Acknowledging that she was giving food and supplies to Muslims, he added, "Go and do your work!" As she left, Rebecca told them she would pray for them.

"The people desperately need help, so I will continue this work despite the danger," Rebecca tells me later. "God saved my life, and so the rest of my life is a bonus. And now they know that I distribute aid to Christians, Muslims, and pagans, and even have a Muslim on my staff, so they let me pass. When they came to Mubi and attacked, they damaged the EYN headquarters. But they didn't touch the warehouse with relief supplies."

**What does a modern-day church** do when its members are hunted down and their church buildings, homes, and businesses are destroyed? And what if this church has taken seriously the call of Jesus – to love their enemies and not return evil for evil? In many personal stories I heard, the faith of individuals was re-founded and strengthened through this ordeal.

"When I was captured by Boko Haram and forced to join them, I received 250,000 Naira, a gun, and ammunition," one young man, a relative of Markus Gamache, tells me. (The interview took place in a car at a gas station to preserve his anonymity.) "We were all expected to kill one or two of our blood brothers. If you refused, they would kill you and take back what they had given you."

For a while, the young man said, he managed to avoid taking part in the raiding, looting, or killing by making an excuse to leave for family emergencies. But he knew he couldn't keep it up much longer. "I also didn't swallow the 'charm,' the drug they give you that makes you compliant and unable to think for yourself."

Before his capture, he had strayed from his Christian faith, but because he knew that what Boko Haram wanted him to do was evil, he returned to his beliefs. In captivity, he and several other Christians secretly communicated about how to escape.

Finally he managed to escape into the bush and to contact Markus, who has since been paying the rent and expenses for him and his family. "Often Christians who have been with Boko Haram but have escaped are not accepted back into the Christian community," Markus explained, "but the people in the EYN congregation here have accepted him. And now his faith and determination to live it out have been strengthened by what he went through."

Like this young man, the church has been strengthened in its faith and determination through the hardships it has encountered. The mood at EYN's Majalisa gathering in May was hopeful, as Rev. Samuel Dali gave voice to the experience of the church: "We have been badly wounded. At first we felt confused, frustrated, and uncertain about the future, but we have never ceased to operate. We have made some painful progress, and we are recovering and gaining strength."

Such words of hope do not erase the horrors the church has experienced or the difficulties ahead. Many EYN members in the Northeast are still vulnerable, and displaced members feel disconnected from the national church. Those returning to their home communities face the tremendous challenge of rebuilding and coping with trauma and wounded relationships. In Bible studies and sermons at the Majalisa, EYN members often spoke of the persecution faced by the early Christians. They adopted Philippians 1:21 as their national theme for 2015: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Yet despite the challenges, many members of EYN say that through this crisis the church is growing stronger. As they seek to be more faithful to Christ, they are rediscovering their peace heritage and witnessing to it. The bold faith and fearless actions of love I have seen here have humbled and inspired me. Some EYN members tell me that they sense God moving among them as they assist those suffering or work with their Muslim brothers and sisters for reconciliation; they say that the crisis has intensified their love and care for each other. And paradoxically, the scattering of the EYN church has spread its witness into new areas of Nigeria and even into neighboring countries.

"Faithful Christians should not fear death, but have hope, and follow God's leading to serve," Reverend Dali told the EYN staff in late March. "We are to follow Christ, whether Boko Haram is threatening or not. If we live for Christ, Boko Haram has no power over us."

*To learn more about EYN's response to Boko Haram, visit the Church of the Brethren's website at [www.brethren.org/nigeriacrisis](http://www.brethren.org/nigeriacrisis) or the author's blog at [plottingpeace.wordpress.com](http://plottingpeace.wordpress.com).*

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