

Matthew Kukah bridges Muslim-Christian divide in Nigeria

by [Josh Kenworthy](#) and [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

This article appears in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue.

(The Christian Science Monitor) When Matthew Kukah first arrived as the new bishop of the Sokoto Diocese in northern Nigeria's Muslim heartland, he received an unexpectedly warm welcome for a Christian leader.

According to Kukah, cultural and religious discrimination in many parts of the north can go all the way to the state governor level. But on the day of Kukah's installation in 2011, the local sultan paid some of his guests' hotel bills.

Once called a "rabble rouser for peace" by Nigeria's press, Kukah has been a key voice for unity as he has served in a number of high-level interreligious and governmental roles. Last year, he convened the national peace committee before Nigeria's presidential election. The committee brokered an agreement between former president Goodluck Jonathan and new president Muhammadu Buhari, ensuring the former accepted the result and handed over the reins of government peacefully.

Nigeria desires Christian-Muslim unity, he said, noting that in 1990, 20 years after the nation's civil war, a coup failed because it was going to remove the 12 northern states. People do not want to be separated, he said, but the country still needs a plan for bringing people together.

"The greatest problem the government has is in its inability to effectively communicate with citizens," Kukah said.

Nigeria's population of more than 180 million people is roughly 50 percent Muslim, 40 percent Christian, and 10 percent indigenous beliefs. The Muslim population is focused in the north and the Christian population in the south. Comprising four states and a population of 20 million people, Kukah's roughly 41-square-mile diocese is home to around 400,000 Catholics.

Kukah has emphasized education as a means of preventing extremism in groups such as Boko Haram, whose name is often translated as “Western education is forbidden.” Kukah noted that while 60 to 70 percent of Nigeria’s literate population is Christian, among northern Muslims perhaps 10 percent are educated.

“I’m explaining to the governors that we have about 10 to 15 million young kids who are out of school or on the streets across the 11 or 12 states in northern Nigeria,” he said. “In a country that is developing, such a huge number of uneducated and unskilled people will mean a combustible environment from where Boko Haram and all these agents of violence will continue to feed.”

Christian schools in the north have Muslim students and provide Islamic education teachers, he said.

“The problem with the Qur’anic education in northern Nigeria is that it was never designed to manage pluralism,” he said. “It is the responsibility of the state government to design a curriculum that takes cognizance of these realities.”

Robert Dowd, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame, helped bring Kukah to Indiana in October to speak about Christian-Muslim relations. Dowd attributes Kukah’s unifying work to his upbringing in an interreligious setting in Kaduna, in northwest Nigeria.

“Growing up where he did, I think he was really inspired to be a bridge builder, to promote mutual respect and peace,” Dowd said.

Kukah relates with respect to both Christians and Muslims, including those who are poor and on the margins, Dowd said, amplifying their concerns to business leaders and government officials, including presidents Jonathan and Buhari.

“He has a very fine way of helping people to see through the complexity of a situation, to see the challenge at hand,” Dowd said.

This report contains added material from an interview Celeste Kennel-Shank of the Christian Century conducted with Robert Dowd.