

## **President's Report – Three Weeks in Juba, Malakal and Renk, South Sudan**

Having returned just last week from three weeks in South Sudan, hosted with great care at all times by His Grace Joseph Garang Atem, Archbishop of the Internal Province of Upper Nile, I want to report on my experience while it is still fresh, but will attempt to condense it to what seems most important, in readily digestible form.

My immediate impression upon arrival in Juba, for the first time in five years, was that of a boom town, with lots of new building and other improvements, and the frenetic energy of a fast-growing city. While some of the improvements were in anticipation of the recent visit of the Pope and fellow church leaders, it is apparent that there is a great deal happening on its own. The improvements included a completely new wing of rooms and a new cafeteria at the Episcopal Guest House, along with a complete refurbishing of the existing wings of rooms. I could not have asked for better accommodation and feeding.

My first visit was to the Glow Mission Academic Primary School, along with Bishop John Gatteck, who founded (through his NGO, Christ Mission Continuous Ministry (CMCM)) and oversees the school in the camp for displaced persons that is still called “the POC”, even though it is no longer formally a U.N. Protection of Civilians facility. Originally begun with 50 students who were orphans and unaccompanied minors, the school has expanded from one church structure to include several new classrooms (though still in a very cramped space) providing primary education to 500 students (286 girls and 214 boys) with 25 part-time teachers. While I was greeted warmly and enthusiastically, by a children’s choir and the teachers present, I also received a list of the pressing needs of the school, which is barely keeping up with the basics of funding teaching staff and the lunch program, much less being able to add other basics such as desks and needed teaching aids. While the school’s very existence is a remarkable accomplishment, additional support is sorely needed for these most vulnerable (but amazingly perseverant) children and their hard-pressed mentors.

The following day I received a thorough update from Vice Chancellor (for Administration and Finance) Rev. Dr. Joseph Bilal on the blossoming Episcopal University of South Sudan (EUSS), now with a fully-accredited degree program in Law and a diploma program in Theology, and with ongoing work to accredit programs in Education, Business, Health, Agriculture and Engineering. Operating now at the Juba campus of what was Bishop Gwynne Theological College, the EUSS has ambitious plans for a new campus in Rokon, outside of Juba, where it received a generous donation of the land, and has taken the first steps of comprehensive master planning, the establishment of water wells (thanks in large part to a bequest from the late Richard Parkins of AFRECS), and the securing of funding for a perimeter fence. Rev. Dr. Bilal and Dr. Eeva John of the UK will be visiting the U.S. in May to discuss plans for the EUSS in detail with various parties, but suffice it to say that while development of the new campus is a big-ticket item, there are many opportunities for smaller donors to support student scholarships and faculty development.

I attended the English Sunday service at All Saint's Cathedral, also nicely refurbished and with expanded covered seating outside the Sanctuary, and enjoyed the sermon delivered by Reverend Professor Peter Ensor, who is serving a three-year term as Vice Chancellor (for Academic Affairs) of the EUSS, overseeing the development of the degree programs while also teaching Theology. Professor Ensor noted wryly to me that he is a Methodist, but that is not really a problem because "after all, John Wesley was an Anglican."

On Monday, I was ushered by Bishop Gatteck to a series of meetings with South Sudanese NGO's with whom he works, including Peace in Action South Sudan (PASS), Universal Intervention and Development Organization (UNIDOR), Action for Conflict Resolution (ACR), Dialogue Research Institute (DRI) and African Mission Assistance (AMA), all of whom are engaged in programs for peacebuilding and trauma healing. While none of these groups is a source of funding for the Glow School, they have helped with in-kind support such as transportation and the passing through of both food supplies and teaching materials. It was great to meet these allies of AFRECS in peace and trauma healing and learn of their specific strategies. While at DRI (which engages directly with individuals in need of trauma healing, despite its bookish-sounding name), I heard the tragic story of new clients referred that day, the surviving mother and two children of a family of nine viciously attacked by an armed group on a roadway in Unity State. The three survivors had somehow been rescued and brought to Juba, where the authorities connected them to DRI for assistance. I was moved to leave a small donation for some initial basic needs.

Archbishop Joseph and I flew the next day to Malakal on Kush Air, a regular commercial operator instead of the UN flight I had expected. We were greeted in rousing fashion by the Mother's Union and various assembled clergy and lay leaders. Ten years after the first of successive battles for the City, each of which caused tremendous damage, the City is still quite literally trying to rise from the ashes, but many people who were forced to flee have returned, and there was positive energy in the air despite a recent outbreak of conflict in a nearby area. I observed lots of activity at the river port, and sipped coffee in the central market, lively enough despite some wistful remarks about its pre-war glory.

While in Malakal we paid a visit to the large UN Mission (UNMISS) Compound north of town, where we met with two members of the Civil Affairs staff and discussed further cooperation on respective peacebuilding and trauma healing efforts, not only to avoid duplication of existing efforts, but also the possibility of joint efforts, especially in making UN aviation resources available for church-led peacebuilding gatherings. Those resources have been strained and limited this past year, mainly due to the impact of wars elsewhere, but should be more available in the coming year, as the system adjusts. It was acknowledged that the church has the trust relationships vital to be effective as peacebuilders, but so often lacks the resources to provide the logistics of gatherings for peace and trauma healing activities.

