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- [Member churches](#)
- [What we do](#)
- [Get involved](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Press centre](#)

- **English**
- [Deutsch](#)
- [Français](#)
- [Español](#)
- [Português](#)
- [한국어](#)
- ...



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## Nigerian Christians and Muslims open historic peace centre

20 August 2016

Nigerian Christians and Muslims gathered on 19 August to open the International Centre for Inter-Faith Peace and Harmony (ICIPH).

The centre is located in Kaduna, where more than 20,000 people have died in various conflicts over the last three decades.

Amid a growing number of interfaith initiatives in Nigeria, the new centre has a unique goal: to systematically document interfaith relations to inform national and international policy-making.

Key local Nigerian organizations, the Christian Council of Nigeria and Jama'atu Nasril Islam, led the effort to open the centre, which was preceded in 2014 by a consultative forum held in Abuja that drew about 40 Muslim and Christian leaders.

Many supporters were recognized at the grand opening, among them Dr Emmanuel Josiah Udofia, primate of the African Church and president of the Christian Council of Nigeria, Sultan of Sokoto Sa'adu Abubakar, and Dr Khalid Aliyu, secretary general of Jama'atu Nasril Islam.

His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi of Jordan and Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja were also among those who envisioned the centre's goals and outcomes.

Malam Nasir EL-Rufai, governor of Kaduna State, formerly opened the centre. He shared his experience of the way that religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, sometimes speak and act in ways that hinder interreligious peace, so he was very pleased to support the centre as a physical symbol helping Muslims and Christians work together more effectively.

Abubakar also voiced his support for the centre, and spoke about how God wants there to be religious diversity in Nigeria.

Onaiyekan said he believed the centre could potentially become a model for conflict resolution in other parts of the world.

World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, also delivered remarks at the official opening.

"We have come here as pilgrims, Muslims and Christians, to seek the will of God for justice and peace," he said.

"Pilgrimages are for people of faith to holy places. That might be places of great historical importance for our faith. However, places where the sanctity of life, holy in the eyes of the Holy God, is under threat can also be holy places. Like here in Kaduna. We are today in the city that has been known by many for the fights with religious connotations."

But now Kaduna will be a city known for its witness to inter-religious peace and harmony, he said.

"This place can be a holy place in a new way, bringing a new vision and anew reality of people of faith living together. The presence of you, the religious leaders of Nigeria, shows the significance of this day and this event for the whole nation," said Tveit.

Local leaders have been backed by international partners WCC and and the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT). "It is vital that our local Nigerian partners are and are seen as playing the leading role in the



Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit and Sultan of Sokoto Sa'adu Abubakar both spoke at the ceremony. © Clare Amos/WCC

management of the centre and the direction of its work.”

What will the peace centre do? “WCC and RABIT will, God willing, seek partners to enable the opening of a neutral information-collection and archive centre, ideally both virtually and on the ground in Nigeria, which will facilitate the sharing of stories, allow the voices of those who feel themselves voiceless to be heard and recorded, and assist with the collecting of accurate data about incidents of violence, online and through hotlines,” explained Tveit. “The aim of this will be to make an accurate, impartial and indelible record of injustices, violence and atrocities which can serve not only as a deterrent but also as an honest starting point for future solutions.”

A ceremony to commemorate the grand opening began with a Muslim prayer and concluded with a Christian prayer.

The peace centre is not simply a building, emphasized Tveit, but a catalyst for hope and change for the future.

“The aim will be to make an accurate, impartial and indelible record of injustices, violence and atrocities which can serve not only as a deterrent but also as an honest starting point for future solutions,” he said.

“My daily prayer, taken from the Song of Zechariah, a prophet honoured I believe both by Christians and Muslims, asks God ‘to guide our feet in the way of peace’. In the opening of this centre I believe that we have taken some steps forward on this vital way.”

Moustafa Elqabbany, a representative of Prince Ghazi of Jordan, spoke about the importance of building peace for and with women and young people. Violence doesn't just affect young people via individual deaths, he said, but a culture of violence scars a whole generation of young people and affects their psyche.

### **Full text of speech from WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit**

**Religion: Way of war or path to peace?** (WCC press release of 30 June 2016)

**Christian and Muslim alliance commits to help solving tensions in Nigeria** (WCC press release of 12 July 2012)

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