MINISTRY TO YOUTH IN THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Abstract
Growing up in a state of violence has profound effects on young people. As it is, adolescence is a time in a young person’s life when changes to his or her body, identity and role in society could evoke feelings of confusion and emotion. In contexts where security and stability are fragile, the uncertainties brought about by adolescence are compounded, making young people extremely vulnerable when crisis hits. It is important that youth workers in northern Nigeria proactively think through how to support young people in the event of a crisis caused by violence, and that they remember the critical importance of engaging young people in the design of their response.

Introduction
Boko Haram remains arguably the biggest problem confronting Nigeria today, with consequences of this terrorist network’s actions reaching far beyond security concerns into the political and socio-economic aspects of the governance of the country. Since July 2009, Boko Haram, an extremist Islamist group from the north-eastern part of Nigeria, has been driving a violent campaign that has resulted in the death of over 3 500 people, with the death toll rising on an almost daily basis (Agbiboa, 2013:13). This paper will consider the impact of violence caused by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria on young people in particular, and its implication for youth ministry. To do that, I will explore the history and emergence of Boko Haram, and the impact of violence caused by Boko Haram. Subsequently I will attempt to provide a supportive approach that could assist youth workers in northern Nigeria to engage young people to critically analyze and thoughtfully respond to the underlying distress caused by Boko Haram’s violence, by providing counseling and support in these troubled times.

Who is Boko Haram?
“We want to reiterate that we are warriors who are carrying out Jihad (religious war) in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the traditions of the holy prophet. We will never accept any system of government apart from the one stipulated by Islam because that is the only way that the Muslims can be liberated. We do not believe in any system of government, be it traditional or orthodox, except the Islamic system which is why we will keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism, socialism and whatever. We will not allow the Nigerian Constitution to replace the
laws that have been enshrined in the Holy Qur’an, we will not allow adulterated conventional education (Boko) to replace Islamic teachings. We will not respect the Nigerian government because it is illegal. We will continue to fight its military and the police because they are not protecting Islam. We do not believe in the Nigerian judicial system and we will fight anyone who assists the government in perpetrating illegalities.” Boko Haram statement

Mohammed Yusuf the founder of Boko Haram was born on 29 January 1970 in the village of Girgir in Yobe State in northern Nigeria. He founded Boko Haram in 2002 in the city of Maiduguri with the goal of establishing sharia government in Borno State, which encompasses the north-eastern part of Nigeria (Onuoha, 2014:3). Boko Haram was led by Yusuf until he was allegedly killed by Nigerian security forces following sectarian violence, killing over 700 people, that broke out in July 2009. At the time of his death, Yusuf was the commander-in-chief (Amir ul-Aam) of Boko Haram. He had two deputies (Na’ib Amir ul-Aam I & II) and each state and local government where Boko Haram existed had its own commander (amir). Boko Haram also has members originating from neighboring countries Chad and Niger, and its members speak only Arabic. Up to now the terrorist group was able to attract more than 280 000 members across northern Nigeria, Chad and Niger (Salami, 2013:12).

Boko Haram’s membership comprises university lecturers and students, bankers, political elites, unemployed graduates, almajiris1, and migrants from neighboring countries. Members are drawn primarily from the Kanuri tribe, which makes up roughly four percent of the Nigerian population, and is concentrated in the north-eastern states of Nigeria, including Bauchi and Borno, as well as from the Hausa-Fulani, constituting 29 percent of the population, who are spread over most of the northern states of Nigeria (Komolafe, 2012:56).

Recent reports have also revealed that some members in the Nigerian security sector have strong links to Boko Haram. In February 2012, the commissioner of police in charge of criminal investigations in Abuja, Zakari Biu, was dismissed from the Nigerian police force for his role in the escape of Boko Haram suspect Kabiru Sokoto. Sokoto is believed to have been the mastermind of the bombing of St. Theresa’s Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State, in which over 40 people died in 2012. Sokoto’s escape also led to the sacking of the former Inspector General of Police, Hafiz Ringim (Abimbola, 2013:95).

1 Almajiris are kids between ages 5-12 that are sent to Islamic scholars by their parents to learn the basic tenants of Islam
The general impact of Boko Haram’s insurgency in northern Nigeria

Consequences of violence like that orchestrated by Boko Haram in Nigeria are better imagined that told. The Boko Haram violence affects numerous people, families, churches and schools in Nigeria. Klauser (2012:65) rightly notes that the violence caused by Boko Haram has definitely sent many families and organizations into deep mourning as they ponder over the loss of those whose lives were cut short so unexpectedly. Consequently economic growth has been slowed down, personal and collective security has been eroded, and social development has been impeded. Furthermore, according to Elaigwu, (2012:7) apart from the death toll caused by Boko Haram’s violence, many victims have been maimed for life and properties worth billions of naira have been vandalized and razed down. Academic calendars and programs have been interrupted or disjointed and many citizens in northern Nigeria are afraid to attend mosques or church services. Politically, the stability, unity and trust among citizens are being threatened, while the security of lives and property are no longer guaranteed.