Moving on to Renk, this time in a smaller, 14-seat World Food Program plane (but one devoted to delivering people, not cargo), we were once again greeted by the enthusiastic ululations of the Mothers' Union and others excited to welcome their long-time leader back. I was happy to see Renk, last visited seven years ago and then partly depopulated following the one brief conflict in

the area, bustling and full of life, having experienced peace and stability ever since. Its Episcopal Guest House had also been improved nicely, despite the difficulty of obtaining materials and getting things accomplished, the border with Sudan still being closed despite periodic announcements by each government that it is poised to reopen.

A first order of business was a tour of the brand-new, 3-story Diocesan Headquarters building, another remarkable achievement given the closed border and the challenge of gathering the necessary resources during the pandemic. The building has more space than necessary for Diocesans needs for a reason, as the extra offices and third-floor conference center provide a steady source of rental income to the Diocese. In a more general way, the new building, adjacent to the soccer stadium and visible to a large area, is a beacon of hope and an example of the progress that can be made if there is peace. The “resurrection” of Renk (compared to my 2016 visit, when it was still partly depopulated after conflict in the area) made an easy theme for my Sunday sermon in St. Matthew Cathedral, where the pre-Easter readings were of the dry bones of Ezekiel and the miracle of the raising of Lazarus.

My time in Renk included a visit out to the Diocesan farm, where additional acreage is being cleared for sorghum planting, despite the loss of most of last year’s crop to an American beetle that was inadvertently imported in food aid in the 1980’s. Planting will come in summer with the arrival of the rains, but we were present for the visit of three successive herds of cattle, sheep and goats by nomadic Sudanese herders, who graze the area in the “offseason” and return to Sudan as the rains move north. The Sudan/South Sudan border is still officially closed, but people do what they have long done regardless.

We also made a trip up the border crossing of the paved highway where nothing has changed since my 2016 visit, the only commercial traffic being charcoal-laden donkey carts. This is one more example of life in South Sudan being made more difficult than it needs to be, in this case by those who benefit from exactions on the unofficial transportation of goods across the border, and the added cost that results.

For every story of frustration and setback, however, there is also one of remarkable perseverance and hope. We bounced South of Renk to the settlement of Panyuer, a former camp for returnees that is in the process of being surveyed and recognized as a permanent village (smaller in size than before, as many returnees moved on to parts South). Rev. Sulieman, who was present for many of our activities during the week, welcomed us to current humble but vibrant stick-and-tarp church (filled with the noise of ululations, singing children and drums), before leading us to the site of the permanent church, under construction with the hundreds of clay and wattle (we might say “adobe”) bricks already manufactured and laid out at the site. As far as I saw, this would be one of the first few structures at the new village other than tukuls of wood structures with thatched or tarp roofs. There was much joy in the air, despite the recent history of displacement and resettlement, with the accompanying challenge of finding a way to make a living.

A capping highlight of our time in Renk was a visit to the central market, to see two thriving new restaurants, each owned by a recent graduate of the Literacy, Peace and Trauma Healing and Vocational training program launched by Archbishop Joseph, conducted by Five Talents and

funded in part by AFRECS. Each of these restaurants employs eight other women, and they stand out among other new ventures begun by the graduates. According to Diocesan Secretary Abraham Jok, 37 of the 49 women who recently completed the training program have begun new businesses of one form or another, financed in part out of the cooperative “loan box”, a safe with three separate key locks, the keys to which are held by three different members of the group, each of which must agree to the making of a loan before the safe can be unlocked and the funds disbursed. A grant request is in the works for the estimated additional \$3,000 needed to help the remaining 12 graduates launch a new enterprise. To see this sustainable new industry in person, the tangible result of the investment from afar of time and money in support of Archbishop Joseph’s vision, was inspiring and refreshing indeed.

Hastily boarding the WFP return flight to Juba (via Paloche and Malakal) we learned a good lesson for the future. Though we arrived almost an hour before the scheduled departure, we found the pilots and the other passengers standing under the wing, waiting impatiently for us in the heat. We were in the air in minutes, with the explanation that they operate based on the check-in time (two hours in advance) rather than the flight schedule, though we had no basis for knowing that in advance. As we landed early in Juba, just ahead of a front moving in, I realized that they were trying to make sure they beat the weather home, but they might have let us know.

Back in Juba, we were able to arrange a meeting at the UNMISS compound with political and civil affairs staff, again to discuss peacebuilding activities and establish new contacts for future cooperation. We also toured, in the rain, some of the growth areas, including a short stretch of the Juba – Bor Highway, which is now paved the entire way. One general observation is that virtually every thatched roof that I saw on my last visit has been replaced by corrugated tin (or “zinc”), right down to the shade structures for animals in the fields.

I was pleased to join the throng processing in from the main gate to the Cathedral on Palm Sunday, to the hearty strains of “All Glory Laud and Honor”. Not only was the Cathedral itself packed full, but so was the new covered seating on each side. We may be able to pack the church on Easter Sunday, but it is a weekly event here.

My last full day in South Sudan included a warm reunion meeting with Primate Justin Badi Arama and Mama Joyce at his home, before we proceeded with Archbishop Joseph to the U.S. Embassy to meet with Ambassador Michael Adler. We had a good discussion of the role of the church in peacebuilding activities and some of the logistical challenges of same, and ended with a group photo posted on the Embassy Twitter account, including the caption “Proud of the role of civil society in promoting Peace in South Sudan.”

I departed Juba once again amazed at the energy and perseverance which Archbishop Joseph and so many others display in pursuing peace and development, despite so many obstacles and occasional setbacks. The church in particular represents the grass roots of South Sudan, and I remain convinced that peace can build upward from these roots. To that end, we must keep walking in support, aware of the difficulties but undaunted, as our brothers and sisters are.