

# THE KRISAN/SANZULE REFUGEE WHO INSPIRED A GHANA MINISTRY

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*This narrative recounts the origination of a nine-year ministry in Ghana led by the author, the former pastor of Webster United Church of Christ, in Michigan. The focal point of the ministry was Ghana's Krisan/Sanzule Refugee camp funded by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). It follows the development of the ministry through the travails of a Liberian refugee who lived in the camp from its inception in 1996 to the beginning of its phaseout in 2006. During the course of the ministry, over fifty Americans traveled to Ghana and hundreds of others provided financial support stateside. The narrative also addresses the bonding between the author and the former refugee who inspired her. All names have been changed.*

## Introduction

I met Kadeja in 2001 at the multinational Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp in the Western region of Ghana. She has been a part of my life ever since. Little did I know that such a brief encounter would change her life, define my nascent ministry, deepen my faith, and launch a ministry that would span nearly a decade. That year marked the end of my second full year of ministry at the Webster United Church of Christ (Webster Church) in Webster Township, Michigan. Webster is a small farming town west of Ann Arbor, the home of the University of Michigan. The town was settled by farmers, many of them Germans, who had received or worked on farms resulting from federal land grants given by the U.S. Government in the 1800s to settle the then-frontier. Webster Church was still housed in its original white-framed clapboard, historic 19<sup>th</sup>-century building. I was the first African American and the first woman to pastor the nearly 200-year-old church.

In July 2001, I received a call from the Africa Office of Global Ministries, a joint overseas mission of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. Unlike other overseas church missions, their goal is not to establish churches, but rather to support existing economic, social, or religious programs run by indigenous people. In short, Global Ministries does not dictate, it facilitates.

Global Ministries invited me to join other African American clergy and lay leaders on a trip to Ghana in order to acquaint us with their work in the country and to meet their Ghanaian ministry partners. While this would not be my first trip to the continent—I had spent time in Senegal and Zimbabwe and later would spend a month training teachers in Ethiopia—it would be my first trip to Ghana. It would be the beginning of a ten-year commitment which would result in the establishment of a church ministry that included: micro-economic projects for refugees, scholarships for secondary and senior secondary school students, as well as funding of 11 hand-pumped wells and a partial water system. Most of all, it would be the catalyst for the development of foundational relationships that spanned the two continents.

## My Introduction to Ghana

The 12-person delegation headed for Ghana in August, following a briefing by the Africa Office of Global Ministries, at which we were encouraged to get involved in and be supportive of their African missions. We landed in Ghana at Kotoka International Airport, and were greeted by what I have come to know as the normal crush of Ghanaians offering everything from a request to carry luggage to a proposal of marriage. Of course, our guides had planned our transportation in advance. After cautioning us to stand in one

place until we were summoned, they went in search of our waiting driver.

Our itinerary—one which I would replicate with varying degrees of alterations over the subsequent years—included: a visit to the Accra office of our host, the ecumenical Christian Council of Ghana; the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ho (EP Church); the slave dungeons in Cape Coast; and the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp in the Western Region. After two days in Accra, the Christian Council of Ghana staff took us to EP Church, where we stayed in their campus dormitories. Our sparse rooms overlooked a well-manicured court yard, had cement floors, twin beds, and indoor showers—replete with a bucket in the event the plumbing failed—which it did.

Each day at EP, we shared in the early morning devotions held in the head office. The devotions were conducted in Twi (the local language) and English. We then adjourned to the office of the Moderator. In a very formal, British-style presentation, we were greeted with salutations as each of us identified ourselves, our affiliations, and stated our purpose. Afterward in Ghanaian-style hospitality, we were each given gifts of cloth.

EP Church provided a major social safety net for Ghana. In Ho, we visited the EP-run leprosarium, a place that housed about 800 people who had been cured of leprosy, but because of the stigma attached to their condition, could not re-enter the general population. This resulted in many of them living at the leprosarium for more than four decades. Many had established long-term personal relationships. The several hundred offspring of those unions were housed on an adjacent parcel of land, where they wove kente cloth for tourists and local use.

We visited a newly built EP-run regional hospital that was virtually empty because most of the health professionals—who remained in the country after training—moved to the major cities to practice. One lone Cuban doctor served the hospital, with nursing staff providing the bulk of the support. One of the most moving visits was to the residence of a husband and wife who had opened their small home to street children, providing them with housing, food, clothing, and a respite from the streets. Global

Ministries gave funding to support these and other EP programs.

