

REFLECTIONS BY PHIL GROVES AFTER THE AFRECS CONFERENCE -

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Our sisters and brothers in Sudan and South Sudan have lived through civil war, protracted peace negotiations, new hope in the comprehensive peace agreement, the birth of a new nation and the reformulation of Sudan as an aggressive Islamic state. Hopes that the new nations would bring peace are fading.

In Sudan Christians face persecution. The plight of those in the Nuba Mountains is largely unreported, but they are suffering systematic oppression. They always feared they would.

In South Sudan the high hopes following independence have been replaced by interethnic rivalry. The world press reports that the tribalism is being whipped up by those in ultimate power for their own financial gain. The world media has paid attention, but only briefly and peace and prosperity seem a long way off.

All through this journey the Episcopal Church of Sudan and South Sudan has not been alone. The relationship between The Episcopal Church, CMS and Sudanese Episcopalians was cemented through the sacrificial work of [Revd Marc Nikkel](#) – a TEC priest and CMS missionary who stayed with his sisters and brothers through the darkest days.

It was Marc who coined the phrase '[the lost boys and lost girls](#)' for the traumatised children who crossed borders to escape execution and were eventually resettled in the USA and Canada. It was these women and men who enlivened the AFRECS Conference, just as they have brought new life to many TEC congregations.

The popular narrative in a world full of fear is that immigrants from troubled nations are likely to be terrorists, full of hate for the nations that take them in. One after another these refugees spoke of the welcome they received in Episcopal churches and of the way they were now seeking to bring peace to their own country. We were among a dedicated group of peace builders – not a room full of fifth column insurgents.

At the AFRECS conference the American friends often spoke of the effect that welcoming these Sudanese refugees had had on them. Many spoke of a spiritual awakening and the personal significance of their journeys to Sudan and South Sudan. They spoke of how much they owed to their Sudanese and South Sudanese sisters and brothers. Partnerships through diocesan links such as that between Renk and Chicago, or Mississippi and Twic East, or through agencies such as Five Talents and Water for South Sudan are alive and vital.

The speakers at the conference included Ambassador Dr Dane Smith – a former U.S. Special envoy to Darfur – and Dr James Leach – a former Congressman and academic. Both spoke with clarity and passion on Christian peace building. They were joined by Pa'gan Amum, a former Secretary General of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Pa'gan is now in exile and his life endangered because of his commitment to peace and reconciliation.

Dane Smith made some vital observations in his presentation. One of those was that ultimately the solutions to the problems in South Sudan will only come from within. Pa'gan's participation highlighted this point, but also highlighted just how difficult that is and how far away the solution remains.

The Diaspora communities have a vital role to play in bridging the gap, but – as they acknowledged – the tribalism that infects South Sudan also plays out in their own communities. AFRECS offers a place for such rivalries to be challenged and a new way of

partnership to be lived in the Sudanese communities in the USA that can be mirrored in South Sudan. At the conference members of the Diaspora communities had the opportunity to speak directly to one another and discover ways in which they could bring about change. This will continue through the Coalition of Advocates for South Sudan – CASS.

A second point Dane Smith made was that women had been excluded from the peace building process. The UN studies have shown that peace processes with women involved are more likely to succeed and more likely to be sustained.

During the conference women had the opportunity to speak about those things which blocked their participation. They spoke of the cultures of rape and intimidation that infected the whole of their lives and how there needed to be radical change in the hearts and minds of men and women if peace were to come.

The AFRECS conference was dominated by the failure of the South Sudanese state to bring the hoped for peace across tribal divides. This meant that the concerns of the Sudanese Christians for their homes in the Nuba Mountains, or in Khartoum were to some extent lost. This was acknowledged towards the end of the conference and time was given for prayer, but more needs to be done.

AFRECS is an absolutely vital organisation and it has opened doors in the Washington corridors of power for Sudanese and South Sudanese church leaders. This is still absolutely vital. The vocal participation of so many from the Diaspora will add to the authenticity of the voice of AFRECS. There are plans for this voice to be amplified over the coming years. There is a need for women to be given a greater say and for there to be an intentional focus on the plight of persecuted Christians in Sudan. The nations have quickly become distinct in their character and this reality needs to be replicated in the AFRECS support.

The AFRECS Conference was challenging and realistic. There will be violence in the future. The birth pains are not over for the new state of South Sudan. Persecution will remain for the Christians of Sudan. The conference was also hopeful. Hope is based in the power of our God to bring life out of death and send his Spirit of Peace (John 14:26-27).