

Mission of Hope

In 2009, I accepted what I thought was a challenge - to move from Australia to South Sudan. It was also an opportunity to walk with the people of the newest nation on earth as they endeavoured to recover from many years of war. The mission was to be a new way for religious from many different congregations and nationalities responding collaboratively. At that time, the difficulties we faced seemed significant, but there was a buoyant optimism in the country, a sense of stability and security and the hope of prosperity in the not too distant future.

My role was to lead the educational endeavour - training primary school teachers for a country where less than half the children ever attended school. Thanks to a great team effort, our initiatives developed and progressed well and we were here to witness the enthusiasm with which independence was embraced in 2011. For the next couple of years, the people remained confident and hopeful - although some of the expected benefits of independence failed to materialise and infrastructure was obviously being neglected.

Now I look back at those years as a time when we were following Christ in his public life, reaching out to the poor and needy, helping children receive better tuition, and ensuring better health and pastoral care of the people. We were missionaries of hope. In 2013, the Solidarity Board decided to move the position of Executive Director to South Sudan and I was invited to accept a wider responsibility for the whole organisation.

Two weeks before I moved into this new role, the country imploded into civil war. We are still missionaries of hope but I had no idea we would soon be finding our motivation more from the suffering Christ than from Christ the teacher and healer. Initially, we felt the effect only in Malakal where our teacher training college happened to be in one of the areas of most violent conflict. For the next two years, our communities in Juba, Wau, Riimenze and Yambio, were relatively unaffected by the continuing conflict. But now, four years on, the whole country has been sucked into the widening violence, the disintegrating economy, declining law and order, lack of food, a much lower standard of living and a future where hope and optimism have given way to uncertainty and insecurity.

Our early *Solidarity* members did not expect, or choose, to come into this situation that seems so dangerous; but here we are and the question Jesus asked of Peter, now rings in our ears, '*Could you not watch one hour with me?*' As Bishop Erkolano remarked at our recent board meeting, '*If the missionaries leave, the people are more fearful.*'

We stay because we feel called even more strongly to be missionaries of hope. Most teacher training colleges and health training Institutes have shut down as violence once again engulfs this land. But our two Colleges, each with over 110 in residence, continue, with students from many different tribes living and training together to be teachers, nurses or midwives. Our agriculture programmes help to provide the food required.

Even more importantly, our students are learning to live in peace with their neighbours from other tribes. We are preparing leaders of the next generation, promoters of peace and the promise there can be a resurrection - if only we stay with them in this critical time. Life here for us is surprisingly normal provided we accept the limited social and recreational opportunities and do not take unnecessary risks. It may not be totally safe but we are much safer than these poor people, the very poor who ask us to watch, to accompany, to seek with them a better South Sudan. The words of the proverb make resounding sense: '*A ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are for.*' The seas may be a bit rough at present but our *Solidarity* ship is still making great headway. What better place for a religious to be. I turn 75 next year. I am in no hurry to leave but I recognise a significant decline in energy levels as I grow older. I know it is time to find a younger religious to take the helm.

Brother Bill Firman,
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