



Wheelchairs from Jesus

by Rick Wood

They crawl across the rocky ground dragging their withered limbs behind them. They should be going to school but this is impossible unless someone carries them. They are often forced to grow up uneducated and beg for a living. They are the childhood victims of polio in Nigeria.

Nigeria has the highest rates of polio in the world, leaving thousands of children paralyzed and hopeless as they face a life of disability in an area of the world with few resources for rehabilitation and training. Some Muslim leaders have opposed polio vaccinations, so the toll of misery and suffering grows ever larger.

A band of Nigerian entrepreneurs with some outside help have built a uniquely designed wheelchair and distributed over 2000 of them to disabled kids in Nigeria. Many of these wheelchairs have gone to kids in largely Muslim areas, with an amazing impact on the lives of the kids and the thinking of the Muslim community.

In a deliberate attempt to bring the reality of the suffering of these children to the attention of the Muslim authorities, these Nigerian Christians have engaged the Nigerian Islamic clerics in a strategic partnership of joint wheelchair presentation. This was pioneered a year ago when there was a wheelchair presentation of 30 wheelchairs at the Jos Central Mosque. The emcee of the event

chastised all the Muslim high officials gathered, saying that the Christians were giving out these wheelchairs to the Muslims, but the Muslims hadn't done anything like this for their own people, let alone for the Christians.

Another joint event was held again on March 4th 2008, when about 50 wheelchairs were presented at the Central Mosque in Bauchi City, located about a 1 ½ hour journey north of Jos in a largely Muslim area. They have used such occasions to make a very strong case for expanded polio immunization and also the discouragement of street begging by Muslim disabled persons.



One leader of this effort says,

Whenever I am part of a wheelchair presentation in a Muslim area, I always tell the story of Jesus healing the paralytic who was lowered down through the roof. I also include the part about Jesus forgiving sins. I explain that as Christians, we try to follow the example of Jesus. Because Jesus went about healing the sick and disabled and giving sight to the blind, we are trying to do that in His name, by giving out these wheelchairs to both Muslims and Christians in the love of Christ.

The wheelchairs are 3-wheeled, self-pedaled "tricycles" made of bicycle parts, which work far better on the rough roads and trails of Africa than a Western-styled wheelchair. They have their own shop in Jos where they build them, 100 at a time, with 20 employees, both Muslim and Christian. Some employees are apprentices and some are disabled themselves. They are built at a cost of \$150 each.

The following story from one of the leaders of this effort illustrates the ongoing power of this ministry to open the hearts and minds of Muslims to the love of Christ.

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As Fadi prepared for the wheelchair distribution, he deliberately chose to give some to Muslims. In fact, he gave seven to Muslims and eight to Christians. He went around and investigated who needed them the most and met with the traditional rulers in that area. In early November they invited the recipients to come to Kare the day before they were to be given. Fadi spent some time with them and their relatives, explaining how to take care of the wheelchair and explaining a little bit of the Gospel.

A few weeks later some of the Muslims began complaining about the sign “Jesus Cares For You” painted on the back of each wheelchair in the Hausa language. Some of the radical Muslims complained to the parents of the children who had received the wheelchair that they should not have the name of Jesus on anything they owned. They wanted to remove the name of Jesus from them. This complaint was eventually carried to the village head who is a Muslim. He

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called together the parties who were complaining and said, “Jesus is the one who brought these wheelchairs here. If you want to clean the name of Jesus off of them, Jesus might come back and take these away from us. Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an and no one has cleaned his name out of the Qur’an.”

He then asked the people, “Do you want your children to start crawling around on the ground again?” They replied, “Oh no.” He then encouraged them to stop complaining. He called Fadi and told him the issue was settled and they would be happy to have Jesus bring any more wheelchairs to them.

Fadi said that this whole thing has caused quite a stir in the Muslim communities. He is receiving many reports of people sitting around under the mango trees talking about why and how this Jesus would do something so wonderful for them. In the past, they have thought of Christians as drunkards and immoral and violent people and have not really seen this side of Christianity before. They are now being forced to rethink their views about who Jesus is.



We might want to ask ourselves whether simply distributing Bibles or gospel messages would have had as great an impact on the hearts and minds of these Muslims as distributing wheelchairs has had.

Fadi also reported that the district head, the Muslim chief over many chiefs in that area, called him recently to talk about the wheelchairs. He was not able to personally come to the wheelchair presentation because of another function but had sent a representative. And apparently he was very pleased with what had been reported to him. He asked Fadi if the ministry had a headquarters building in Kare. Of course, Fadi had to say no. The chief said, “You know when white people are involved, they like to see things done properly. It would be shameful for the white man to come and there not be a proper place to receive him.” Therefore, he promised that he would give whatever land was needed for Fadi’s ministry to build a headquarters building in the area. He told him to go back to Kare and select any land he wanted and come and report back to him. Fadi did so. The chief sent a letter to the local government headquarters telling them that they should deed this piece of land over to them. He also told him that he would make a contribution toward the building whenever they started to erect it.

The next time we think that social action is unnecessary in evangelism or even a waste of time and resources, we might want to ask ourselves whether simply distributing Bibles or gospel messages would have had as great an impact on the hearts and minds of these Muslims as distributing wheelchairs has had.

If you would like more information or to get involved in supporting the ongoing distribution of these wheelchairs in Nigeria, please email me at: rick.wood@uscwm.org.