



OMNIA

INSTITUTE FOR  
CONTEXTUAL LEADERSHIP

# Winning Hearts and Minds: A Strategy for Engagement In Northeastern Nigeria



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‘I am convinced that the creation of open,  
equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies,  
based on the full respect of human rights and  
with economic opportunities for all,  
represents the most tangible and meaningful  
alternative to violent extremism.’

*António Guterres United Nations Secretary-General*



## Executive Summary

*This report presents a strategic solution to the violent religious extremism in Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria. It provides a contextual analysis of the current Boko Haram terror campaign, which since 2009 has destroyed over 20,000 lives and displaced over 2.6 million people, including the famed 276 Chibok girls. It details the solutions offered by OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership, a global leadership training institute specializing in training clergy, lay religious leaders, and people of faith.*

*OMNIA's uniqueness is its method of contextual leadership. Religious extremism is the result of top-down or "received" theologies that have attributes of exclusivity and superiority. OMNIA teaches religious leaders and people of faith to begin with the real questions people on the ground are asking. Such an innovative bottom-up or "contextual" approach to religion is what leads to pluralism. It also trains them in skills for peacemaking and building power for effective action. OMNIA-trained leaders form Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IPTs), in which skilled team members build powerful coalitions that work collaboratively across racial and religious lines to address injustices in their communities. IPTs are powerful citizen groups skilled in methods of non-violent social change. Muslims and Christians working together reduces the space available for Boko Haram's recruitment.*

*This document is intended for current and prospective donors, partner organizations, policy makers and friends of OMNIA both in Nigeria and elsewhere around the world. It is our hope that this will encourage you to engage with OMNIA in bringing a peaceful resolution to a nation of kind and generous people devastated by violent religious extremism.*

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## Boko Haram: The World's Deadliest Terrorist Organization

Boko Haram's brutally violent tactics have the goal of destabilizing the Nigerian government and establishing an extremist sharia-based caliphate. Its leader, Abu Masab Al-Barnawi, has said that Christians in Nigeria will be the new target of the sect's attacks, vowing to kill all Christians and "blow up every church that we are able to reach." Al-Barnawi was the spokesman for the group until August 3, 2016, when he was declared its new leader to replace Abubakar Shekau who had led Boko Haram since 2009 and was killed by government forces.

In recent times the focus has turned to Fulani militias, cattle herders migrating southwards in search of grazing land because of the expanding desert, who are brutalizing and killing crop farmers, most of whom are Christians. Many observers think that they have a direct relationship with Boko Haram because they share the same goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate. Some have accused President Muhammadu Buhari, who himself is from the Fulani tribe, of being unwilling to take forceful action for fear of offending his political base.

The religious demographic of Nigeria's Northeast zone is roughly 40% Christian, 50% Muslim and 10% African Traditional Religions. For most of its history Christians and Muslims have had good neighborly relationships. However, since the 1966 massacre of mostly Christian Igbo by mostly Muslim Hausa, sporadic conflicts have occurred and continued into the late 1990s, leading to deepening mistrust between the religious communities.



*Boko Haram fighters*

Boko Haram, which literally means "western education is forbidden," arose in early 2000 as an anti-government Islamic sect and rose to prominence following the deadly conflicts of 2009. The environment of distrust between the religious communities provided fertile ground for it to prosper. Correspondingly, Boko Haram violence and Christian militias that arose to counter that threat deepened the gulf between Muslims and Christians.

Claims by President Buhari in December 2017 that Boko Haram was defeated were proven exaggerated when just three months later, in February 2018, Boko Haram captured 110 school girls in the village of Dapchi. The Christian girls, aged 11-19, have since been rescued except for one, Leah Sharibu (15) who refused to convert to Islam and is still in captivity.

The difficulties in accessing certain populations have hampered the work of research agencies' work to analyze this complexity. Amnesty International reports that although the total number of Boko Haram members has decreased, fighters still number in the thousands. Addressing the motivations for radicalization is a major concern.

### Drivers of Radicalization

Participants at the OMNIA trainings in Gombe affirm the following indicators as possible drivers of radicalization of young people, and their recruitment to Boko Haram:

- **Religion:** The gulf between Muslim and Christian communities fuels all other drivers of radicalization and recruitment to Boko Haram. A wide-spread narrative that extremist religion is more authentic because people are willing to die and indeed, kill for it, incentivizes young people seeking a more devout religious faith and practice. Therefore, the desire to fight un-Islamic "infidels" boosts recruitment. Some label it a religious sect seeking to render a "pure" Muslim society. One said: "We were told that Boko Haram is the best religion if we want to go to heaven. However, when I joined the religion I realized it was not true. We were told to kill anyone that is not in Boko Haram."

