

Diversity in Action: Rev. Raymond Dyer

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Rev. Raymond Dyer with wife, Elizabeth

NEW YORK - When the word diversity is heard today it often implies a difference of skin color, religion or gender. When the Reverend Raymond Dyer, pastor of the First Church of Illumination in Harlem since 1999, uses the word, however, he's speaking of another form of diversity: a diversity of ideas and thought not confined to race, religion, ethnicity or gender.

During his time as a student at the Manhattan campus of the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) starting nearly a decade ago, it quickly became clear to him that he was involved in a very unique kind of learning

experience.

So unique, in fact, he believes it did not exist in any other learning institution at the time. It was an experience he was unprepared for, but one which continues to pay dividends in his life and ministry today.

“Myself and one of my former classmates really loved and relished the fact that we believed that UTS was ahead of the curve in that it was a microcosm of our society.

“We were in a classroom with Muslims, Jews, Christians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Protestants. That was really a reflection of our society; it was not denominational or dogmatic in that sense.

“We were taught by East Indians, Rev. Dr. David; Japanese, Dr. Noda; we were taught by African-Americans; by white, by black, by female. UTS in my opinion is way ahead of the curve, and you're talking quite a few years now. Currently other seminary's can say 'we have that now,' but you're talking decades that UTS was way ahead of the curve.”

Rev. Dyer, a native of Belize who came to New York City when he was 16, recently had the opportunity to apply the lessons he learned at UTS, graduating from the Citizen's Police Academy this past December following a 14-week program designed, as Dyer puts it, “to bridge the divide, to close the gap between the police and the community which it serves.”

Various members of the local clergy, activists and community leaders participated in the program, which concluded with a graduation ceremony presided over by Police Commissioner William Bratton held at One Police Plaza.

“Being at UTS and being exposed to professors like Dr. Brown, Dr. David, Dr. Winings, and Dr. Mickler, gave me the confidence to go into an environment like that and be qualified just to participate and not to feel at a disadvantage,” said Dyer.

A husband to his wife, Elizabeth, for more than a quarter of a century, and the father of a grown daughter and a son who is attending the Borough of Manhattan Community College with an eye on entering law enforcement, Dyer has also been active in the American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLC) since the late 1990's.

His association with the ACLC put him in contact with Rev. Leander Hardaway, a recruiter for UTS who encouraged him to apply. His acceptance was the beginning of a life-altering experience, giving him a new outlook on life as well as a new outlook on the Bible.
Rev. Raymond Dyer

"The classroom was so diverse, we had African students, we had Indian students, Asian students, Americans, Latin Americans. Not only was I experiencing the Bible from an American perspective, but a West African perspective coming out of a war-torn conflict area and corrupt regime and talking about how they see the Bible"

"So you're getting all these different ideas and concepts that make it all better. You would hear someone say something about a passage and you would know what that passage said because you've been taught what it said. Then this person says something that hits you out of left field and you say, 'Wow, I never saw that and I never saw that in that passage.'

"And, guess what, his point is just as valid, if not more so, than yours. Just this incredible experience."

Rev. Dyer also applies his training as a clergyman in his position as an employee of NYC's transit authority where he, along with rabbis, priests, imams and other religious leaders, are regularly called on to perform various functions of their faith when accidents in the subway system occur.

Still a young man of 46, Rev. Dyer felt a change come over him 20 years ago when he heard a sermon by Rev. Frank Austin speaking on how, 'if God could forgive David's sin with Bathsheba he could forgive you.' That was his conversion point, and he soon became a regular church attendee.

Not long after that he felt a "calling" from God, which he resisted at first. Reluctance gave way to acceptance, however, allowing him, as he put it, 'to sleep more soundly at night.'

A wise decision, no doubt, just like the one he made when he chose to attend UTS on the recommendation of a friend and colleague, and one which has had a lasting effect on his life and ministry.

To sum it up Rev. Dyer was not lost for words, "without UTS I don't know where I would be."