



THE IMAM AND THE PASTOR in Auckland- an interfaith journey from hatred to love

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In the 1980s, the Imam and the Pastor were leaders of opposing religious militias, sworn to kill each other. Now, they are brothers who travel the world, preaching a strong message: love people who are different to you, accept others, and learn to forgive.

On Tuesday 27 August 2019, around 140 people gathered in the Fickling Centre, Three Kings, Auckland to hear the remarkable story of 'The Imam and the Pastor' from Nigeria, hosted by the Auckland Inter-Faith Council. Imam Muhammed Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye come from Kaduna, in northern Nigeria, where the Christian and Muslim populations have been embroiled in violent conflict for decades.

In his talk, Imam Ashafa began by expressing his admiration for the way New Zealand handled itself in the wake of the 15 March massacre. He then explained that religious leaders can be -" 'good, bad, or ugly'" – and the bad ones use misinterpretation of religious texts to radicalise and wrongly influence people to violence. He acknowledged that he had been manipulated in that way as a young man. He had hated Christianity and all things Western. He then explained the extraordinary process by which he and Pastor Wuye went from being enemies to brothers.

As leaders of opposing militias and community leaders within their respective groups, they had a chance direct meeting in 1995 in the Governor's house. They had been invited in order to promote vaccinations among their communities. At this occasion, a journalist who knew both of them put their hands together and said to them that they could initiate positive change in the country if they wanted to. They absolutely didn't trust each other, and the Imam said he wanted to use this brief interaction as a way to make contact so he could kill his enemy Pastor Wuye! However when the Imam attended prayer that week, he heard a passage from the Quran that encouraged believers to make friends of their enemies. Something spoke to his conscience, and he began to read in the scriptures the need for forgiveness, to abandon hatred, and that in the name of God there should be love not violence. Over time he decided to become an agent for peace and he set out to win the trust of Pastor Wuye. The Imam had lost his spiritual mentor and two cousins in battles with the Christians, and Pastor Wuye had lost his hand in a fight with the Imam's group. With such deep scars, it took several years and many tentative encounters before they could completely forgive each other and begin to work together for the good of their communities. Imam Ashafa noted that it was **hate** in the name of their religions which turned into **love** in the name of the same religions. Both men came to realise that, by connecting with the true values of their faith, it was not possible to hate in the name of God.

Pastor Wuye explained that due to political problems there are serious divisions within their society along religious lines. As a Christian, he had grown up with a very strong hatred of Muslims. He talked

about how it took three years for him to even begin to trust Imam Ashafa. It took longer before they could really accept each other and work through their differences. He had us laughing as he explained how sometimes he and the Imam would be out speaking about inter-religious dialogue and the need for harmony, but after leaving the programme they wouldn't speak to each other because of some argument! Pastor James told the audience that "forgiveness can disarm your enemy". Once he was able to forgive, he felt **free**.

Some important work they are doing is trying to re-integrate religious fighters back into their respective communities. The fighters have caused much fear and terrible violence, so even after an individual reforms and renounces his violent ways, the community may not accept the person back. Other work they are doing has been to draft a bill in Nigeria about Religious Tolerance and Hate Speech, which will be presented to the government.

Following their talks, the audience asked questions. Michael Wood MP asked how to grow trust; they responded that it takes time, and sharing each other's suffering and hard times is one way to strengthen the bond. The Imam said that when the Pastor's mother died, he brought his wife and family to sit and grieve with the Pastor's family, and that act of common humanity helped open the Pastor's heart.

Another person asked if they had experienced retaliation from their own faith group. Imam Ashafa explained that at times he had to hide, to save his life. One time he was accused before the Sharia court for compromising Islam. To defend himself he presented a 26 page paper proving that the Quran promoted good relations between Christians and Muslims. The charges were dropped.

The final message was that we need to practice forgiveness as the antidote to anger. We may feel anger but should not act on it. Where there is conflict, bring the parties together and work it out. If we can't forgive, it is like taking poison and expecting the other one to die! Letting go of our anger is the way to freedom; by controlling our anger, we are becoming more human.

A koha was raised to support the Center for Inter-Faith Dialogue in Kaduna, and the guests were also presented with a framed photo of the Auckland sky-line to remember us by.

Everyone present seemed to gain inspiration from the words and lives of these two great leaders.