- **Poverty:** 61% of Nigerians live on less than a dollar a day. More than 76% of the Northeast lives in absolute poverty.<sup>1</sup> Poorer communities are exposed to a greater risk of recruitment because of the promise of financial reward for participating in violence.
- **Unemployment:** About 70% the population of youth in the Northeast Zone are unemployed with a significantly higher proportion of unemployed women than men. Many young people see Boko Haram as an opportunity because of their promises of entrepreneurial support.
- **Education:** Poverty results in the lack of educational opportunities. Many families who can't afford to send their children to school, send children as young as 4 to a *mallam* (teacher) in a system called *almajiri*. During the day, these children beg for food for the teacher and in the morning and night learn the Qur'an. Children radicalized by these teachers are easy recruits for Boko Haram.



*Nigerian women and girls face grave risks*

- **Family:** African values lead to large and complex families. Polygamy is a wide-spread practice. Some men who cannot afford to do so, marry multiple wives under social pressure, resulting in large numbers of children. Those who cannot be fed and cared for are often sent to “study” with *mallams*.
- **Governance:** Grievances around inadequate public services, the perceived illegitimacy of the government, and widespread corruption contribute to the rise of armed opposition groups such as Boko Haram. Some join because they believe that the movement would lead to a revolution to sanitize the system of government.
- **Women:** Some 2000 women and girls were abducted by Boko Haram in 2014 through April 2015. Abducted women are often forced to marry fighters. Some see opportunities in joining. Women who dropped out of school can study the Qur'an, which increases their appetite for further education. They are sometimes given tasks that afford them higher status, such as recruiting other girls and women, burning homes during attacks and even carrying out suicide bombings.

## Reducing Boko Haram’s Impact

OMNIA’s goal is to reduce Boko Haram’s impact. While it cannot address all the drivers of radicalization, it can address the one that most impinges on others -- religion. OMNIA asserts that the primary driver of extremism is the paradigm of top-down or “received” theologies that have come to Nigeria from foreign lands, bringing with them attitudes of extremism and superiority. These prevent Muslims and Christians from building relationships and collaborations for effective action. Empires and extremists rejoice at this dysfunction because when religions work together they can thwart oppression, domination and violence.

OMNIA’s leaders build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams of Muslims and Christians whose bottom-up, “contextual” theology enables them to work on issues arising from the margins of their communities. They build power by building deep relationships and creating coalitions. When they act collaboratively and powerfully, they achieve effective and measurable results. As Muslims and Christians work together, they significantly reduce the space available for Boko Haram to recruit.

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<sup>1</sup> Absolute poverty is characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.

## OMNIA Is Already Effective in Nigeria



*Rev. Dr. Obed Dashan*

When the Boko Haram terror campaign began, Dashan found himself caught in the middle. He had to go out to dangerous locations to diffuse tensions and to negotiate peaceful resolutions. “SCUPE taught me that effective ministry requires that I take the political context seriously,” he said, “and this is what I do every day. But this situation is unprecedented. Sometimes at 2 in the morning, I would get a call saying Boko Haram is going to attack a particular Christian village. Now I must decide if I will try to get the villages to evacuate before daybreak, or whether I should go and negotiate with Boko Haram. There is no script to follow. The book has not yet been written about how to handle a situation like this. We are making it up as we go.”

OMNIA’s engagement with Nigeria began with Rev. Dr. Obed Dashan, an alumnus of OMNIA’s predecessor organization, the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE). Currently, he is the Vice President of the Church of Christ of the Nations (COCIN) in Nigeria, a denomination that has a membership of over 3000 congregations, mainly in the north and northeast zones of Nigeria.

Dashan’s emails with stories and vivid descriptions of the violence compelled OMNIA, its board, staff and friends to act. With the help of Rev. Dr. Isaac Laudarji, who at the time served on its faculty and currently pastors a church in Northern Nigeria, SCUPE engaged in a period of deep learning. He introduced to SCUPE a dynamic young church leader, the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria’s Northeast Zone, Rev. Abare Kallah.

