There is certainly nothing unique about the persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria. The persecution of the Christian church is as old as the history of the church itself. However, there is a profound difference between the attitudes of the early church towards persecution and that of the church today. In a contemporary world where power, success, and glory are “worshipped,” as opposed to suffering, persecution poses a huge challenge to the church. Unlike in the early church, where Christians who gladly endured persecution sought and willingly embraced martyrdom, the reverse seems to be the case these days. This is not to say that martyrdom in Northern Nigeria is sought for, or informed by an individualistic and romanticized pietistic desire to die and be with Christ! It is meted out against Christians by the virtue of being the disciples of Christ in the midst of a predominantly Muslim population. In first part of this article, I describe the reality of the
persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria and the despair that this persecution has caused. In the second part, I articulate a theological interpretation and response to the persecution and its implications for the global church. In the face of the challenging religious persecution, I argue that neither armed struggle nor reverting to traditional worship of ancestral gods is a valid response to such persecution. Rather, it is resilient faith in the liberating presence of the crucified God in the midst of suffering and despair that offers the ultimate hope to the persecuted church in Northern Nigeria.

Jesus once told his disciples that “they will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2, NIV). This prophecy has once again come to fulfillment as we explore the persecution of the Christians in Nigeria. There are two dominant religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity, which consider themselves as rivals rather than friends. The church in Northern Nigeria has been under severe persecution since its inception in the nineteenth century. The persecution is meted out against the church by virtue of its members being a minority in the predominantly Islamic states of Northern Nigeria. The church has always suffered two types of persecution: institutional persecution and terrorist attacks.

In this part of Nigeria, fanatical Muslims are openly hostile to the Christian faith that the church confesses and teaches, and openly preach hate and violence against Christians, publicly stereotyping them as “infidels.” As people who believe in the Triune God, the church is constantly being ridiculed for worshipping three Gods. Regarding Christian faith as a perverted religion, these Muslim fundamentalists strongly believe and publicly proclaim that Islam alone is the true religion that offers humanity the only means of salvation. As such, we who are non-Muslims are lost. Therefore, it is their divine duty to subdue and convert us to Islam by whatever means—including use of force. It is up to us to willingly embrace Islam or risk being killed. As a result, Northern Nigeria has become a hotbed of religious persecution in West Africa.

The institutional persecutions that Christians suffer are myriad: discriminating against them in hiring for public jobs; denial of property to build churches; dis-
discrimination in admission to public higher educational institutions; denying Christians lucrative government elective and appointive positions; imposing the veil on Christian female students and denying Christian students a place of worship on public school campuses, even where a mosque is built. Other subtle forms of institutional persecution are forcing young Christian girls into marriage with Muslims against the consent of their parents, but forbidding Muslim girls from marrying Christians; preventing teaching of Christian religion to Christian children in public schools, where Islam is taught; and mistreating and threatening of Muslim converts to Christianity. Christians are constantly and publicly being humiliated for their religious identity; anything deemed blasphemous to Islam is resisted with violence. They continue to experience these insidious persecutions daily with impunity, because those in power who ought to be protecting them are often complicit.

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The insidious persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria has recently degenerated into acts of terrorism with the emergence of the world’s most deadly Islamic terrorist group, called Boko Haram. In their elevated persecution, Boko Haram has destroyed over 1,000 churches, of which about 100 are Lutheran churches, and has caused mass displacement of Christians, many of whom are women and children. The hope of rebuilding these churches as quickly as possible for the people to resume worship is very bleak, as many Christians have lost their means of livelihood. The terrorism is so appalling that the Global Terrorist Index of 2015 ranked Nigeria third out of the 158 most severely religiously terrorized countries in the world.²

There are people who claim that Boko Haram not only attacks Christians, but also Muslims, and therefore their attacks on churches and Christians are far from being a form of religious persecution. Though this claim has some elements of truth, it not only underestimates the severity of the persecution of the terror group against Christians, but also undermines the overarching religious motivation of their mission, that is, either to systematically eliminate Christianity or to intimidate Christians to total submission to Islam in Northern Nigeria. Claiming they are fighting for God, whenever Boko Haram destroys churches, maims and kills Christians, and abducts and rapes schoolgirls, it proclaims that what it does is not the

work of humanity, but of God. Sheik Abubakar Imam Shekau, the leader of the group, said:

If death is your worldly gain, for us, it is eternal victory to die working for Allah. Our joy is to die in Jihad for Allah against infidels like you….Allah that finished Pharaoh and other wicked rulers that you are not up to, will finish you and end your government. We are not afraid because we are not doing man’s work but Allah’s work. And we will see who will carry the day.3