### The Startling Encounter with Kadeja

Our last official stop was the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee camp, located in a forest about an hour's drive from the trading port of Takoradi. That year, we were told the camp had a population of approximately 2,000 refugees from wars and political unrest in Cote D'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Chad, Sudan, Darfur, the Congo, and Rwanda. The refugees lived in cement cubicles with dirt floors, corrugated tin roofs, and no electricity. The leadership of the camp had our 12-person delegation sit on a stage in an open-air pavilion while they gave a presentation about the camp and how well it was working. In the midst of this planned, upbeat briefing, a woman emerged from within the crowd of refugees. The young woman, whose age was 26, was Liberian.

She spoke in a deep, gravelly voice: "The women and children are dying in this camp. The women are being raped and the children are dying of hunger. Please help the women and children."

We were silent because the well-orchestrated presentation had just taken on a different tone. My heart ached, listening to her petition.

"Can you people do something?" she pleaded.

It was not our habit during these presentations to speak, but I could not refrain from saying something. What I should have said was: *I have no idea what I can do; I have no idea if I will ever get back to Ghana.* Instead, I said: "I don't know what I can do, but I *will* do something."

After the session ended, I met privately with the woman who had spoken out so courageously. Her name was Kadeja. I told her I would come back, and I gave her a ring to hold until I did. In an interview with Kadeja in March of 2011, she reflected back on the day we met:

*"I was tired of people coming and hearing the same things from the camp management, feeling sorry for us, but never returning. The*

women in the camp wanted me to go and to tell what was really happening to them. I didn't want to go, but the women kept begging me. It was dangerous, but I spoke up."

### **Kadeja's Odyssey: Warring Liberia to the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp**

My promise to return haunted me all the way home. I vaguely remembered the other meetings with church officials and other organizations, because my thoughts were with Kadeja. I remembered her face--drawn and weary far beyond her years. She wore a sleeveless grey-green dress similar to one that I owned. When I returned to the States, every time I looked at that dress in my closet, I thought of Kadeja and her seemingly hopeless condition.

Kadeja was born in 1974 in Liberia, a year after my oldest son. By the time she arrived at the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee camp in 1996, she had lived nearly half of her life in a country engaged in one war after another. From the overthrow of the Americo-Liberian President William Tolbert by Samuel Doe, to the rebellion by Charles Taylor, Kadeja knew nothing but war.

As a teenager, Kadeja became pregnant and, because of the conditions in the war-torn Liberia, she was afraid to leave the house to go to the hospital. She delivered her daughter at home. The baby, Rebecca, was in a coma for three months. Kadeja told us of her miraculous recovery and her growth into a normal little girl. In addition to what we could read about in the newspapers in the West, Kadeja spoke of numerous culture wars between feuding tribes. Better known to Americans, however, was the Charles Taylor invasion, which lasted the first time until early in 1995. It ended in fragile, short-lived peace.

In April 1996, a savage and bloody resurgence of the Charles Taylor rebel forces known as the "Easter Terror" produced the next big wave of Liberian refugees and initiated the second half of the Liberian Civil War. Kadeja remembers the date, even to this day. As she was heading home with her six year-old daughter, she was swept up with the crowd of people running toward a Nigerian Freighter

known as the Bulk Challenger Lagos. She was a 22-year-old single mother finishing her last year of school, studying computer science. By that time, almost all of her young life had been defined by coup d'états and violent civil war. Kadeja and Rebecca would be among the 4,000 Liberians to board the Nigerian freighter. In 1990, another ship had carried thousands of Liberians to Ghana. They eventually settled in Buduburam, a refugee settlement on the outskirts of Accra, populated primarily by Liberians.

The 4,000 refugees aboard the Bulk Challenger Lagos became a part of an international cause. The freighter had no place to anchor. Initially it was thought that the freighter would go to Nigeria, but the Nigerian government refused them. Other West African countries had been swamped with Liberian refugees, and Ghana refused to allow the ship to dock on its shores for fear of a stampede of refugees. Consequently, the Bulk Challenger Lagos stayed in the waters for over a week with no safe harbor. When the Liberian Civil war was over, it would produce nearly half a million refugees.