Under Rev. Kallah’s leadership OMNIA has conducted four basic training workshops since February 2017, with over 600 Muslim and Christian leaders, clergy and lay women and men participating. Among the participants were senior religious leaders, two Traditional (Tribal) Rulers, a representative of the Governor of the State of Gombe, two members of parliament, NGO executives, lawyers, teachers and other professionals. These Muslim and Christian leaders learned a great deal about each other and had the freedom to ask even the most difficult questions of each other’s tradition. They learned how to build powerful coalitions and how to engage in effective actions together.

A dynamic teaching team of two Muslims and two Christians gave instruction, training and agitation, and participants committed to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams of Muslims and Christians and plan projects they would do in their communities. Today, some 50 Interfaith Peacemaker Teams operate in and around the city of Gombe.

The impact of the training on the participants is significant. Here are a few brief stories of collaboration:

- Two young women, inspired by OMNIA’s training, started a sewing shop making colorful African dresses. They are hiring Muslim women to help in their shop.

- Two young men, under grave risk, broke out of Boko Haram and were inspired by OMNIA’s encouragement to start a barber shop.

They are Muslims and are hiring Christians as they build their business.

- Two women, a Christian and a Muslim, in a one-on-one conversation at an OMNIA training, made a plan to get Christian and Muslim women in their village of Kaltungo to pair up and build relationships with each other. Now numbering over 20 pairs, they are working on projects they will accomplish together.

The participants testify that such collaboration was impossible to imagine prior to the OMNIA training.

So far, OMNIA has held three Advanced Trainings, with 120 selected leaders participating. These leaders learned how to give leadership to IPTs, teach and preach in their mosques and churches, and to lead their organizations using the method of contextual learning.

OMNIA leader Soraya Deen led women's summits. The first had more than 150 women and the second, more than 100. At the first summit, the wife of the Deputy Governor of Gombe was the chief guest. She was delighted to see the gathering give women an opportunity to raise difficult questions like polygamy, child marriage and female genital mutilation. Some participants, in senior positions in government and NGOs, as well as lawyers and accountants engaged in the conversation affirming that this was a safe place to do so.

## OMNIA's Strategy to Counter Extremism

### Winning Hearts and Minds

Tools available to governments are inadequate to the task of countering religious extremism. Boko Haram cannot be defeated militarily because most of its members are embedded in local communities. State diplomacy conducted by governments does not reach the ground where recruitment of young people and their indoctrination for violent extremism take place. The only viable option, therefore, is "winning hearts and minds."

Churches and mosques rooted in local communities, who know the people well and have been in the business of "winning hearts and minds" for centuries, can be powerful partners in the struggle against this deadly terrorist organization. Religion, which has given an ideological foundation to this extremism, can be the most effective instrument to counter it. However, it requires a massive training effort to deconstruct received theologies of exclusivity and superiority and to reconstruct contextual theologies of pluralism and solidarity.

### Bringing Muslims and Christians Together

Religious communities are among the most organized and stable institutions, ubiquitous in cities and villages across Nigeria. Large numbers of people gather at least once a week to listen to one person declare what God's will is for them, and many try to follow. They have ritualized methods of collecting money, and many own significant assets including real estate.

Religious preaching and teaching often aid radicalization. Churches and mosques of the Northeast are heirs to strict top-down theologies, received from their colonial past, that engender attitudes of exclusivity and superiority. Such attributes are inconsistent with the core-values of both religions and with the traditional values of Nigeria. The resulting gap between faith communities creates opportunities for negative stereotypes to flourish and extremism to expand. Groups like Boko Haram step in to that gap. OMNIA's strategy is to close the gap by bringing Muslim and Christian leaders together to learn the collaborative and peacemaking impulses within their religions and to gain skills to act powerfully and effectively together. This, OMNIA believes, is the key to countering extremism.



*Rev. Abare Kallah*

Abare Kallah is OMNIA's lead organizer in the city of Gombe. In 2015 visiting the U.S. to attend a conference, he came to SCUPE. "I came even though I was unsure of why God wanted me to come to the U.S. at this time. I knew it was not just to speak at a conference," he said. But now, he felt that he knew the ultimate purpose. "It was to meet SCUPE," he said. "This is why God brought me here. My soul rests in this place!"