Over the years the terrorist group has carried out frequent attacks and bombings, in some cases by means of suicide bombers. Target locations have included police stations, military facilities, churches, schools, beer halls, newspaper offices and the United Nations building in Abuja (Uzodike, 2012:91). Boko Haram’s increasingly sophisticated and coordinated attacks have targeted Nigeria’s ethno-religious fault lines and security agents in an attempt to wrest power from the Nigerian government and create an Islamic state governed by strict sharia law (Forest, 2012:5). So critical is the threat posed by Boko Haram that in January 2012 Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan lamented: “The situation we have in our hands is even worse than the civil war [1967–1970] that we fought” (Agbiboa, 2013:65). The threat posed by Boko Haram looms large, not only over Nigeria's national security, but over the Nigerian citizenry whose daily lives are subject to unprecedented levels of stress. Unfortunately, Boko Haram activities have impacted many churches; Christian youth have been abducted, for example, which left many youth workers at their wits’ end. The fact that many young people no longer regard the church as a safe place has a growing impact on the youth ministry in northern Nigeria.

In the midst of all the above challenges, Michael (2014:16) asserts that, “in this context of mistrust and, insecurity, many Christians have also become unfortunately violent in order to confront the challenge of an increasing Islamic fundamentalism”. Living in such a context of
hostility between Christianity and Islam, the people in the northern part of Nigeria are having a foretaste of the global conflict between Christianity and Islam in a microcosm. In a way, northern Nigeria is becoming a prototype of the global scenario that is marked by a quest to forestall the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

The impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people
The youth often is a targeted group during violence or conflict. Young people have been the target of Boko Haram in many cities, with the terrorist group meting out all sort of ill treatment towards them. As victims and witnesses, they cannot help but be affected by the grim realities surrounding them. In addition to the physical, emotional, social and societal consequences of violence for the youth, their families, schools, and communities, Boko Haram’s violence has also incurred a huge financial cost to society. Time and space will not allow me to cover the full impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people; hence a few areas of impact will be considered, namely impact at a psychological level, social level and economic level.

Psychological impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people
The psychological impact of violence on young people is highly diverse and complex (Berman, Silverman and Kurtines, 2000:143) however, not all young people exposed to violence will manifest with significant emotional and behavioral difficulties (Cohen, Berliner and Mannarino, 2003). Psychologists believe that while a broad range of factors, including features of the violence experienced and those of the young person and his or her environment will influence his or her attempts to manage the violent event, a traumatic experience will have a significant impact on the majority of young people (Murphy, 2003:27). Moreover, the link between exposure to violence and distress symptoms in children has been clearly documented in the literature (Berman et al, 2000). The immediate psychological impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people includes feelings of fear, anger, hostility, anxiety and depression. Haruna (2013:92) notes that many young Christians in northern Nigeria are full of anger and that they are seeking revenge. Some are even considering leaving the Christian faith to stop being targets. The resulting psychological impact of Boko Haram’s violence in northern Nigeria is reflected particularly in relation to community violence, which include self-hatred, a deep distrust of the community and society as a whole, a lack of a sense of safety in northern Nigeria and a damaged
internalized sense of morality and notions of caring for others (Parson, 2010:376). There is deep hurt among many young people in northern Nigeria, especially among the Christian youth, who is always seen as a soft target.

A variety of studies have documented that young people living in communities with high crime and violence rates have a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and behavioral disorders (Berman et al, 2000). The link between exposure to violence and PTSD is perhaps the most clearly established in the literature, with PTSD identified as a core feature of the distress reaction manifested by young people in response to violence (Berman et al, 2000).

**Social impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people**

I remember growing up in northern Nigeria and how peacefully and harmoniously we used to live. There were no ethnic or religious hatred or tension between young people – Christians and Muslims alike. We very closely share almost everything around us. Unfortunately, things have now changed drastically, with young people no longer celebrating things together; neighborhoods are now separated according to religion. Boko Haram’s violence has affected the social strata in northern Nigeria enormously, making young people enemies of each other instead of friends, and social functions are now dictated by religion.

Accordingly, Stavrou (1993:6) notes that repeated exposure to violence leads to the reinforcement of the “culture of violence”, with young people believing that violent behavior is acceptable and normal. This is particularly so with regard to the nature and the modus operandi of Boko Haram’s violence in northern Nigeria. The exposure to and the normalizing of violence driven by Boko Haram makes it more likely that young people will take part in violence and general criminal activity.

