

JE SUIS CHARLIE ? I AM A CHRISTIAN AND A NIGERIEN

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Is being a Christian a crime? It is hard to explain what happened January 16 and 17 in Niger. Officially, that famous caricature of the Prophet Muhammad in Charlie Hebdo triggered this chain of events which led to the burning of dozens of churches in this West African country borders Nigeria. But could that caricature alone be enough to spark so much hate that 10 people died in the flames?

More than 80 churches and Catholic missions, schools, and pastors' houses were burned, leaving families with nothing left. It was a barbaric day, a day of pillaging. Even family pets and livestock were not spared.

January 16 and 17 were like a bad dream for the Nigerien Christian community. And yet Niger has always been a country of peace, hospitality, and religious tolerance where different religious communities live together in peace.

We couldn't believe what we were hearing. "It was like we were living a nightmare. It is impossible to believe that during all those hours that the churches burned, not even a single firefighter made an effort to put out the flames," said a church leader sadly. A pastor that the World Renew team met told us, "the hardest thing for me is to know that people wanted to kill me. The idea that I could be hunted like an animal...it's hard to handle."

The whole Christian community was deeply wounded; there were even death threats against Christians. Many Christians took refuge in police stations, in the wilderness, or in the homes of the few Muslims who defended Christians or protected churches from the protesters.

People were afraid. Christians were discouraged, shocked, in disbelief. In short, they were traumatized. How could we help them to heal from the trauma they had suffered? After having given financial aid to the families of pastors whose houses had been burned, World Renew decided to help in a way that others had not considered—we decided to support the victims and the whole community psychologically.

To prepare the community, an introductory class on trauma healing for church leaders took place February 2. More than 50 leaders took part in the meeting. The impact of this class was obvious when many victims signed up for debriefing

sessions. The team first trained 17 church leaders to heal themselves, and then, to help others to heal. An expert in trauma healing and her assistants taught these 17 leaders for 3 days.

Here are just a few comments from these leaders after the workshop:

We welcome this workshop. It can help us not only with the trauma caused by the events of January 16 and 17, but also with everyday life. I now feel more qualified to overcome my personal problems and help others as well.

I appreciated the various stories that reflect life in my community and also the spiritual character of the workshop, especially because it was practical and adapted to our culture.

-Yazi Adamou

Yes, I live with trauma, since my wife died on June 3, 2011 at 4:55pm. Afterwards I married another woman who encourages me a lot--she also lost her first husband in an accident. In this seminar, I learned many things that really encouraged and comforted me. I've had many reactions to this trauma and I didn't know what caused them, but at this workshop I learned that they come from my trauma. And now that I know, I'll take precautions. The events of January 17 also were not easy.

Really, I am very grateful for this seminar that has helped me so much, from the first day of teaching to the last. I now feel more at peace. Glory to God!

-Pastor Issa Elhadji Kouldjami

I thank the Lord for giving me the chance to participate in this seminar. I've really profited from it. First of all, it has helped me understand what trauma is, especially how it affects people in a variety of ways. I've realized that there have been moments when I've been traumatized, but I was unaware. What was really important for me was discovering the different stages of healing from trauma. Understanding this will not only help me, but will also permit me to help others who are in need, people who are traumatized. Through this seminar I've been introduced to how to help people help from trauma. May the Lord help me to use what I've learned effectively for the good for people in need.

-Abou Chaibou

This seminar is valuable for helping people understand what trauma is and how to respond and help traumatized people. Many actions that are considered sins after a traumatic event are actually signs of trauma that must be received with grace and understanding. The preliminary teaching of this seminar can help us to be sensitive to these signs and ready to begin a healing process. Thank you for allowing me to participate in this seminar with you.

-Steven Brown SIM Niger

I was very impressed by this workshop. In general, I was very happy with its

organization. The subjects covered were interesting. We are sure that they will be a great help as we accompany our Christian communities and traumatized individuals.
-Father Cosue Ahonon, Catholic priest

I am Cameroonian and I've been living in Niamey, Niger with my family for the last 5 and a half years. The events of January 16 and 17 2015 have disturbed me. It was as if the roof that protected us had been suddenly taken away. I was sad, angry, and afraid, and I even had diarrhea and stomach problems. Some nights I had trouble sleeping or nightmares. In fact, I didn't know what to do; I was confused and I cried even more because my husband was travelling at the time.

