

Idris Ena Kone's Peace Conference for leaders of the Ivory Coast diaspora

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April 2, 2016



On Saturday, April 2, 2016, Mr. Idris Ena Kone [photo: front row third from left] held a peace conference with civic and religious leaders of the Ivory Coast diaspora community in New York City at the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) in Manhattan, at the 4West43 building. “Drissa” Kone is in his final year of a Doctor of Ministry program in peace and justice at UTS, where his desire to understand and to resolve conflict led him to research the impact of the First and Second Ivorian Civil Wars on the Ivorian diaspora community in New York City.

It has taken almost 15 years for Drissa Kone to arrive at this point. His journey to the doctoral ministry program and its culminating peace conference began in 2002, when he was unjustly arrested and tortured as a rebel in the first civil war. His name alone, communicating his Muslim identity and heritage, had been the basis of his arrest; the allegations of his support for the rebels were completely unfounded.

Before reporting on the details of his research findings at Saturday’s conference, Drissa Kone shared that his past experience, though at first it instigated a desire for vengeance, was ultimately a deeply humbling and transformative experience. He explained, “After I was arrested and tortured, I determined to become a killer. But ultimately I didn’t because I had a spiritual experience with Christ on the last night of my imprisonment. Christ called me to walk the path of forgiveness, and I responded that I would.”

Shortly thereafter, Kone joined the Unification movement, which inspired and enabled him to continue pursuing practical ways to resolve conflict and to foster forgiveness, peace, and unity between warring groups. He began his search in the Ivory Coast and eventually came to America, where he received a Master of Divinity degree at UTS and a Master of Diplomacy, with a concentration in conflict management and negotiation, at Norwich University in Vermont before beginning his Doctor of Ministry degree at UTS, in 2013.

At Saturday’s conference, Kone reported the primary finding from his doctoral research: namely, that the practice of “active listening” is the key to strengthening relationships and resolving conflict. “My studies showed me that this was the practical way to love sacrificially, even when we, ourselves, are hurting. We often feel like we have to say what we think is right, but we often do this at the expense of our relationships. I realized that I have to listen first to understand. If we don’t understand, we can never love and we can never achieve peace.”

Most of the Ivorian civic and religious leaders in attendance at the conference had participated in Kone’s doctoral research on the efficacy of active listening as a source of conflict resolution. Kone had reached out to them, one by one, to invite them to share their hearts and stories, seeking simply to understand rather than to be understood. For Kone, the conference itself represented the fruits of his research. He was able to gather Ivorians of different ethnicities, religions, and political affiliations—all touched by the violence of the civil wars in some way—together in one room through the mutual trust and love he had built by actively listening.

Several of the leaders in attendance spoke of their gratitude for and pride in Kone for the work that he has done. The Hon. Christophe Kouakou, Consulate General of the Ivory Coast in New York, commented during an introductory speech, “To you, my young brother, Mr. Kone, I would like to say I am

particularly proud that you recognize the value of forgiveness. That is the foundation of all social life, all community life, both in the diaspora and the Ivorian nation. To you, the leaders of the Ivorian diaspora, I invite you to make the work that our brother has done, your own. Please make that work your own. To all the advisors and professors of Mr. Kone, I would like to express my gratitude for supporting him and, by extension, the Ivorian diaspora and nation.”

Similarly, Imam Souleymane Konate of the Majid Al-Aqsa Mosque in New York commented, “I’m so proud of this young man because the project is a very productive one and he did a good job. Bringing all these people together is a great accomplishment, and the presentation itself was also great. I was sharing with some of the leaders just now, ‘Drissa started it. Let us finish it.’ The choice Drissa gave us today, if we act on it, will definitely bring our people together in love, peace, and harmony.”

Also in attendance at Saturday’s conference were representatives from Universal Peace Federation (UPF) USA. Mr. Richard De Sena, President of UPF-USA, reflected after the event, “I think it was a great event and very significant. It was great to see Ivorians of different ethnicities and religions coming together in an environment of tolerance, respect, harmony, and, I would say, love. Mr. Kone has accomplished a great work of peace today.”

Dr. Hugh Spurgin, President of UTS, also shared, “Mr. Kone is trying to bring Ivorians together, regardless of their differences of faith, to work for peace in the Ivory Coast. Interfaith studies and relations are a hallmark of UTS; the student body, as well as the faculty, are from very diverse religious backgrounds. Our mission is ‘bridging religious and cultural divides.’”

After the conclusion of the event, Mr. Kone reflected on the opportunity he has found to foster peace through his studies at UTS, “For my doctorate, I wanted to do something that would impact society in a very special way. Rev. Moon has said that we have to go beyond the church, beyond religion, beyond denominations. For me that was the most important thing, and if I could find a pressing social issue and connect my ministry to that, then I could find the drive to move forward. That’s what I found in my doctoral work with the Ivorian diaspora community.

“It’s not a traditional way of doing ministry, and for me, that’s the power of what UTS offers. Through our studies at UTS, we can actually learn to take ministry to the real world, not confining it to the pulpit or the four walls of a church but applying it to resolve real societal problems of violence and conflict. I hope more people will enter ministry and come to UTS not just to become pastors, but because they see a social issue that they want to address from a theological or ministerial perspective—because that is the power that changes the world.”