Shekau, who vowed that his group would destroy Christians and Christianity in Nigeria, said it would also kill all Muslims aiding the arrest and harassment of its members.4 Therefore, Boko Haram attacks fellow Muslims only to the extent that Boko Haram perceives them as a threat to their mission—especially those Muslims who collaborate with the government in fighting them. Their attack on Muslims is also designed to blindfold the public from getting to know the real religious mission of its violence against the Christian church. The financial supporters of the Islamic sect, many of whom are politicians, want the public to believe that the violence against Christians is politically driven. Though Boko Haram has some political undertones, reducing the motivation of the terrorist group to mere politics dismisses the intensity of their persecution of the church. Why is the church a target if the violence is purely political?

Decrying that the church in the north is “systematically, deliberately and progressively being eliminated” by Boko Haram, the Bishop of Durham, the Rt. Rev. Justin Welby, said that the Anglican Bishop of Damaturu (in Yobe state) has presently gone into hiding further south.5 Welby claims “his flock is scattered, his church destroyed….It is too dangerous for him to return and there is little sign at present of that changing.”6 Even Lutheran churches that were before rapidly growing in the area have now been halted and deserted; hence, Christians have become an endangered species. The pastors and the members have fled for their dear lives. It is dangerous to be identified as a Christian, let alone to hold worship services! Christians who have lost their families, relatives, friends, and property in the violence have wondered whether the church has been forsaken and rejected by God. They have become despairing, looking inward and wondering whether they have sinned against God. In Northern Nigeria, “when Christ calls us” to be Christians, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly suggests, “he bids us come and die.”7

All the efforts of the government to stem the religious violence seem to have

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4This explains why, even at the time of writing this paper, there is no single mosque that the sect has claimed responsibility for bombing.
6Ibid.
yielded little or no success. Boko Haram appears to be unaffected, continuing with its deadly attacks while bragging the government will not be able to bring them to order and justice. Even dialogue with the sect seems not to be helping matters. The sect withdrew from preliminary dialogue with the government in 2012, alleging that the government was not sincere about the dialogue. Sad]ly, Boko Haram has unrealistic and perhaps nonnegotiable demands, namely the immediate and unconditional release of all its members from detention, formation of an Islamic state in the north and imposition of a stringent Sharia legal system across the country. In view of the inability of the Nigerian government to forestall persecution of the church in the north, the question is where the Triune God is in all of this. Is there any hope at all for the church in Northern Nigeria? Who can help the church in this critical situation? How can we theologically engage the reality of our suffering?

There is no other theology that captures the liberating presence of the Triune God in the midst of God’s suffering people like the theology of the cross.

The persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria has elicited a myriad of responses from Christians. In the wake of the brokenness and hopelessness brought about by the protracted persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria, there are those who suggest that the church should engage in armed struggle to bring an end to the persecution. They argue that armed struggle has become a necessary evil if the church is to survive the current onslaught by Boko Haram. In this spirit, there are instances where some Christian youths have resorted to violence in defense of their faith, life, and property whenever they were attacked. As Doorn-Harder argues, “In reaction to increased Muslim activism, Christian militancy has also grown.” Such Christians have not only abandoned the Sermon on the Mount, which promotes the culture of nonviolence, but have drawn inspiration from the Mosaic injunction that permits violent retaliation in search of peace. There are, however, those who charge that the Christian God is weak, and thus has utterly failed to protect the church against persecution. They strongly advocate that Christians should revert to the worship of their ancestral gods to overcome the persecution.

None of these suggestions is a vibrant response to the scourge of the persecu-
tion of the church in Northern Nigeria. They will not only beget an endless cycle of violence, making attainment of lasting peace elusive, but also draw Christians back to the old dark days of evil. Such reversion to ancestral worship will lead to utter annihilation of the church. I argue for an unwavering faith rooted in the liberating presence of the crucified God in the midst of God’s suffering people. Such a faithful path better promises victory over persecution for the church in Northern Nigeria.

There is no other theology that captures the liberating presence of the Triune God in the midst of God’s suffering people like the theology of the cross. By theology of the cross, I mean not the concept itself; it is the crucified God revealed in suffering and the cross, the God who is present in the proclaimed Word and sacrament for the liberation of humanity and the world. Vítor Westhelle argues that the theology of the cross is not a mere doctrine, but an “orthopraxis.” It is “a practice of [God’s] solidarity with the pain of the world, which follows the encounter with Christ crucified.”

