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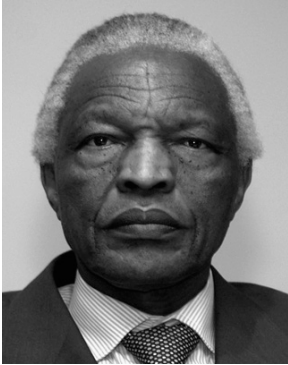
Multi-talented peacebuilder: Ambassador Dr. Bethuel A. Kiplagat (November 28, 1936 -July 14, 2017)

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Multi-Talented Peacebuilder: Ambassador Dr. Bethuel A. Kiplagat (November 28, 1936 -July 14, 2017)

By Jesse N. K. Mugambi



1. Introduction

This article for the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is dedicated to Ambassador Bethuel Abdu Kiplagat (November 28, 1936 – July 14, 2014), the distinguished Kenyan diplomat, ecumenist, and mentor who served in many roles, with great impact both in Africa and abroad.⁴⁵ Here is a summary of his illustrious career as a diplomat, in context of his role as member of the Panel of Eminent Persons (APR Panel) of the African Peer Review Mechanism

(APRM).

Bethuel Abdu Kiplagat was born on November 28, 1936 in Kenya. He studied physical sciences at Makerere University and sociology of religion at the Sorbonne (Paris, France). He served in the Kenyan Foreign Service for thirteen years then was Kenya's Ambassador to France (1978-1981) and the United Kingdom (1981-1983) and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation of Kenya from 1983 – 1991. He also served his country in other capacities as a member of the Election Monitoring Committee of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (1997) and was involved in the constitutional review process in Kenya. Kiplagat was closely involved in the conflict resolution efforts on the continent, particularly in Eastern Africa. He facilitated peace talks in Uganda (1985 –86), initiated and facilitated peace talks in Mozambique (1988-1992), and engaged warring parties in Ethiopia in dialogue in 1988-1992.

Kiplagat was active in civil society organizations, serving as Deputy General Secretary with the National Christian Council of Churches of Kenya and

⁴⁵ The sources for this paper are wide-ranging, from his close associates both in Kenya and abroad, and also from his public roles in ecclesial, corporate and state responsibilities. The author of this article is grateful to the Amani Group and the family of Ambassador Kiplagat for the support and encouragement in the process of compiling this brief paper on such an exemplary lay leader in African Christianity during our generation.

director of the Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development Program of the Sudan Council of Churches in Southern Sudan. He also chaired the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) and served on a panel established by the International Peace Academy and the OAU to examine the institutional relationship between the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and civil society.

He was a resource person to the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) Peace Process for Sudan from 1985 and advised Sudanese civil society on conflict resolution. He was an independent consultant on peace and conflict resolution, Kenya's Special Envoy in the Somali Peace Process and chairman of the IGAD Technical Committee on Somali National Reconciliation Conference. He chaired several organizations such as the Kenya Rural Enterprise Program and Operation Save Innocent Lives, served on several boards including that of the Nairobi Stock Exchange, and he was also the chancellor of Egerton University in Kenya. Kiplagat was the founder and executive director of the African Peace Forum and a director of Universal Bank in Kenya. He was also engaged in activities aimed at encouraging community-based peace processes in Eastern Africa.⁴⁶

Kiplagat's vocation exemplified the core teaching of Jesus about Christian discipleship, as summarized in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 to 7. In his various duties and responsibilities both in Kenya and elsewhere, Kiplagat seems to have been guided by the Beatitudes – the blessings that accompany those who do endeavor to make the world a better place for all, without complaint, without blaming others, and without evading responsibility:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴⁶ http://www.aprmtoolkit.saiia.org.za/component/docman/doc_view/16-atkt-kiplagat-bio-apr-panel-2007-en

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely[b] on my account. [Matthew 5:1-11, NRSV]

The testimonies of many people who encountered Kiplagat in the context of a wide variety of circumstances—from many nations, professions, religions, organizations and political leanings—confirm that he was indeed a unique personality. He was firm in his convictions, but gentle in persuading other people to embrace his insights. Long before his appointment as ambassador in the diplomatic corps of Kenya, he was already a practicing diplomat, mediating conflicts between individuals, communities and political factions within Kenya and elsewhere. He had the rare gift of articulate, multi-lingual self-expression, and a likable personality that drew people to him, both for company and counsel. As an Anglican lay leader, he set a high standard of active participation in Church affairs, particularly with regard to welcoming visitors to “feel at home away from home.”

