

November 2, 2011

## **OttawaWatch 320: The pastor and the imam**

**By Lloyd Mackey**

*As of a few months ago, the pastor and the imam continue to work together. According to a report on the United Religions Initiative website, dated May 27, 2021:*

*Today, Imam Ashafa and Pastor James work together to act as an example to their communities that peace is possible. They teach members of youth militias methods to resolve their conflicts peacefully rather than infinitely escalating violence, and have even led successful efforts to rebuild the churches and mosques that had fallen during their conflict.*

*The mention of the “notorious Rift Valley” in Kenya caused me to recall that a pastor and emerging award-winning Christian journalist, Jack Taylor of Vancouver had many years of experience at Rift Valley Academy. That school, among the top five of Kenya educational institutions is generally highly regarded as a place where both locals and expat young people can receive a Christian faith-based education. Like many other Christian boarding schools that, by necessity, separate children from their parents for months at a time, Rift has been the subject of period allegations of student abuse.*

It was good fun, last night (November 2), to watch a video in which a Nigerian Muslim imam told a feisty group of mostly Christian Kenyans that they best be about doing what their leader (Jesus) would like them to do.

The means by which Imam Muhammad Ashafa, and his Pentecostal pastor fellow peacemonger, James Wuye, came to be advising some Kenyans, is today’s OttawaWatch topic.

The imam and pastor were together in Ottawa, at St. Paul University. They were part of a panel moderated by Vern Neufeld Redekop, the Mennonite head of the Catholic university’s conflict studies department. The whole evening was initiated by Initiatives of Change (pun intended), described in its promo material as “a diverse, global network committed to building trust across the world’s divides.

The blurb continues that IOC “works on the principle that changes in people’s motives, attitudes and behaviour are not only possible, but are the only sure basis on which wider lasting change in society can be effected.”

Originally known, 70 years ago, as Moral Rearmament, the group had a strong Christian basis. Even today, with its broader, multifaith emphasis, it continues to encourage people to begin their day with a “quiet time” in which the words of scripture and other contemplative exercises help to shape the activities of the hours to follow. (I first learned about the “quiet time” during my spiritually formative years in high school, through the

efforts of the Inter-School Christian Fellowship. Little did I know that the idea was not original with the ISCF.)

But back to the imam and the pastor.

Imam Ashafa and Pastor Wuye used to be warriors in and around the Plateau province in central Nigeria, where Muslims and Christians were constantly waging turf battles and killing each other off in the process. Wuye, in fact, was a part of a Christian militia that fought off Muslim incursions into their communities. He has fair evidence of the battles: his right hand is obviously artificial and he good humorously notes that the real thing was cut off in a hand-to-hand exchange with a Muslim opponent.

There was something worth noting in the costuming of the two men, when they appeared in Ottawa. Wuye, a jaunty little fellow with a mischievous glint in his eye, sported a black suit with Roman collar and a small black fedora. Ashafa, lanky and almost scholarly, wore a white kaftan and, on his head, a white turban.

Their “fashion statements” were meant to reinforce the point that both of them were strongly committed to their own particular faith perspectives. True, they have reached a common understanding that forgiveness leads to mutual respect and, indeed, the kind of filial love that leads to the cessation of hostilities.

But Wuye has not left behind, his enthusiasm for leading people to Christ. And Ashafa maintains that a little “healthy competition” tends to lead to the sharpening of the devotional skills that bring out the best in his faith – as well as that of his friendly competitor.

So how did Kenya get into this mix?

In 2008 post-election violence, hundreds of Kenyans were killed and tens of thousands were displaced from their homes and farms – many of them in the notorious Rift Valley. In most cases, perpetrators and victims were Christians whose political interests had brought out the worst in their tribal instincts. A young lawyer, Joseph Karanja Murathi helped facilitate the involvement of Ashafa and Wuye in the task of quelling the violence. In the process, the peace teams involving these people also introduced what Kofi Annan, former secretary-general of the United Nations, called “experiences of healing and reconciliation.”

It was in this context that Ashafa, the imam, with the full encouragement of Wuye, the Pentecostal pastor, was literally “teaching” these Christians the ways of Jesus, particularly as they related to the heretofore mentioned healing and reconciliation process.

There was one more element to the story, as presented in Ottawa last night. It was that two videos were excerpted for the occasion: *The Imam and the Pastor*, which told the

Nigeria story, and *An African Answer*, which recounted the Kenyan experience that followed.

To Richard Weeks, who runs the IOC Ottawa operation, the presence in the room of a fourth man, Alan Channer, the British director of the two videos was significant. He represented the importance of story-telling, communication and media in spreading the word into other climes, about faith-based peace-making. If Channer had not been in the picture, the imam and the pastor would still be in Nigeria doing their thing. The rest of the world would not know about what that thing was.

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Many of my readers make the point that there is no such thing as a “moderate” Muslim, and that all true Pentecostals should be prepared to draw the sword on this “unholy enemy”.

In telling this story, I can only note that, by all appearances, these once mortal enemies are now friends, congenial competitors – and agents of reconciliation. Go figure.

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