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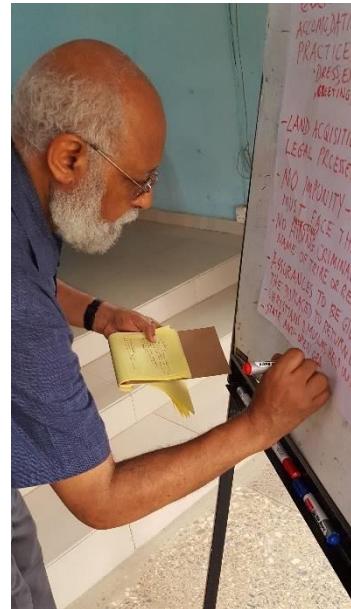
WUKARI PEACE BUILDING CONSULTATION MAKURDI, NIGERIA SEPTEMBER 26-29

On Tuesday, September 26, with the prayer and financial support of the members of the CRCNA and the masterful facilitation of Dr. Hizkias Assefa, over 45 religious leaders, traditional chiefs, politicians, as well as local government officials gathered in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria to take another step in building a regional peace in Wukari.

In his opening welcome, Rev. Caleb Ahima, Chairman of the Peace, Justice and Reconciliation Committee (PJRC) of the Reformed Churches in Nigeria, said: "We know the value of peace and we know the danger of conflict. No one will build peace for us. We must own this process for ourselves, our children, and grandchildren."

The chief Imam of the Wukari mosque opened with prayer along with the chairman of the Taraba state Christian Association of Nigeria.

Five traditional rulers were present - including the chief of the Wukari Fulani community - sitting with their staffs of office in



Traditional Rulers

participation. It builds on the first consultation.

Why is this important? Why should we in the CRCNA care about and support this effort on the part of our Nigerian Reformed family and their Muslim neighbors?

Conflict between Muslims and Christians, stoked by extremists and fanatics, has been growing all over the world but it has been especially worrisome in Nigeria – a country of 180 million people equally divided between Christians and Muslims. The origins of these conflicts are almost never religious differences. Issues such as grazing and farming rights, control of local markets and resources, and increasing drought in the north have spawned protracted and recurring conflicts resulting in death, destruction, disrupted economic activity, and millions of displaced people in Nigeria.

the front row. In his introduction one of them said: "I am filled with joy to be here. Peace has found a stool to sit on. Our prayer is that everyone here will leave with a gift to take home to give to our people."

This is the second peace building consultation held in the Middlebelt region of Nigeria this year, and was organized by the Inter-Religious Implementation Committee – which itself was the outcome of the first consultation held in January. It is larger, more diverse, and has high level



To transform four years of bloody and destructive conflict into a lasting peace is the long-term goal. It is this that has brought Key leaders of Wukari to a Catholic retreat center for three-and-a-half days digging into causes, talking and listening to each other, and then trying to find ways to confront and solve those things that lie at the root of the conflict.

During one dramatic moment, a Muslim participant shared his anger and hatred for those who shot him in the stomach. He said: "I said and did things in anger and pain that I am now sorry for. Now I must forgive and work for peace." The hope of the participants is to take another big step together towards peace and reconciliation so that, in the words of one participant, "our children and grandchildren will know real peace".

On Thursday the consultation moved to the last and most difficult stage – agreeing on what practical steps they could take to bring a lasting peace. This is hard work and requires creativity and the willingness to compromise. In the end the group agreed on several important steps forward:

First, representatives of the Muslim Council and the Christian Association of the Wukari agreed to advocate for a political power sharing arrangement that fairly represents

all religions of the Wukari area. Power sharing has helped create stability in other regions of Nigeria, but will take time and much public education.

Second, the same two institutions are asked to initiate a joint effort to end inflammatory preaching in mosques and churches, and to identify and resist outside preachers who come to incite and divide.

Third, the group has tasked the traditional leaders as well as representatives of both the Muslim Council and the Christian Association of Nigeria to build a mechanism to facilitate the return of persons displaced by the conflicts, assist them to rebuild destroyed properties, and ensure their safety. Since leadership from all these sectors were part of this consultation this is not an idle hope.

The consultation made many other recommendations and action decisions that could contribute to lasting peace contained in a signed communique for media outlets in Taraba state outlining their recommendations to the public.

The Inter-Religious Implementation Committee and the Peace, Justice and Reconciliation Committee of the Reformed Churches in the Middlebelt region have much follow-up work to do, but the fact that they successfully organized such an intensive and diverse consultation bodes well for the future.

There is a long way to go and many pitfalls along the way, but there are also many friends and supporters on the journey. The Christian Reformed Church in North America has been inextricably linked to the Reformed churches of Nigeria's Middlebelt for over 100 years. It is a joy to note that we remain in active solidarity during today's hard work of being builders of peace; Agents of reconciliation.

Peter Vander Meulen