The pain of the church in Northern Nigeria, which is provoked by persecution, is in a way the pain of God. Such persecution should not be divorced from the reality of the crucified God revealed in suffering and the cross. Therefore, the persecution should impact the church’s understanding of who God is and where God desires to be present. For us, the Triune God we worship is not an Aristotelian “unmoved mover” who is insensitive to human suffering. God is a vulnerable, loving God who suffers and stands in solidarity with those who suffer.

Because suffering and the cross is the preferential locus of the liberating presence of God, God does not desire to be present in the human most-comfort zones, nor mega and magnificent church buildings of the world. Rather, God is preferentially present in the greatest discomfort zones of the world such as in Northern Nigeria, where Christians suffer martyrdom, loss of their families, life, and property, all for the sake of the Gospel. The story of the cross is the story of our persecution, and vice versa. The persecution is the replication of the painful experience of the crucified God, who was also the victim of religious persecution on the cross. Therefore, where churches are bombed and the blood of Christians is shed in Nigeria and elsewhere around the world, there God is crucified and God’s blood is shed. The despair and powerlessness of the church in Northern Nigeria amidst persecution is the despair and powerlessness of the Triune God on the cross. The crucified God who felt the pain of Saul’s persecution of the early church, querying Saul, “Why do you persecute me?” is still moved by the suffering and affliction of the persecuted Northern Nigerian Christians.

Such persecution should also radicalize our understanding of what it means to be a church in the midst of suffering. For us, the church is not merely where the

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11In claiming that the crucified God is always in solidarity with the persecuted Northern Nigerian Christians, one may wonder if logically God is not also on the side of the masses of Muslims who also suffered from the attacks of Boko Haram in the north. The answer is “yes,” but I wonder whether making such a claim will make sense to Muslims, who do not believe in the crucified God.
gospel is proclaimed and sacraments are rightly administered; rather, it is where people gathered up by the Spirit suffer persecution in the name of Christ. Even the right administration of the sacraments does not simply mean proclaiming the real presence of Christ in created things for the forgiveness of sin, but is God’s real redemptive presence with the church in the midst of its persecution. Luther argues that those who have not experienced misfortune or adversity have no need of the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is beneficial only to those who have been assailed by adversity; the people who are in dire need of strength and comfort. As people who are distressed and troubled by persecution, the sacrament of the Eucharist supplies Nigerian Christians with the much-needed comfort and strength to bear persecution and to love their persecutors! The church then is the community of the cross, which not only bears and lives out the cross, but also witnesses the cross with and for the sake of the groaning creation and its savior.

For those of us in the desperate situation where the government, which is responsible for protecting us against persecution, has woefully failed in its responsibility, the church in Nigeria needs to come to the realization that “only the suffering God can help,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized in his Gestapo prison cell. The suffering God does not help by his triumphal power, but by his power of vulnerable love. Such a God who suffers helps through expressing his unconditional love on the cross for the godly world. It was through such love even unto death on the cross that the Triune God conquered his enemies and communicated this unconditional love to the church in the Eucharist to live out in the midst of its suffering. Thus, the crucified God is not an outsider to the church’s suffering. God is deeply involved. God will in due course bring the persecution to an end and eventually wipe away the tears of the church!

The cross reveals that suffering is not just the character of God; it is also the mark of a true church. The story of persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria is the story of the cross in which God not only experiences suffering, pain, and rejection, but is also hidden and revealed. To experience and endure the cross (which means rejection and suffering), such as persecution and martyrdom, is never a misfortune, rather, it is the fruit of justification by faith alone in Christ produced in us by the Spirit.

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14 I strongly believe that God is at work in every situation for the good of those God loves and, therefore, even when the devil afflicts us with evil, God uses it for our good and for God’s own glory.
As Steven Paulson rightly claims, suffering does not suggest the promise of our faith is broken, “it is the only ‘evidence’ God gives in the old world that his will is being done. …So that good works could flow by assuring us, ‘Blessed are those who persecute you’ …for what is impossible for humans is precisely what the Holy Spirit produces.”

It is the Holy Spirit who produces in the church the strength to bear the persecution! Bonhoeffer accurately writes: “to bear the cross [by the power of the Spirit] proves to be the only way of triumphing over suffering [including persecution]. This is true for all who follow Christ, because it was to true for him.”

Should we be killed while suffering persecution, as many have been killed, the theology of the cross proclaims that we are not hopeless.