Kadeja recounted how the people were packed into the ship, which had only one toilet. People had diarrhea, two people were shot, and one woman died of internal bleeding. Then the Ghanaian government ships fired on the vessel. With horror still in her voice, Kadeja recalled:

"I was there with Rebecca and we were huddled on the ship when the Ghana ships started firing at the refugees. We kept raising and waving white rags, but they didn't care. They later stopped and somehow talked with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees) and let us into the camp."

### **The Early Years at Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp**

The *Voice of America* reported that the European Union and the United States had negotiated with Ghana officials, which resulted in a relationship with the UNHCR and the designation of the Krisan/Sanzule region as a

site for a new refugee settlement. When Kadeja and her daughter disembarked in Ghana, she was stunned at what would be her new home. A decade and a half later, Kadeja was still emotional about the first years in the camp:

*"It was a forest! There were crocodiles, scorpions, and snakes. We lived in tents and, during the rainy season, the water would flood the tent and come up to our waist. A lot of people died in those early years."*

One incident that she recalled from those early days was the time when one of the refugees came out of his tent to find a 25-foot snake eating one of his chickens, while his baby son stood next to the other chickens. Kadeja said:

*"We would say, God put the chicken there to save the baby because the snake got to the chicken before he came to the baby. That's what saved the baby."*

Over the years the story would be retold throughout the camp, accompanied by a time-worn picture of several men holding the huge, dead snake.

In 2001, five years after the 1996 opening of the camp, the refugees no longer lived in tents. Kadeja was one of the early refugees who helped build the cinderblock houses. While cinderblock dwellings allowed some degree of protection, there were still children being killed by snakes and scorpions, and there were still crocodiles in the waters. But Kadeja felt that the noise in the camp kept some of the animals away, at least during the day.

#### **A Promise Kept: The First Webster Church Delegation to Ghana**

I returned to Webster Church and told the congregation that, when I took my vacation the following year, I would be going back to the refugee camp to do something, even though I wasn't sure what that would be. Slowly, individuals from the congregation came to me

and said that they wanted to go with me, and that they would pay their own way. It was amazing! This predominately white, Midwestern church had produced people who wanted to take their first trip to Africa, in some instances their first trip outside of the country; for one or two people, it would be their first trip outside of Michigan. Our first delegation included a lawyer, a psychiatric social worker, a municipal supervisor, a business executive, a management consultant, a college student, two former missionaries, a retired professor, a former Peace Corps volunteer, and a child care professional.

The Global Ministries Office and the Christian Council of Ghana provided the travel arrangements and the logistics for this first trip. The delegation turned out to be that ecclesiastical number of twelve. The schedule would be the same as the one provided by Global Ministries--at least that was the plan. The first change of plans occurred on the third day of our two-week trip, as we were being escorted by our guide to visit EP's Peki Seminary. Following breakfast, we headed for the Seminary, but our guide rearranged our schedule, which resulted in our visiting an EP-run clinic in Gemeni village.

Upon entering the clinic, we saw a father holding a listless child of about a year old. The child was suffering from a fever and some other malady that was not easily determined. The nurse, who was the only staff at the clinic, was administering medicine through a large hypodermic needle. She needed a doctor. A trip to the hospital was out of reach for the mother and father. The \$20 entrance fee to the hospital was prohibitive for the family, and the one-hour drive to the hospital required additional funds to pay someone in the village to drive them there.

The delegation decided to take a detour and drive the family to the nearest hospital, pay for the cost of care, and provide money for the family to return home after treatment. Following a prayer with the mother and a brief discussion with the doctor, it was learned that the mother was fearful for the life of her child, because another child in the village with similar symptoms had died the day before.

When we arrived at Peki Seminary, we were greeted by a huge sign that read: "Know Who You Are; Where You Are; and Why You are Here." After such an experience, some tearful delegates read the sign with a poignant sense of purpose and humility. About ten months later, I received an envelope at the church that was only addressed to "Webster Church, Michigan, USA." I cannot imagine how it was delivered with such an incomplete address. It was from the baby's father, who wanted to thank us and to let us know that she was doing fine.

