

# The Herald

## TWO FORMER ENEMIES CAN TEACH US LOVE AND TOLERANCE

By Carole Woddis  
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*Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye from Nigeria outside the United Nations in New York, at the launching of their film *The Imam and the Pastor*.*

Against a background of increasing worldwide religious tension, particularly between Muslim and Christian, out of Africa—a continent so often associated with bloodshed and mayhem—comes a story of hope.

This week, two remarkable men, Islamic preacher, Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Christian evangelist James Movel Wuye are touring Britain. It coincides with the screening of a film about their lives by two British Christian film-makers and a Palestinian Muslim.

Already shown at the United Nations in New York, in Washington and at the House of Commons, *The Imam and the Pastor*, by David and Alan Channer with Imad Karam, is narrated by former BBC broadcaster Rageh Omaar.

Beautifully shot, visually evocative and with a soundtrack provided by award-winning musicians, including Youssou N'dour and Femi Kuti, its content is never less than thought-provoking and carries potential lessons for us all.

The reason is simple. Ashafa and Wuye once were sworn enemies, each consumed by hatred of the other. That hatred has now been turned to love and respect. As joint co-ordinators of the Muslim/Christian Inter-Faith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, their work involves going to flash points in Nigeria where religious divisions have broken out, and promoting tolerance and forgiveness.

As peace-makers, they make a striking couple. Ashafa is tall, bearded. In Wuye's words, "when you see him he is like the embodiment of an Islamic fundamentalist". Wuye is smaller, chubbier. Behind the eyes, which often seem to hold a muted sadness, there is an irrepressible twinkle. In his early years, he was a bit of a lad. A snapshot of him as a young man shows him in a posture of adolescent bravado, hands in his belt, legs akimbo.

"I used to drink a lot and go to church to wink at the girls in the choir," he says, describing the moment when things began to change. One day, instead of going outside to drink, he stayed behind. It was, he says, as if the preacher had turned his "sunlight" on him. He kept ducking under the pew to avoid him, but to no avail. The conviction grew "that God was speaking to me and I had to change".

That change led to his becoming a Pentecostal minister and a passionate evangelist, eventually vice-president of the Youth Christian Association of Nigeria. It also meant he joined the Christian militia in his province, Kaduna, in northern Nigeria.

At the same time, Ashafa – from, as he describes it, "a strong religious family, custodians of the Islamic religion who had serious trouble with the West when the colonial forces changed the language of communication in Nigeria to English" – was also going through a moment of truth. He, too, joined a

militant militia, to defend his faith.

In the late 1980s, after a period when Muslims and Christians had lived peaceably together, a new spate of sectarian violence – fuelled by economic decline, religious extremism and political turmoil – broke out. And, in 1992, Wuye and Ashafa's lives fatefully crossed, on opposite sides. In the fighting, Ashafa lost two cousins and his spiritual leader. And he discovered that it had been Wuye's group who had organised the attack.

"For three years", he says, "I wanted to take revenge and planned to eliminate the leaders of these groups."

Wuye, likewise was looking for revenge. He lost a hand in the fighting as well as friends. Then, on either side, both were reminded by their spiritual leaders of the power of forgiveness. In May 1995, mutual friends introduced them to each other and challenged them to make peace.

It has not been an easy journey. Wuye describes how in the first months, suspicion of the other resulted in him carrying around a pillow "to suffocate Ashafa when they stayed in the same room". The first time he went into a mosque, he did not think he would come out alive. Ashafa admits he was in "an ocean of confusion between conscience and the reality of my standards" when his preacher told him "you have to forgive".

When Wuye's mother fell ill and eventually died, Ashafa went out of his way to visit him. Slowly, suspicion gave way to trust – a trust often misunderstood by followers. They were labelled "traitors", betrayers of their faith and even accused of being funded, separately, by the Vatican and Israel. But both insist nothing has been "compromised" in the way each feels about his faith.

Sometimes their differences – Wuye says the death penalty should be abandoned, while Ashafa believes it should be retained in Nigeria – lead them to stop speaking to each other, their only means of communication are notes stuck under the door. But like any married couple – both have wives and children – they have learned to work out difficulties through talking.

"We must not divorce, we cannot divorce," says Wuye. "Our children, the global community, would suffer too much."

Challenges continue to test them, on a personal and spiritual level. Ashafa talks of the impact of global events – Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo – on Nigeria's Muslim community. But he stresses respect for difference, the dangers of demonisation. He is unequivocal in his condemnation of suicide bombers while noting that such tactics have always been the "weapon of the oppressed, the voiceless" and speaking of historical precedents. Wuye talks of how, when the Channers proposed making a film, it required great soul-searching by all of them – film-makers and subjects alike – as to whether, in the ensuing publicity, vision and purpose would be lost.

"My colleague and I need to remind ourselves we are nothing," says Wuye. By way of explanation, he describes the day he lost his hand. "It was a day I had been praying. I had said, 'God, break me and use me'. But I did not mean having me literally incapacitated." He tells this with a smile and without regret.

Both men exude fathomless spirituality, as well as other dimensions, as scholars not only of the Koran and the Bible but also of political and psychological realities. Their journey to understanding and toleration of each other's views is embedded in a book, *The Pastor and The Imam: Responding to Conflict* – published almost 10 years ago.

Whatever one may think of the roots of some of today's problems stemming in part from religion's own rigidities, theirs is a remarkable story. The UK has need of the path along which they are now set.

*The Pastor and The Imam has been made by David and Alan Channer with Imad Karam for FLT films (the independent arm of the charitable organisation Initiatives of Change, formerly Moral Re-Armament)*