2. Bethuel Kiplagat’s Multi-faceted Legacy

In his vocation, Kiplagat played many roles in his interactions with others.

An exceptional mentor. Kiplagat placed a high priority on mentoring young people across Africa to become responsible and exemplary leaders. He took great interest in their concerns, especially those in schools and colleges. This mentorship vocation began early in life at the Alliance High School he was appointed school captain in 1956.

A visionary. As a visionary, he encouraged people, young and old, men and women, to think and act for long-term goals, even when focusing on short-term objectives.

A Prominent Lay Churchman. He was a prominent lay leader at St. Mark’s Anglican Church in Westlands, Nairobi. At the same time, he was a strong promoter of ecumenical and inter-faith relations. Thus his commitment to the Christian faith, as an Anglican, was supportive of, rather than antagonistic to, ecumenical and interfaith collaboration.

A Senior Ecumenist. For more than five decades he served as a consultant ecumenist within the National Council of Churches; the All Africa Conference of Churches and the World Council of Churches.

A Respector of all Faiths and a Promoter of Inter-Religious Dialogue. His Islamic background prior to joining Alliance High School positioned him in good reputation as a respector of all faiths and he inspired others to do likewise. This

inter-faith posture remained an integral aspect of his mediation throughout his life.⁴⁷ Within church circles, Kiplagat was most renowned for his work in diplomacy, mediated through inter-religious and inter-cultural relations. Mediation was his vocation since his youth. His proficiency in French became a great asset in his vocation of diplomacy and ecumenical relations, both within the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). While within the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) he remained a faithful congregant and at the same time, remained a staunch Ecumenist, in pursuit of the prayer of Jesus, “That All may be One” (John 17: 20-26).

A Pan-African Patriot. Although he was a very patriotic Kenyan, he was at the same time a committed Pan-Africanist. In his vocation there was no contradiction or conflict between passionate patriotism and broad-minded Pan-Africanism. This open-mindedness was cultivated early in life, when he studied at Makerere University, Uganda, with peers from various African nations, under instruction and mentorship from multiple nations abroad. To Kiplagat, Pan-African identity was a practical commitment rather than a theoretical proposition. He chose as his wife a diplomat from Madagascar, a French-speaking nation in the Indian Ocean. Thus his family became multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-talented – an example of what Pan-African identity could achieve if taken seriously as a lifetime commitment.

A Peacemaker and an Inter-Community Bridge-builder. In all his involvement with various initiatives both within and outside ecumenical, diplomatic and inter-faith circles, Kiplagat always advocated for peace, healing, and reconciliation—to which he richly contributed both formally and informally.⁴⁸ He was an effective bridge builder. He assumed this role very naturally, in small groups as well as between communities and organizations.

A Principled Negotiator. One of the qualities that made him acceptable as a mediator was his disposition as a principled negotiator, that is, a person in whom the conflicting parties could confide.

A Seasoned Diplomat. As a member of the Kenya Diplomatic Corps he served as a senior diplomat for more than four decades mentoring younger

⁴⁷ His father was a Muslim from the Rift Valley, Kenya, but his upbringing was rooted in the Tugen-Kalenjin cultural heritage.

⁴⁸ Bethuel Kiplagat offered to mediate for peace whenever and wherever conflict erupted, if he was convinced that he could contribute constructively toward bridging the gap between the conflicting viewpoints. This commitment was exemplified in his mediation of conflict in many African countries, including Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan.

diplomats and advising older ones while sharing his wide-ranging experience and exposure. One of his younger colleague diplomats, Amina Mohamed summarized Kiplagat's contribution to Kenya's diplomatic profile thus:

His tenure at the ministry coincided with the so-called "lost decade" for Africa -- a period in which there were widespread misconceptions about Africa, then regarded as a hopeless continent. Navigating international relations at this time was therefore a considerable challenge, demanding creativity, hard work and sufficient enterprise. Unmatched in his creativity, insight and drive, Kiplagat was equal to the task. A dynamic leader and team worker, he was instrumental in the introduction of strategic approaches and fresh perspectives in the conduct of Kenya's diplomatic relations. This ushered in a new assertive and progressive profile for Kenya on the world stage. An effective negotiator, he also had an impressive career as a peacemaker who contributed immensely to peace initiatives and processes in Africa. He served in various peace engagements in Africa.⁴⁹

An Innovative Motivator. During his stint at the National Council of Churches (NCCCK) the work of the council grew tremendously, with many pioneering ventures and innovations -- all thanks to Kiplagat's innovative and imaginative ideas.

An Investment Advisor. He became one of the influential leaders in the Nairobi Stock Exchange; encouraged the National Council of Churches to promote investment ventures as a strategy to wean from dependence on donations from abroad; and became one of the founders of the Kenya Rural Enterprise Program that eventually grew into the K-Rep Bank.⁵⁰

An Effective Entrepreneur. Throughout his vocation, Kiplagat was convinced that Africa's economic success would be assured through effective African participation in industry. During the late 1960s, he campaigned for research to ascertain the level of African investment in the industrialization of Kenya. The outcome was a book titled *Who Controls Industry in Kenya* in which it was confirmed that Kenyan participation was practically non-existent. As follow up, he encouraged Kenyans to participate in the industrialization of Kenya

⁴⁹ <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001247682/opinion-bethuel-kiplagat-has-left-peace-imprints-on-sands-of-time>

⁵⁰ The K-REP Bank was re-branded as Sidian Bank in 2017.

through investment in shares and also through the formation of Kenyan-owned companies.⁵¹

A Radio and Television Personality. Through the media—especially television appearances—Kiplagat influenced and educated many people in Kenya and elsewhere. He was an excellent communicator.⁵²

A Strong believer in Family Values. Alongside Kiplagat's very busy schedules in Kenya and abroad, he allocated time for his family and mentored younger people to do the same.⁵³

3. Diplomacy through Ecumenical Relations

For more than half a century Kiplagat consistently promoted reconciliation, with the ecumenical movement as the frame of reference. He featured in most ecumenical initiatives for reconciliation across all of Africa, including Angola, Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Sudan. He served as mediation consultant for the World Council of Churches (WCC), the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), and the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK).

Kiplagat was Africa Secretary for the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) between 1968 and 1971. Though based in Nairobi, he travelled widely. One of his priorities at that time was mentoring young Africans to become exemplary future leaders of their respective nations. Many African leaders of the present generation have benefitted from his mentorship. While in the WSCF Africa Office he served as editor for *Presence* magazine (Volumes 2 and 3, 1969-70) that published contributions from visionary young Africans, motivating many of them to become prominent leaders in their respective nations.

He firmly believed that peace and harmony could best be achieved and sustained through mutual recognition, mutual respect and mutual appreciation across the barriers of race, religion, nation, profession, age, and gender. One of his great assets in mediation was his proficiency in both English and French. Thus he could communicate directly while most of his colleagues relied on translators and interpreters.

In 1974, Kiplagat was appointed Deputy General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK). One of his most memorable contributions to ecumenical diplomacy was his influence in mid-1974 that led

⁵¹ *Who Controls Industry in Kenya? Report of a Working Group* (Nairobi: NCCCK, 1968).

⁵² <http://www.tubeita.com/search/Bethwel-Kiplagat>

⁵³ https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/07/21/bethuel-mourned-as-african-pillar-of-peace-his-kids-term-him-caring_c1601166

the World Council of Churches to choose Nairobi, Kenya as the venue for its Fifth Assembly in November 1975, with the National Council of Churches (NCCCK) as the host organization. As soon as the decision was confirmed, Kenyan church leaders mobilized their human and other resources, and hosted one of the most successful conferences ever held.⁵⁴ The theme was “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites.” This was the first WCC Assembly convened in Africa. Kiplagat’s role as coordinator of the Local Arrangements Committee was exemplary. Here is a testimony from a Kenyan Muslim of the younger generation, whom Kiplagat has influenced and impressed immensely:

I knew Kip from the late 1980’s on radio and television, and finally met him in person in 2007 at the Citizens Initiative for Peace -- after the outbreak of violence in 2007. He never was simply a peace lover, and was never a spectator where violence threatened peace. He rolled up his sleeves and he did what he had to do as peacemaker. One teaching I learnt from my Christian friends is “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will inherit the Kingdom of God.” That was Kip. In our Islamic traditions, the same teaching is expressed thus: “If you save life, it would be counted as if you saved the whole humanity.” I had chances to witness Kip’s peace work in Somalia and Kenya. I also learned of his many achievements from friends. I saw the man doing his work with humility. Ambassador Kiplagat, himself, was a “center of excellence.”⁵⁵

Kiplagat’s involvement in the WSCF, the WCC, the AACC, and the NCCCK prepared him for diplomatic service. In 1978, the Republic of Kenya appointed him ambassador, a role he maintained in various capacities, both formal and informal, until his health deteriorated. He left a legacy to be emulated. He set very high standards for those who come after him. “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.” (Psalm 25: 9, NRSV).

4. Bethuel Kiplagat’s Resilience and Consistency

⁵⁴ The WCC Fifth Assembly in November 1975 was the first international gathering convened at the Kenyatta International Conference Center, Nairobi (KICC). The Center had just been completed and opened for such functions.

⁵⁵ Dr. Mustafa Ali, Personal Tribute to Amb. Bethuel Kiplagat, July 17, 2017.

One of Kiplagat's most challenging responsibilities in Kenya was his role as chairman of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Committee (TJRC). He was confronted with criticism and allegations that he had been adversely implicated in one of the scandals. In an interview conducted at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, U.S.A. on July 7, 2010, Kiplagat's resilience and consistency were explicitly articulated. Here below is a transcript of two questions published on the Center's website:

Mr. Kiplagat, could you elaborate on where the work of the TJRC stands today, especially during this sensitive time of the constitutional referendum?

Bethuel Kiplagat: First, I want to point out that regardless of whether or not the referendum passes, the TJRC stands, and we will continue to do our vital work. Beyond the two years of our mandate, there remains the more permanent institution called the National Cohesion and Integration Commission, which will endure the 2012 presidential elections and beyond. With relation to where our work stands today, we are in the middle of our fact-finding mission, and I believe that it is very important that we continue during this politically sensitive time. We have hired dozens of experts, historians, and researchers, and we are well underway with our research. The TJRC is another reason why Kenyans stand optimistic today: people will finally have a more complete record of their past and the ability to bring to justice the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes that this country has seen.

What is your version of the allegations against you regarding your past during the Moi regime and what that says about your current position as chairman of the TJRC?

Bethuel Kiplagat: I am well aware of all the allegations against me, and I will repeat what I have said to everyone else: I stand behind my innocence, and I have opened a case in court for them to investigate my past. I am not avoiding accountability and would be happy to prove my innocence in a court of law. I am proud of the work of TJRC, and I think that these allegations will pass, and we

will be able to continue our work undisturbed. We are still coming to work every day and realizing the mission of the TJRC.⁵⁶

Kiplagat diplomatically and courageously expressed his views in his endeavor to mediate conflicts, even when the opponents were poles apart. He was a very patient negotiator, and his diplomatic skill was exceptional. His faith as a Christian sustained him, and people of other faiths appreciated his devoted religious practice. Mutual respect and appreciation, Kiplagat emphasized, is the beginning and the essence of reconciliation.

5. Kiplagat the Ecumenist

Kiplagat's international profile grew and blossomed within the ecumenical movement, first in the World Student Federation (WSCF), and mostly in the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the WCC, in his tribute after receiving the sad news of Kiplagat's death, lucidly and concisely expressed this ecumenical aspect of Kiplagat's vocation:

I am writing on behalf of the World Council of Churches to express our heartfelt condolences on the passing of Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat. Amb. Kiplagat was a true ambassador of peace and reconciliation and a successful career diplomat who played crucial roles in the lives of many, both in his country, Kenya, and in the East African region and the continent of Africa at large. His service as chairman of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) of his country was a true testimony to his dedication for peace and harmony among the Kenyan society. Amb. Kiplagat had a distinguished record in conflict resolution efforts in the continent. Beyond Kenya, he also facilitated historic dialogues among warring parties in Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, and Sudan that all culminated in negotiated settlements. He has also been a valuable and willing resource person to civil society organizations who also established and chaired the African Peace Forum to help crusade peace building and reconciliation efforts in the continent.