On day three, we visited the EP Leprosarium. The day had already been emotionally and spiritually full, but nothing prepared us for that evening's visit. There we were, mesmerized by the stories of the residents (most cured from leprosy, but still bearing the scars and deformities of the disease). These stories told of people who had not had any relatives, children, or spouses visit them for more than 30 years. Abandoned by family, they were also shunned by the outside world. The residents sat on one side, the medical staff on another, and the delegation on the third side of the seating triangle. One member of the delegation rose up and approached the leper residents and reminded them that we were all children of God—sisters and brothers—and that we loved them. She then went over and hugged them all. The other members of the delegation followed her lead. The delegation donated money for the purchase of special shoes to be used by the lepers whose feet had become deformed.

#### **The Delegation's First Encounter with the Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp**

The Webster Church delegation finally reached the refugee camp. The bus was welcomed into the camp by singing and dancing refugees who were glad to see us. Unlike the large Buduburam Refugee Camp outside of Accra, Krisan/Sanzule had very few visitors due to its remote location. Our delegation was one of the few that had ever visited. When we gathered with the members of the refugee camp, I saw Kadeja. She gave me a necklace that she had made and spoke these words:

*"People say they are coming back, but they never do. You came back. I have been praying for you to return. Thank God."*

Once again, the camp manager organized a meeting and the refugees came forward under his leadership. He began to tell us the story of the progress made in the camp and the effectiveness of the governing model that he had structured, where each of the nationalities had a representative on the camp's welfare council. The delegation separated into small groups with individual tasks. To the consternation of the camp manager, three of us met with the women only. He wanted a representative to be present in the meeting, but the women objected. I asked the women to share their stories. Most were not unlike Kadeja's story—lost families, parents, brothers, and sisters dead or missing, rapes by rebels, witnesses to mutilation of family members and worse. The following narrative from one woman in the camp is typical of the stories we heard:

*"I am a Liberian who lived in Liberia from the day of my birth. However, since the war started in 1990 up to now, my parents and the entire family was hunted. My father was part of Doe's Administration as a police officer. He was killed. In April 1992, I try my possible best to try to travel out of the country, but while at the last gate or border point in Yekepe Nimba country, I was arrested by the officer who knew my father very well...they immediately took me to prison, and I was there for six months. While in prison, I experienced a lot of inhumane treatment which I cannot explain to you. After two months, the commander of the prison came with his friend and took me to another room and raped me. I cried for help, but there was no one and they also took off one of my toenails and stabbed my foot with a knife."*

### **The Sanzule Women's Sewing Circle— "With Every Dress a Story"**

The Webster Church delegation returned to the hotel, shocked at the litany of violent stories and the plight of the women. As we reflected on the future and what was possible for our involvement with the women, I suggested that we start a micro-economic enterprise that would provide them with some independent resources for themselves and their families. Many of the women were seamstresses. That night we gave a structure to the plan: we would form the "Sanzule Women's Sewing Circle," and they would make dresses, handbags, and aprons that we would sell in Michigan. We would purchase manual sewing machines, material, thread, and supplies for them to begin the project. We would include with each dress a story about the plight of one woman so that their circumstances would be made known to a larger audience. The theme would be: "With Every Dress a Story."

Excited and hopeful about the prospects of the project, we returned to the camp and shared the plan with them. The women, whom we had left looking forlorn and rejected because we had promised that we would return with a solution or some hope, returned that morning with brightly colored dresses, their hair beautifully done, and some even wore make-up. They were smiling and ready to hear our ideas. We shared with them our vision of the Sanzule Women's Sewing Circle, with the theme "With Every Dress a Story."

They were so excited; they joined with us to put the particulars to the plan. Members of our delegation accompanied by several of the women went into Takoradi to shop for supplies. Other women stayed behind and worked out a budget and pay scale for the project. They would pay someone to type the stories, as dictated by the various women. The photographer at the camp would be paid to take pictures of the women and their families to attach to the narratives. The women in the sewing circle would be paid per dress, and Kadeja, along with another woman, would be our liaison in the States. When the women had finished 50 items they would ship them to Webster Church. We would establish an

account with a shipping service and pay for the shipments. Women who could not sew would be paid for ironing, folding, and packing the dresses (to press clothes, the irons were placed on hot coals).

