

# Reflections on My Journey to Nigeria in February 2025

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Had I read the travel advisory from the US State Department before going to Nigeria in February of 2025, I might not have made the journey given the danger of Boko Haram still present in that country and particularly in the region of Kaduna where there is still a presence of Boko Haram.

During my travel from Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, to Kaduna State University for a major interfaith conference, I was accompanied by four Nigerian policemen driving in front of our caravan as my security detail.

Providentially, I did make this trip, and upon reflection, it did fulfill a prophetic message that came to me 24 years ago when our daughter, Corita Grudzen, MD, was beginning her medical residency at Bellevue Hospital in New York. The attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11/2001 were emblematic of the tangible divide between Christianity and Islam in the modern world. At that time, I dedicated the remainder of my life to help heal the divide between these great spiritual traditions by completing my doctoral studies at Columbia University in NYC on the history of Christianity and Islam and the founding of Global Ministries University in 2001.

Even though I had little idea how this inspiration might be fulfilled, my life and that of my wife, Marita Grudzen, has taken on an interfaith focus with dramatic involvements in Turkey, Kenya, India, and now Nigeria. I was recognized in Nigeria as a prophetic voice in the field of interfaith relations partly because of the connections forged over the past two decades with the Gulen or Hizmet movement led until 2025 by Fethullah Gulen, now deceased as of October 20, 2024. I

had the opportunity to meet Fethullah Gulen at his retreat center in Saylorsburg, PA, in 2018... At this meeting, Mr. Gulen asked me to sit in his chair. I felt this was a symbolic way of his passing on part of his interfaith mission to me. Mister Gulen had initiated a unique relationship with the Roman Catholic Church in February of 1998 when he had a well-publicized meeting with Pope John Paul II. He was heavily criticized for this meeting by more conservative groups both in Turkey and the Sunni Muslim world of the Middle East and South Asia. In the US and Europe, many Turkish Americans continued to advance his mission of interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

After the completion of my doctoral studies at Columbia in 2006, Marita and I began a closer relationship with Turkish people both in Turkey and in the Bay Area. Marita worked with a group of Turkish doctors to develop international meetings in Istanbul and Antalya, Turkey, in 2005 and 2007. In this initial period of encounter with the Turkish culture and political context, my wife, Marita Grudzen, received special recognition from the Turkish government, led by Prime Minister Erdogan, for her collaboration with the Turkish medical community on these international healthcare conferences. We had also developed a closer relationship with the Turkish community in the Bay Area, resulting in a trip to Turkey with the Gulen-affiliated group here in the Bay Area in 2009.

Our work in Kenya, starting in 2012, began a relationship with the Hizmet-led educational movement in Kenya. Fatih Akdogan, a Hizmet educator and later principal of a Hizmet school in Mombasa, became a founder with us of an interfaith training program for Kenyan teachers and principals in the coastal region of Kenya until the onset of COVID-19.

Beginning in 2019, we initiated, with the help of the Harmony Foundation in Nairobi, a series of global online conferences in collaboration with Tangaza University and the Harmony Institute in Nairobi. Harmony was led by Mustafa Genc until he was kidnapped by Turkish security forces in November of 2024. Mustafa Genc joined our Maryknoll Affiliate chapter in 2019, becoming a member of the first interfaith chapter of the Maryknoll Affiliates.

During my time in Nigeria, I encountered John Cardinal Onaiyekan, a leading Roman Catholic proponent of interfaith dialogue. Cardinal Onaiyekan and I were speakers at a major interfaith event held in Abuja on February 20. I also attended a ceremony with him to dedicate water wells

at camps for internally displaced people in Nigeria. These water wells were funded by a Romanian delegation that participated with me in the three successive interfaith conferences in Nigeria from February 20 to February 25, 2025. The Romanian delegation consisted of professors from Romanian universities who are affiliated with the Hizmet movement in Europe.

The global reach of this movement became ever clearer to me despite the efforts of the Turkish government to suppress it. GMU is offering three scholarships for our graduate program in Science and Religion to candidates recommended by UFUK Dialogue. We also had a meeting with officials from Nile University in Abuja. This university was founded by members of the Hizmet movement in Nigeria in 2009 and offers a full range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. GMU is exploring an affiliation with the Centre for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria. Doctor Taufiq Abubakar Hussain, Director of the Centre for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue, met with me at our Abuja conference and expressed interest in an affiliation with GMU upon my return to the US.

Nigeria has the largest population of any African country, with over 230 million inhabitants. It is expected to become the third largest nation by population by 2050, with over 400 million persons living in Nigeria. Only India and China will have a larger population. Since Christians and Muslims are almost evenly divided in Nigeria, it is very important to foster a strong interfaith platform for dialogue between these two monotheistic religions. Roman Catholics represent about 12% of the population in Nigeria, or around 20 to 30 million people. Given projections to 2050, this number could grow to nearly 50 million by 2050. The efforts by Pope Francis to establish interfaith harmony with Islam have been highlighted by Pope Francis's meeting with the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Ahmed Al Tayeb, and their Joint Statement on Human Fraternity on February 9, 2019, which led to the major encyclical of Pope Francis, ***Fratelli Tutti***, published in Assisi on October 3, 2020. GMU has cosponsored three global online conferences on ***Fratelli Tutti*** in 2021, 2023, and 2025. The three **International Conferences on Fratelli Tutti** are documented on <https://fratellitutticonference.org/> and are available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/c/InternationalConferenceonFratelliTutti>

GMU plans to collaborate with UFUK Dialogue on a variety of online interfaith programs in the coming year and provide Nigerian students access to our interfaith degree and certificate

programs. We will add a new faculty member from Nigeria for our Religion and Science program who will teach Ethics from both a philosophical and interfaith perspective. Nigeria has a very large youth population; 70% of Nigeria's population is under 30 years of age. 40% of these youth are living below the poverty line. UFUK Dialogue has become a leader in addressing the needs of youth in Nigeria, as indicated by the title of its recent interfaith conference at which I spoke, **“Empowering Youth: Cultivating a Culture of Peace and Understanding.”** UFUK Dialogue, in partnership with GMU, can provide leadership training for the future social and political leaders in Nigeria. We welcome this challenge and look forward to a fruitful relationship with UFUK Dialogue and its educational and interfaith infrastructure in Nigeria.