**Economic impact of Boko Haram’s violence on young people**

Boko Haram’s violent activities in northern Nigeria keep on having a huge economic impact on young people. The country is losing potential entrepreneurs, talent and ideas through the killing of innocent young people and the disruption of school activities. Adamu (2012:26) echoes this sentiment, noting that in 2009 more than 15 young medical graduates were killed in cold blood by Boko Haram in Bauchi. Similarly, in 2012 and 2013, more than 100 young people were killed
in various high schools across northern Nigeria – young people who would have contributed to
the economic growth of Nigeria (Shehu, 2013:8). Boko Haram’s violence has affected education,
social welfare and economic development in northern Nigeria and it has aggravated
unemployment. This places the youth population in a particularly vulnerable position, as they are
the group most targeted for recruitment or abduction by Boko Haram. They are also more likely
to turn to black markets for survival and may use violence as a way to vent their anger.

There is no doubt that economic activities have been seriously hampered by the scourge of Boko
Haram’s activities in northern Nigeria. Many young people have lost their lives, others have lost
their properties, while many have completely lost their sources of livelihood, thereby increasing
the pressure on the already saturated labor market and contributing to unemployment. Many
resources that were meant for developmental projects have been diverted to relief services and
the deployment of security personnel.

**Implications for youth workers in northern Nigeria**

In areas of conflict young people are the most vulnerable, as the discussion above has
emphasized. Young people are an essential ingredient for bringing about change. Hence youth
workers need to equip young people with tools to build a better future for themselves and their
communities. Young people are often at the heart of conflict. They may be manipulated by those
in power and used as soldiers – or be caught up in the cross-fire as casualties (Boyle, 2009:79).
When schools shut down or are destroyed by Boko Haram, children and young people suffer the
most; without hospitals, they cannot get the medical help that could save their lives or stop
injuries from having long-term consequences for them. When their parents are killed, they are
left defenseless. Young people and children are the ones who are left to deal with the lasting
consequences of violence.

In view of this, youth workers need to recognize the importance and value of listening to
young people’s perspectives. In addition, youth workers should look for ways to engage
young people in practical ways to make them defensible, for example drawing the
youth’s attention to examples of how they are and can be engaged in efforts to enhance
their own protection and their community’s security at local and national levels. Youth
workers must also help the youth to respond positively to the roles and responsibilities
they have, and support and help them to strengthen their struggle against violence. Further, youth workers should promote young people’s voices in peace processes and make commitments to comprehensive plans of action to fulfil young people’s rights in coping with violence.

Since 2009, many young people have been adversely affected by either witnessing or experiencing the violence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Exposure to violence – especially when it is ongoing and intense like that of Boko Haram can harm young people’s natural, healthy development unless they receive support to help them cope and heal. Many of the affected young people now are vulnerable to serious long-term problems. Thus, youth workers must take action to engage young people in reflection and exploration of how to meaningfully interpret and respond to violence – especially the violence incited by Boko Haram. Youth workers must help young people stay responsive and not become immune to the anger and sadness that occurs when their classmates or parents are shot in front of their eyes. Youth workers must help young people to become less fearful of life even when the abuse or the anger is directed at them, so that they can reassure themselves that all of life is not that harsh.

To achieve the above goals, youth workers must firstly promote unity amongst the young people in northern Nigeria. Considering the social impact of Boko Haram’s violence in northern Nigeria, young people are divided between religious lines. In a pilot study (Chiroma, 2014) conducted among 60 Christian young people, more than 45 of them postulated that every Muslim in northern Nigeria was their enemy. This shows that many Christian young people are not able to differentiate between Boko Haram and Islam; to them all Muslims are part of this terrorist group. The logic behind this thinking could be attributed to the fact many young Christians, churches and Christian school have been major targets of Boko Haram’s violence. On the other hand, many Christian young people attest to the fact that they no longer trust their Muslim counterparts due to fear of reappraisal attacks. Consequently young people in northern Nigeria – both Christian and Muslims – are focusing on the wrong enemy. It is necessary that youth workers help unite young people for them to face a common enemy, in this case Boko Haram. Youth workers must strive to create an atmosphere of trust by creating adequate awareness of Boko Haram’s activities and exposing their evil deeds. In doing this, youth workers should take
care to be sensitive to divides among and between young people and avoid exacerbating them, fermenting stereotypes, or creating potentially dangerous situations that would enhance hatred.