### **The Initial Success of a Micro-Economic Enterprise in the Refugee Camp**

We gave them the first order for fifty dresses. They delivered them as planned, earning the sewing circle an estimated \$1,250. In a country where a good salary was \$30 a month, these funds would put money in the women's pockets to use to provide food for their families. At that time, their monthly rations amounted to a quart of oil, two cans of tuna fish, a pound of rice, a pound of maize, salt, and a pound of beans. Families with infants received additional rations, but not much more.

Of course, the introduction of that kind of money into a system where people had so little required someone trustworthy. Kadeja was one of the most trustworthy, God-fearing women I had encountered in the camp. My confidence in her integrity proved to be well placed. She distributed the money to each of the women in the agreed-upon amount. She had them sign for the money, kept a roster of the recipients, and also requested that they give her a thumb print next to their names when they were paid.

Kadeja later told me that the camp manager and the men in the camp had tried to get her to turn the money over to them. She knew she had to get the money to the women without letting the management know it was being distributed. So she gathered the women together and paid them, after retrieving it from a hiding place in her house.

### **The Second Webster Delegation Returns to Ghana**

Before the second visit, Kadeja warned me that the men wanted something, as well. A businessman from the congregation facilitated organizing the men into forming a craft circle. The men made carvings, necklaces, and other trinkets that we sold.

The delegation provided school supplies for students in the camp, and we purchased

large quantities of rice, beans, fish, canned milk, maize, and oil. During this trip we were successful in getting the food to the refugees directly. Our first attempt to bring additional food into the camp almost caused a riot, because the women refused to allow the Red Cross to take the food and store it. They said that much of the food designated for refugees ended up in the Ghana market to be sold to Ghanaians. The women sat on the bags of food and surrounded the Red Cross truck to keep the driver from loading the food onto the truck. The welfare council finally decided that the food would be distributed directly to the refugees, instead of putting it in the storehouse with the rations.

As they had done the year before, the clinic nurse gave us a list of medicines to purchase, and accompanied us into Takoradi to the pharmacist, where we purchased what was needed. We later find out that much of the UNHCR-funded medicine designated for the refugees found its way into the marketplace as well. That year, we learned of the death of a child from malnutrition. While it startled us, it was common for refugee children to die of hunger. Even though natural resources such as fishing waters were within reach, we learned that refugees could work for Ghanaian fishermen by hauling in fish, but they were forbidden to fish for themselves. If caught, they could be shot or jailed.

Kadeja seemed to possess a degree of hope, even though the conditions in the camp had deteriorated for Liberians. Refugees had three options available to them, according to the UNHCR: they could repatriate to their home countries if the war or unrest had ended; they could naturalize in the country of their asylum, if permitted; or they could be resettled in another country, which in most instances meant the U.S., Canada, or Australia. In 1996, with the election of Charles Taylor as president of Liberia, UNHCR support for Liberian refugees ceased. This meant that rations for them would be discontinued and they would be encouraged to return home. However, most did not. According to the UNHCR 2002 Statistical Yearbook, the Liberian refugee population in Ghana had grown to 28,298 by the end of 2002. Kadeja, like many others, was

still afraid to return home. For those women and men who had married spouses of other nationalities, there was still the possibility that they might receive rations, and still the hope that they might be resettled in another country.

### **Going from a Mission to a Spiritual Pilgrimage**

The one message that the delegates took back to the church was that the people in the camp possessed an indomitable faith. Whether Christian or Muslim, the refugees were faith-filled to the point of inspiring and strengthening all of us. As a result, the trips were renamed "spiritual pilgrimages" rather than mission trips. For middle-class Christian Americans, the experience of being with people who had lost home, family, and country--yet still harbored a strong spiritual core--was transformative. The 2003 delegation experienced the refugees' spirituality even more profoundly than others.

When the delegation arrived, we were met by two women led by Kadeja. They had been fasting and praying for three days for our safe arrival. They met us in Accra and stayed with us during our trip to Ho and Cape Coast. They did devotions every morning with whomever their roommates happened to have been. They slept in beds for the first time in a long time, and used the facilities of the dormitories and hotels in which we stayed. They marveled at how much we ate: three meals a day, snacks, and large portions of rice. One woman cried when she saw so much food. She was reminded of how little food they had in the camp.

