

## I had the unique opportunity to visit my native land, Mauritania

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*On far right, Abdou Gaye, with tournament participants in Mauritania*

Between July 24 and August 24 I had the unique opportunity to visit my native land, Mauritania. This time I was not only visiting parents and friends but I was also going as a peace ambassador, focusing on youth development. Thanks to the sponsorship of PEACE CLUB and the assistance of generous friends here in the US who contributed to the soccer tournament for youth in the city of Rosso where I spent some of the most exciting days of my stay.



When I refer to Mauritania maybe you think I mean the island of Mauritius, or imagine a tiny country within the vast African continent. However, Mauritania is almost 2x larger than Texas; there is desert throughout most of its territory; and yet it faces the ocean and is the third largest fish exporter in Africa. The country's official name is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. As the name implies the country is 100% Muslim. There are two main ethnic groups, the black African including the Wolof (my ethnic group) and the Maurs (including the Arab-berbers and the black Maurs who had been enslaved by white Maurs). The painful reality in the cultural structure is the imbalance, unfairness, and potential conflict between these two groups.

I graduated UTS with a Doctor of Ministry in May, 2016. My years of study afforded me the time and gave me the maturity to discern new opportunities and new approaches to work with people of all faiths and backgrounds; to bring reconciliation within families and within groups, and ambitiously to have the confidence to seek peace at all levels of society. Also, starting a spiritual outreach in Kingston, NY and launching the Islam Forum in Kingston, as co-director, renewed my investigation into the Muslim religion of my home country. My anticipated trip to my homeland of Mauritania in the summer of 2016 re-ignited my desire to restore balance there, help heal the wounds of past wrongs and to be a catalyst to foster hope and righteousness in the youth culture.

I found that doors were opened, not through religion or ethnic partiality, but through soccer. Soccer is a sport in Mauritania which almost everyone can unite around. I wanted to inject a diplomatic dimension into the tournament by bringing together young people from different factions, using the slogan "Celebrating our differences in harmony and peace through soccer".

Most important was the energy and joy of the young souls who played and really celebrated during the city-wide event. The winning teams received a brand new set of soccer uniforms (shirts, shorts, socks) and a soccer ball. The winners also received trophies.

The following week I met with the Governor of Rosso and then the General Secretary of the Mauritanian Football League in Nouakchott. The road ahead is wide open. The Governor and I talked about the unhealthiness of the city, the challenges in managing the collection and disposal of the garbage. But we also discussed what might be offered to the young people who are mostly idle during the 3 long months of the summer. We agreed that a sports program would be a good start.



*Photo: Meeting the Governor of Rosso*

The General Secretary and I talked about a larger tournament in Nouakchott next summer, and introducing a coaching curriculum to teach the PEACE CLUB values. I am confident and excited to begin planning. My relatives and old friends there are enthusiastic. I have been able to bring a breath of fresh air.

Transformation is wonderful. I began that transformational experience at UTS through my MRE studies with the exposure to world religions, theology, counseling, devotion and peacebuilding. The effect those studies had on my own spiritual development and the health of my marriage is immeasurable. My life ahead is to endeavor to bring my experience and convey it to those around me, and especially to my homeland where life can be fixed and change can be slow. The excitement of soccer may be the way to shake things up.