In April 2017, Rev. Kallah helped negotiate the release of 82 Chibok girls in April 2017 together with a group of religious and civic leaders. He is a minister in ECWA (Evangelical Church Winning All), a denomination of over 5000 churches, and the chairman of CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria) for the Northeast zone. CAN is the largest Christian ecumenical organization in Nigeria. Click here to watch him on [Chicago's WGN TV News](#).

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## Building Interfaith Peacemaker Teams

OMNIA equips Muslim and Christian leaders and people of faith to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IPTs) in local towns and villages. IPTs are proficient in the method of contextual learning. They build deep relationships across religious and ethnic identities and create coalitions between churches, mosques and community organizations. From this base they act powerfully and effectively together on issues that arise from the context. Recognizing that women have often had a disproportionately effective role in peacemaking around the world, OMNIA has a specific focus on training women.



## Leadership Training Goals and Process

OMNIA's training has two goals. The first is to shift the leaders' theological orientation from top-down theologies that validate exclusivity and legitimize extremism to bottom-up theologies that compel them return to the core of their faith: to love God and love their neighbors. The second is to build their skills to build collaborative power. They learn to gain a clear awareness of their own self-interest, learn the self-interest of others through one-on-one interviews, and finding mutuality. They also learn to engage in dialogue with those who are religiously different and to act effectively and powerfully, together.

OMNIA's training has three stages. Its basic training teaches leaders the alternative paradigm of OMNIA's contextual method, and skills to build power. It equips them to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams in their communities for collaborative and effective action. The advanced training is focuses on participants who will give leadership in the IPTs. It also equips them to teach and preach in their congregations, and lead their organizations using the contextual method. The Training of Trainers is for those who will train others to take these new skills to all the Northeastern states of Nigeria.

## OMNIA's Goal for Northeastern Nigeria in 2019

**OMNIA's goal is to reduce Boko Haram's impact. To achieve this end, in the next year, OMNIA will train at least 450 religious leaders, provide advanced training to 100 leaders selected from that pool, and train at least 20 trainers, who will take its training to many parts of Nigeria's Northeast.**

In addition to the trainings, OMNIA will engage the following strategies:

### A. Engage Religious and Civil Society Leaders in Track 2 Diplomacy

A method tested in many parts of the world, Track 2 Diplomacy engages religious and civic leaders to influence public opinion and thereby legislative action, and is known to produce effective results.<sup>2</sup> Nigeria's religious leaders have significant moral authority, a powerful public voice, and the ability to convene and convince large numbers of people. When combined with civic leaders, and Tribal Rulers, their influence will be significantly amplified.

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<sup>2</sup> For a helpful analysis of the multiple tracks of diplomacy used by the Carter Center in Atlanta in the United States, please see: Jeffrey Mapendere, "Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks" in *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, 2(1), 66-81.

[https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/TrackOneandaHalfDiplomacy\\_Mapendere.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/TrackOneandaHalfDiplomacy_Mapendere.pdf) (accessed June 2018)



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## B. Power Up the Media

OMNIA seeks to create a multi-pronged strategy to engage the power of media -- state-owned, commercial, social, and earned media -- to use creative campaigns for getting the message of the value of pluralism to the broader public.

## C. Stimulate Entrepreneurship

Boko Haram provides various economic incentives to young people in return for their loyalty and service. In the city of Gombe entrepreneurial opportunities abound, yet over 70% of young people in the Northeastern states are unemployed. OMNIA will explore offering entrepreneurial training and finding investors who will open up new opportunities for them.

## OMNIA's Model for the World

Religious extremism and religiously legitimized injustices are realities across the world. In a year and a half OMNIA has shown that its method is already producing results, and that its work in Northeastern Nigeria is a model, that can be effective in other parts of the world as well.

Nigeria, with a population of 180 million, is the most populous country in Africa. With a growth rate of 2.7% it is anticipated that by 2050, Nigeria will overtake the United States as the third most populous country in the world. As Nigeria's influence within the continent of Africa continues to increase, it will become OMNIA's gateway to Africa and to other countries across the world.

OMNIA's model is already working in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the United States. Its work elsewhere is significantly influenced by the successes in Northeastern Nigeria.



## Step Up for OMNIA

OMNIA presents those who are searching for solutions to the massive problem of religious extremism with a proven and effective strategy for change.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once observed that the "greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people." OMNIA cannot do this alone. It needs many partners -- "the good people" -- to step up and be counted. This is the work of us all.

Please contact OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership to learn about specific ways in which you can participate in such a critical peacemaking venture.

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