When we finally arrived at the refugee camp, the other women had prepared a lunch of fried chicken, plantains, soft drinks, and rice. We were ashamed to eat knowing that so many had so little, but of course we could not refuse because it would offend them. That night at the camp there was a church revival, and members of the camp used a local church-owned generator to produce light in the open-air pavilion.

I was asked to preach. I had no sermon; we were all tired and sweaty because we had been going all day. Nevertheless, I preached from the Gospel of John about the woman at the well who encountered Jesus and about how

she, too, was a refugee - a Samaritan. Jesus took the time to talk with her, giving her the status of being "somebody," and that even though they were without a home, or a country, they too were "somebody."

One woman left the revival singing a song she had made up about being somebody. She confessed that she had been beaten by her husband (not an uncommon occurrence in the camp, where domestic violence was prevalent). She was determined that she would not allow him to continue to beat her. However, we were made aware in subsequent visits that the domestic violence continued.

Six months after our return to the States, movement began to take place in the camp. Eight hundred refugees were resettled, after years of very few resettlements. The story in the camp was that the revival and the sermon brought about the change. In actuality, UNHCR started implementing its resettlement plan more vigorously.

#### **2005 Delegation Met by Despondent Refugees**

The refugees were calling it a miracle. Following the first wave of resettlements, Webster Church started a resettlement ministry. After years of hopelessness, refugees were going back home, or to Australia, Canada, or America. The Sierra Leoneans were the primary beneficiaries of this first wave of resettlements. Some were placed in Lansing, Michigan, an hour's drive from Webster. The resettlement ministry helped with housing, hospitality, life skills, clothes, and food. A few of the new arrivals joined Webster Church.

By 2005, the Ghana Ministry commitment had expanded to include a fully developed scholarship program that provided financial support for more than a dozen young people in secondary school, scholarships for the EP School, medical supplies for the camp, and school supplies for the street children and the elementary school at the camp. We also provided toiletries and financial support for the leprosarium.

The refugees looked forward to our yearly visits as much as we anticipated seeing them. Unfortunately, the camp had become more anxiety-ridden than before. A new group of

women had taken over the leadership of the Sanzule Women's Sewing Circle. These women not as transparent and honest as Kadeja's leadership team. Kadeja had stepped down because she had gotten wind of the dishonesty. The camp management, the UNHCR, and the Christian Council of Ghana seemed to have had problems with the income being generated by the Sanzule Women's Sewing Circle, which made them a little more independent than before.

Now in her tenth year as a refugee, Kadeja had witnessed infant deaths, endured food shortages, watched as later arrivals were resettled in other countries, and had survived different political movements in the management of the camp. The 2005 delegation included an 83-year-old African American woman who had dreamed all her life of going to Africa. After her trip, she decided that she wanted to pay for a water well for the country. She went into her savings and gave the church \$6,800 to pay for the construction of a hand-pumped well.

A matching grant allowed us to have an additional well constructed along with the first one. Both wells were completed in 2007. That same year, we expanded the Ghana Ministry to include building wells. The "Living Water Well Ministry" was documented by the Office of Proclamation and Identity of the National office of the United Church of Christ. This two-part video can be found on YouTube ([www.Youtube.com/Webster/Ghana](http://www.Youtube.com/Webster/Ghana)).

In 2005 we felt the tension in the air. People were restless with so much movement, resettlement, and repatriation. The remaining refugees were weary and ready for a change in their own circumstances. Friends were leaving each day, and the remaining residents were depressed and distressed at their condition. Kadeja had aged and was now married to a Sierra Leonean. They had two children--a boy and a daughter that she named after me. Each week the UNHCR officials would post the names of refugees on a bulletin board in the open-air pavilion. These refugees were to report to the resettlement office to schedule physicals and prepare for trips to their new homes. It was the dream that they all harbored. In some instances, refugee

identifications were sold to Ghanaians, resulting in some losing any chance of resettlement.

### The Krisan/Sanzule Rebellion

That year we returned from Ghana in mid-March and in November, I received a call from Kadeja. She was desperate and hiding from the Ghana military and police. There were 30 people with her. She wanted me to send her money so that she could rent a bus and carry them to safety in Accra. They were fearful that if they returned to the refugee camp, they would be arrested, beaten, or killed.