The Christians in Northern Nigeria need neither die nor grieve for their loved ones who have died from persecution in Christ, as do unbelievers who have no hope! The life of the Christian is bound up with Christ, such that “if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom 18:8). As people are united with Christ in baptism, not even death can separate them from the love of God who died on the cross for us. There is resurrection, the ultimate foundation of all human hope that the theologian of the cross anticipates. As Gerhard Forde accurately writes,

The theology of the cross is the true and ultimate source of human optimism because it always presupposes the resurrection….Without the resurrection theologians cannot speak the truth about the human condition, and without hearing and confessing such truth we have no hope, no resurrection. For resurrection to happen there must first be a death.

Thus, in trusting the God revealed in the cross as our God, and in viewing its story of persecution as a story of the cross, the church in Northern Nigeria can also anticipate that its story of suffering will become nothing other than a story of the resurrection to new life! This does not simply mean life after death. It is the total restoration of the Christian community here on earth. The Spirit of Calvary, who is also the Spirit of the Pentecost, brings healing and restoration to any church broken by suffering through persecution.

Therefore, the fact the church is experiencing persecution does not mean that the church is being forsaken and rejected by God. As a trial, the persecution does not even entail that the faith of the church is damned; rather, it is being strengthened and made vibrant. Walther von Loewenich suggests that “according to the theology of the cross the worst kind of trial consists in not having any trial; for trial

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16Bonhoeffer, A Testament to Freedom, 315.
17The question of whether or not Christians have the right to protect themselves from persecution is an issue that requires additional discussion elsewhere.
keeps faith in motion…. Life under the cross is a life trial.” He adds: “the most severe trial comes upon a person [and the whole church] when he believes he has been forsaken and rejected by God. Such a trial comes only to the ‘greatest of saints.’” Undoubtedly, despite these insidious and elevated persecutions of Christians, especially in the north, the church has remained firm, resolute, and committed to its faith in the face of all acts of hate and terrorism. Though the Christian community has somewhat suffered a physical setback, it is spiritually vibrant. Rather than destroying the faith of the church, the persecution has made that faith even stronger and more robust than ever. Pastor Samuel Goro said, “They can destroy our property, but our faith is made stronger.”

In confronting the alien work of God, even in trials such as persecution, the theology of the cross suggests that the church in Northern Nigeria should insist on clinging tenaciously to Christ’s promise given to us in the Word and sacraments. Thus, peace is not mere absence of suffering in the form of persecution, but the liberating presence of God creating peace even in suffering and the cross, which cannot be attained through retaliation. The cross of Christ affirms that peace is granted to us paradoxically under the opposite of suffering, which appears as foolishness to the world. In response to this, von Loewenich suggests that “the way of peace is the way of the cross, and therefore peace is to be found only under the cross and suffering…. One who seeks peace [by violence] misses the true peace; one who shuns the cross will not find peace.”

Our ultimate way of peace and victory over evil does not come from overcoming evil with evil or escaping from it, but from being given the strength by the Spirit to endure and bear through it via the Word in the power of the cross. Such is God’s means of victory over sin, the devil, and evil, and hence, salvation for the world. It is when we are killed and made alive through law and gospel that we can be made to overcome our Anfechtung and experience ultimate peace. Indeed, the cross of Christ is the assurance that persecuted Christians will never experience brokenness without healing, sadness without joy, suffering without forbearance, grief without comfort, despair without hope and death without resurrection. This

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20Ibid., 136.
22Von Loewenich, Luther’s Theology of the Cross, 124.
is the fruit of the liberating presence of the Triune God in the midst of suffering believers granted by the Spirit.

The global communion of the church involves reciprocity and mutual sharing of one another’s joy and burden informed by the sacrament of the altar. There is no true global communion in the body of Christ apart from this mutual sharing. This means that as a part of the global communion, the persecution of the church in Northern Nigeria is invariably persecution of the church anywhere. Terrorism against the church somewhere is terrorism against the church everywhere. Boko Haram’s is not a local terrorism. It is a global menace. As we are together the interconnected single garment of Christ, whatever affects any part of the garment impacts the entire garment. Luther argues that there is no way Christians who share common Holy Communion will not “care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth, and at the risk of [their own] life, property, and honor seek the betterment of the church and of all Christians.”

The breaking of the bread and wine every Sunday should remind the global church of not just the death of Christ and misery of their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, but should inspire the global church to stand in solidarity with them. Luther writes, “No, we on our part must make the evil of others our own, if we desire Christ and his saints to make our evil their own. Then will the fellowship be complete, and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with all others!” Here lies what the reality of the cross is up to in responding, engaging, and healing the brokenness and the despair of the Nigerian church brought about by incessant religious persecution.