Secondly, youth workers must educate parents and caregivers to help young people cope with the various effects of violence caused by Boko Haram. Young people depend on adults to help them cope with the psychological and emotional trauma caused by violence. Youth workers must train parents and caregivers how to help young people respond positively in the midst of violence. In situations where there are no parents or caregiver, youth workers must train mentors who will work with young people to help them cope. Equipping young people with peace education through parents and caregivers will help those young people better appreciate the value of peace, making it harder for extremists to use them to foment trouble.

Thirdly, youth workers must promote interfaith dialogue among young people. The experience of interfaith dialogue among young people will help them to humanize the other religion. In discussing the involvement of young people in interfaith dialogue, it may be instructive to understand that such dialogue comes in different forms. Hence Haney’s (2009:23-45) framework for interfaith dialogue is worth considering for youth workers in northern Nigeria. His framework entails the following: 1) “living dialogue”, or that which consists of building positive relationships with people from other faith traditions, as they are neighbors and fellow human beings; 2) the “dialogue of cooperation”, an interfaith collaboration for a unifying cause, such as that of promoting peace and justice in the world; 3) the “dialogue of religious experience”, which opens a person to respect what the other deems sacred: how one experiences God in one’s life; and 4) “theological dialogue”, discussions on the knowledge and interpretations of God. All these forms of interfaith dialogue will help young people to learn from rather than just about other religions. The participation of youth in interfaith efforts shows that they have the capacity to both learn and contribute to interreligious understanding and community-building. Through interfaith dialogue, groups of young people can make their unique contribution to the common cause of creative co-existence and would be able to unite and face the common enemy. But this is far easier said than done, and to do it well, interfaith dialogue programs must be evaluated so that lessons, good and bad, can be learned for future application.
Fourthly, youth workers in Northern Nigeria must embrace different counseling strategies to help young people cope with the violence caused by Boko Haram. Counseling young people could involve individual or group interaction, depending on the nature of hurt caused by the violence or the context in which youth workers find themselves. Since Boko Haram’s violence has caused an adverse effect on the socio-economic, religious, moral and political facets of the lives of young people in northern Nigeria, counseling strategies are important instruments to help young people not only cope, but also contribute to peacebuilding meaningfully. Counseling strategies can help young people modify their attitude and cope with violence by means of modeling and mentoring, among others. Hence, youth workers in northern Nigeria should make use of qualified counselors to counsel young people at various institutions on the vices of violence in the society, and youth workers need to organize community-based counseling to sensitize entire communities on the dangers of violence and the role young people can play in restoring peace.

In the fifth place, youth workers must invest in intergenerational partnerships in northern Nigeria. They can achieve this by increasing dialogue; making an effort to understand and create opportunities for cooperation among young people, parents and elders. In this way stakeholders can be mobilized to act jointly to prevent and resolve Boko Haram’s violence and transform their communities. McEvoy-Levy argues the youth is “at the frontlines of peacebuilding” (2001: 24), and claims that policymakers, youth workers and scholars have not adequately explored the positive contribution young people can make in dealing with violence. Youth workers must nurture young people’s skills in leadership and create opportunities for them to share their goals and aspirations with adults.

In the sixth place, youth workers must confront government policies that fuel violence in northern Nigeria through various means. In a recent report on the reasons why the youth joins Boko Haram, compiled in June 2014 by the United States Institute of Peace (www.usip.org), the research cites, among others, the failure of the government to address certain factors (such as unemployment, favoritism, sectionalism and corruption) that promote young people joining radical movements. The research indicates that the growing animosity towards the government, particularly due to corruption, especially among political leaders, makes youth more vulnerable for recruitment by Boko Haram. Hence the report urges the Nigerian government to reinvigorate the fight against corruption urgently by repositioning institutions that will deal with corruption
effectively. Youth workers in northern Nigeria have an important role to play in confronting government policies that promote violence – they need to organize various forums and symposiums and invite government officials to address the policies that fuel injustice and religious intolerance. Youth workers must challenge the government to upgrade the operational and logical tools of the security apparatus to boost its intelligence gathering and effectively discharge its surveillance functions. The government must be challenged to protect its citizens – young and old.

**Conclusion**

Boko Haram’s activities in northern Nigeria for the past five years demonstrate the urgent need for youth workers to address the impact of these activities on young people. Boko Haram’s terror regime has resulted in the destruction of private and public property, grievous bodily injury and death, has displaced thousands of people and has disrupted educational activities in northern Nigeria. This paper has considered the impact of Boko Haram’s violence in northern Nigeria, focusing on young people in particular. The paper has also touched on who Boko Haram is and its growing connection in northern Nigeria. In addition, the paper showed that youth workers in northern Nigeria have a vital role to play in helping young people cope with the psychological, social and economic impact of Boko Haram’s violence.
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