There had been an uprising in the camp. The genesis of the unrest was dependent on who was reporting the story. One version blamed the Togolese for the disturbance. According to this account, the Togolese were upset because they wanted to be resettled outside of Africa, but because they were not refugees from a war and were there because of political deal making, they were not eligible to be resettled. They led a large group of people to the border Ghana shares with Cote D'Ivoire, but were met with force by the Ghana military and police.

Kadeja's account in later years was that the police had badly beaten a female refugee and her son, who eventually died. Kadeja took pictures of the two and encouraged the residents to send letters of protest to UNHCR along with the pictures. She thought this would be better than trying to demonstrate and risk their personal safety. Others chose a different route. When the unrest began, residents turned over UNHCR cars and burned the food storage shed that held the rations. Kadeja fled along with her husband who had previously incurred a leg injury that caused him to limp and their three children. Kadeja explained:

*"We ran to a Ghanaian friend who let people stay in his house. We were sleeping all over the house. Then I called you."*

When she received the wired money, Kadeja rented a bus, loaded the 30 people onto it, and headed for Accra. When she arrived in Accra she called me again so that she could get money to rent a house for herself and the

others. The money was sent, and Kadeja rented housing in Accra.

### Kadeja is Resettled in America

Several months later, in 2006, I received a call from Kadeja saying that a friend had informed her that her name had been posted on the camp bulletin board. Because the police were still looking for her, she waited until one day before she was supposed to take her physical and leave before claiming her resettlement package. Kadeja and her family would be resettled in Lansing, Michigan. It was a dream come true. It had been seven years since I first met Kadeja, when I thought her plight was hopeless. Now she would be an hour away from me. She would no longer live in fear of snakes, scorpions, and crocodiles. Her children would no longer have to fear malnutrition or malaria. After a little over a decade in the refugee camp, years of wars and political unrest, Kadeja would be coming to America. She was almost 33 years old.

Church members met Kadeja and her family at the airport, and gave them coats, gloves, and hats. The housing that the official refugee resettlement service provided seemed adequate initially, but turned out to be otherwise. The landlord would house the refugees until their resettlement funds were exhausted, and then would devise a pretense to evict them. Fortunately for Kadeja and some of the other former refugees, we had a developer in the congregation who had townhouses to rent in the Lansing area.

In those early days, I would invite Kadeja to stay overnight at the parsonage with the kids on the weekends. They were not used to cold weather and thought that they needed to keep their coats, sweaters, gloves, and hats on even indoors at night. I told them that it wasn't necessary, that we had heat and blankets; but it seemed as though those first few months were much too cold for them. I explained the seasons to them. I told them about fall and how the leaves fell off of the trees, but that in spring new leaves would return. They were incredulous because, in the abstract, this seemed impossible.

Kadeja moved ahead, enrolled the children in school, and began to take classes to become

a licensed practical nurse, (while working part-time at a bargain department store. (She wanted to work full-time but her employer kept her part-time so that she would not be eligible for benefits.) Her husband had a little more difficulty getting work. She visited the church when we drove to Lansing to get the others; however, our services were no match for the spirit-filled African worship experience. I understood her need to settle into a church that was much more expressive and evangelical than our Reformed worship tradition.

### **A Military-Controlled Krisan/Sanzule Refugee Camp**

When the delegation visited Ghana the spring of 2006, the atmosphere was different. We were not allowed to go into the camp as usual. Crowds did not greet us, and many of the women we knew stood behind trees as if in hiding. The one thing we did notice was that several of the teenage girls were pregnant. Their pregnancies could be traced back to the time of the unrest and the subsequent occupation of the camp by Ghana police and military. They were silent. I had to negotiate with the new camp manager, a former military officer, to get access to the camp. I assured him that we would not disrupt anything, but this was our annual visit and we wanted to spend some time and resources on the clinic, the school, and the food.

Our micro-economic enterprises had dissolved. When we were finally allowed in the camp (under strict scrutiny), we saw a lot of new faces. We took two of the young girls with us to Takoradi to get food and medicine. Both were pregnant; one was having morning sickness and fell ill in the van. We later took the two of them to a restaurant. Unlike the normal morning sickness, when the teenager vomited she spit up only sand and water. It was clear that she had not had any substantive food.