⁵⁶ <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-major-general-ahmed-sheikh-farah-member-and-bethuel-kiplagat-chairman-truth-justice-and-reconciliation-commission-nairobi-kenya>

Amb. Kiplagat successfully served as the moderator of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) of the World Council of Churches from 1998-2006. As moderator of the CCIA, he brought keen theological and public witness perspectives and vast experiences from the life of his public service. As a moderator, he worked tirelessly to defend and promote human rights. He was a highly respected and beloved leader within the global ecumenical movement. His faith and sense of dedication reflected a deep commitment and calling to serve in the life of the church, not only within his own denomination, but also in the global fellowship. His focus on issues of justice has been, and will continue to be, an inspiration to the council. I have had the privilege to get to know him personally and I got a deep respect for him and his faith and his work for justice and peace. From the General Secretariat, I would like to extend my sympathy to his wife and the whole Kiplagat family who mourn, and pray for peace and comfort at this difficult time. Our thoughts and prayers are with you. The WCC prays that his memory will inspire many and his legacy will continue to endure.⁵⁷

5. Some Highlights of Bethuel Kiplagat's Biography

Childhood and Youth

- 28.11.1936: Kiplagat is born
- He studied physical sciences at Makerere University and sociology of religion at the Sorbonne University (Paris).

Career

- 1978-1981: Kenya's Ambassador to France.
- 1981-1983: Kenya's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.
- 1983– 1991: Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation of Kenya.
- 1985 –86: Facilitated peace talks in Uganda.
- 1988-1992: Initiated and facilitated peace talks in Mozambique.
- 1988-1992: Engaged warring parties in Ethiopia.
- 1985: Resource person to the IGAD Peace Process for Sudan.

⁵⁷ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/tributes/condolences-on-the-death-of-ambassador-bethuel-kiplagat>

- 1997: Member of Election Monitoring Committee of the National Council of Churches of Kenya.
- 2003- 2005: Kenya's special envoy to the Somalia peace process.
- 2009- November 2010: Chairman of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC). He later resigned after coming under investigation for past human rights abuses, particularly his role in the 1984 Wagalla Massacre.
- He also served as the chairman of Juhudi Kilimo Company Limited and chairman of K-Rep Bank Limited.
- He was the founder and former executive director of Africa Peace Forum.

Memberships

- Member of the Nairobi Stock Exchange.
- Executive Director of the Universal Bank of Kenya.
- Chairman Kenya Rural Enterprise Program and Operation Save Innocent Lives.

6. Some Related Website Links on Bethuel Kiplagat

- <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001247682/opinion-bethuel-kiplagat-has-left-peace-imprints-on-sands-of-time>
- http://www.aprmtreekit.saiia.org.za/component/docman/doc_view/16-atkt-kiplagat-bio-apr-panel-2007-en
- <https://softkenya.com/kenya/bethuel-kiplagat/>
- <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Peace-calls-mark-Bethuel-Kiplagat-burial/1056-4027992-ht8y1h/index.html>
- <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Life-and-times-of-Bethuel-Kiplagat/1056-4014396-nikudvz/index.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3K5PqJ6k7w>
- https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/07/14/former-tjrc-chairman-bethuel-kiplagat-is-dead_c1596826
- <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/07/ambassador-bethuel-kiplagat-is-dead/>
- <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/07/former-tjrc-boss-kiplagat-to-be-laid-to-rest-saturday/>
- <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/bethuel-kiplagat>
- <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001248471/diversity-as-mourners-pay-tribute-to-bethuel-kiplagat>

- <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Peace-calls-mark-Bethuel-Kiplagat-burial/1056-4027992-ht8y1h/index.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHpOwF4mJro>
- <http://www.genevadeclaration.org/2014rrc/rrckenya/programme/speakers.html>
- <https://hukaloh.com/index.php?a=watch/ahSGPC3lkOc>
- <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/tributes/condolences-on-the-death-of-ambassador-bethuel-kiplagat>

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