Meeting with others to discuss these events comforted me a little and I the symptoms that I had before the trauma healing workshop have diminished somewhat. This seminar did me a lot of good because each person expressed his or her emotions as we discussed in small groups. I learned relaxation exercises to heal from trauma. I also learned how to help others and how to stay effective while helping them.
-Mme Gaston Elisabeth

I felt very at home during this workshop. It helped me to externalize and better understand my emotions. I became more clear-minded and ready to face our current situation. I think I will now be able to accompany others, whether they are children, adults, or elderly people, in their journeys toward healing from trauma. I would like to express my gratitude and that of the Catholic Church in Niger and our leaders to those who organized this seminar. I wish for all of them the benediction of our God. My humble prayers accompany you at all times.

-Father Paul Wendyuam Sandwidi
Priest of Saint Gabriel de Garbado parish, Niamey

After the leaders' workshop, we organized a workshop for children traumatized by the events of January 16 and 17. More than 50 children between the ages of 8 and 15 who had suffered traumatizing events were in attendance.

We use a story-based healing method founded on the Bible with interactive activities. During the full-day workshop, the children participated in drawing exercises, listened to stories and participated in other exercises according to their age group. It is not only adults who can be traumatized.

"Papa, will the Muslims kill us? Why do they hate us?" one child asked.

Another 8 year-old child was so afraid that he vomited.

Another refused to go outside by himself because he thought the neighbors would kill him. Yet another little girl no longer wants to sleep alone because she has nightmares.

These are the kinds of stories that parents told us about their children after these events.

The debriefings took place Monday, February 16. They were individual or group sessions with a facilitator which allow individuals to share their stories of the traumatic events that they suffered.

“I feel guilty that I didn’t save my diploma and my class notebooks. We had heard that people were burning churches, but my father said that since our church is far from the paved road, it would be difficult for people to find our church. So we were still there when we saw them coming and we had to hide at the neighbors’ house. We saw them steal and burn all of our things. I’m sorry that I didn’t prepare myself better and I have nightmares,” said a university student during a debriefing session.

Another individual also had trouble sleeping after the attacks. *“I felt all alone, completely unsafe, and I couldn’t hold back my tears.”*

Many men and women had similar reactions. We wanted to help people understand that these reactions are normal and natural and that with time they will slowly disappear. Many lay people benefitted from these debriefings.

During my debriefing I began to understand that the attacks in Niger had deeply affected me. I understood that my Muslim neighbors had not protected me, and yet I must love them. The debriefing was interesting because I learned how I should behave with Muslims, and also how I should approach my family to encourage and counsel them as they interact with other traumatized people. Finally, I am also very happy with the prayer that we lifted up together.

-Pastor Panlieba Ouaba

It’s really important and even necessary that as Christian brothers and sisters we know how to listen well to those who have lived through trauma. It is a source of comfort for them to talk about their experiences. This teaching helped me a lot, especially praying together.

-Pastor Samaila labo

Representing World Renew Niger, Harouna Issaka of Mali was a guest speaker on a radio program in order to raise awareness throughout Niger about trauma. This 2-hour show covered themes such as the definition of trauma, in order to work against the idea that traumatized people are ill. He also spoke about forgiveness, wounds of the heart, grief, etc. Several listeners called in with questions. The show was broadcast many times, which allowed us to impact a greater number of people.

Listener testimonies:

“Your show really comforted me today because I’ve been sick since our church was burned. I couldn’t believe what had happened. But I have great hate for Muslims,

even my relatives. I was asking questions such as: Why doesn't God curse them? How can I stand living among them? Will the government rebuild the churches? How can we learn to forgive the Muslims? This show helped me to begin the healing process."

"Since the events of January 17, I've wanted to get revenge against Muslims. I couldn't sleep well. Listening to this program has done me good. I am now ready to forgive."

World Renew must continue this work to reach everyone who has been traumatized and help them begin the healing process. Because Nigerien Christians are already traumatized, many fled their homes after a recent Boko Haram attack on February 9. Fear of Boko Haram and growing anti-Christian sentiment in Niger are making the country increasingly dangerous for Christians.

In response to these events, Nigeriens have taken action. A church in one small village sent thousands of dollars which had been set aside to renovate their church to churches that had been affected by the attacks. Nigeriens have also taken to social media to respond to the idea that true Nigeriens are Muslims. Hundreds have joined a Facebook page called, "I am Nigerien, I am Christian."