I was glad that Kadeja had been resettled in America, but I was saddened by the condition and the spirit of the camp in 2006. When we returned to America, I spent some time with Kadeja. It turned out that she was having marital difficulties with her Sierra Leonean husband and they were on the verge

of separating. In the meantime, Kadeja had learned from another Liberian woman in the States that it was possible that her mother was alive and possibly living in New Jersey. Kadeja thought initially that the woman was talking about her stepmother, but later found out that it was her biological mother, whom she had not seen for sixteen years. Kadeja had matured into an extraordinary woman in the refugee camp. Now she would find out that she would lose a husband but gain a mother.

### **Expanding the Ghana Pilgrimage to Include Water Wells**

Our 2007 pilgrimage started off on a high note with the dedication of the first two "Living Water Wells" in Dambai and Akaa in Northern Ghana. We had doubled the number of delegates for this trip to about two dozen. Another highlight was a ceremony at the W.E.B. DuBois Museum in Ghana honoring the work of Webster Church and its delegations from 2002 to 2007. The plaque included the names of over 50 people who had participated in the mission over that period of time, some of whom had returned several times.

Ghana had changed. The decision was made to close the two refugee camps. Buduburam residents protested their closure, but the Krisan/Sanzule refugees were in a state of despair. The camp had become dilapidated. The refugees that were left were unlikely to be resettled and the rations had been cut drastically. The medicine in the clinic was practically nonexistent. Once again, the children were dying of malnutrition at a more rapid pace. Children who received scholarships were thriving, and some of the individual relationships established by the members of the church were at various levels of success and failure.

In the meantime, the Webster Church Ghana Ministry became involved in raising funds for "The Living Water Wells." This phase of the ministry—inspired by the aforementioned octogenarian—raised about \$100,000 for the construction of wells in Ghana. The wells were dedicated during our 2008 pilgrimage. In all, we constructed eleven wells and a partial water system.

### **My Last Spiritual Pilgrimage to Ghana**

That year, I returned from our annual pilgrimage to Ghana and made good on my letter of resignation that I had written 18 months earlier. In May, I resigned from Webster United Church of Christ and began serving as the Chaplain Administrator at The Chautauqua United Church of Christ Society, Inc., in Chautauqua, New York; a summer religious, arts, and educational retreat center. During the remainder of the year I remained home in Reston, VA.

When I returned to Ghana in 2009 to finalize the well inspection and to visit the refugee camp, I knew that it would be my last trip for awhile. I was experiencing major health challenges. When Kadeja found out about my condition, she called and sent cards from her home in East Orange, New Jersey. She was praying for me and sending forth petitions in her home church for my renewed health. In one email she offered to come to Virginia and take care of me until my health was restored. Her prayers and those of others were well placed and produced the desired healing.

### **Re-Uniting with Kadeja in New Jersey**

In March 2011, my first road trip following my illness was from Virginia to New Jersey, to visit with Kadeja and her kids. She had moved from Newark where she had lived with her mother. It appeared as though too many years had elapsed for them to recapture the mother-daughter bond. When I climbed the stairs in the two-story garden apartment Kadeja called home, I remembered that first image of her in the dust and dirt of Krisan/Sanzule; her face weary, her children neatly dressed, even in the worst of circumstances.

When she opened the door to her apartment, we just embraced. My namesake was now six years old, smart and feisty, and her brother was seven or eight and already had the bearing of a little man. I looked around the apartment, which was neatly decorated with pictures, comfortable furniture, and plants; it had the warmth of a real home. Rebecca, Kadeja's oldest daughter was in her first year at state college. She had wanted to come home to see me, but she had to stay in school. I couldn't stop snapping pictures and marveling

at the progress that this courageous woman had made in spite of the adversities. She was now sitting before me, healthy and strong, as spiritually centered as she had always been. She held devotions every morning with the two children and cooked meals at home because eating out was too expensive. Most of all, she said that she was enjoying the peace and serenity of her new life.

Kadeja was now working part-time at a nursing home as a nurse's aide. She had purchased a second-hand car that she used to drive to work. Her plan was to return to school and study to become a radiology technician. As we began to talk, Kadeja went back into the bedroom and came out with something in her hand.

She sat next to me and said: "I still have it." "What?" I asked. "The ring," she said as she held out her hand. "This is the ring you gave me and said to keep it until you came back."

We just stared at each other—it had been a remarkable journey!

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