60. Faith or Foolishness

Tomorrow, I shall be back in Southern Sudan. At the SSS Board meeting a question was asked about the security and safety of our SSS members during the time of the referendum. Similar questions have been directed to me outside of the Board meeting by others interested in our work in Sudan and once or twice there has been almost a suggestion that it may be foolish for us to be in Sudan at this time of uncertainty.

My reply has been that those of us living and working in Southern Sudan assess it to be a situation where there is some risk and it is inevitable that there will be varying degrees of anxiety about this. None of us are seeking to be martyrs for the cause but, nevertheless, we have assessed the risk and believe the right decision is for us to stay. Most NGO personnel left the country during the election. We stayed. In fact many of the missionaries stayed right through the war years and the Church has great credibility in the eyes of the people because the Church, by the presence of both expatriate and local, priests and religious, stood in solidarity with the people during those devastating years.

SSS has taken care to establish a clear policy decision. Any individual SSS member who wishes to leave the country during this time of uncertainty may do so, even if the rest of the community decide to stay. But if the community decides it would be wise to evacuate, everyone must go: no individual may choose to stay behind. We think we are as well prepared as we can be. We have purchased reserved supplies of food in case it becomes dangerous to go out. We have discussed how to maintain communnication.

We have decided, however, not to invite extra volunteers to help during the first half of next year. The Sudanese people in the localities where we live and work know us and recognise that we are Church people. That is our greatest protection. Volunteers would not be so well known. So we have made a different assessment for short-term volunteers who could well have found something very different from what they had imagined.

It is not that we are expecting violence. I think the 101 Days of Prayer for Peace has helped greatly to bring both religious and civil leaders to focus on the strong priority, being expressed by the people, for peace. Add to this, the self-interest of those in power on both sides, and there is a strong recipe for peace. There is likely to be continuing peace because the leaders who led the fighting are now doing so well in peace. They are benefitting the most from the prosperity peace brought and now they have the most to lose.

It is a limited analogy but consider what happens when we fly. Several hundred people board a plane. Those people have assessed the risk and placed their faith in the pilots, the air traffic controllers and those who built and those who maintain the plane. Boarding a plane only becomes foolishness, in retrospect, if that plane crashes! Flying is reasonable. If one joins the police, the fire brigade, the armed services, it is reasonable risk-taking.

If I were a married man with a wife and children, then my responsibilities to them would also become key considerations. Thus the decisions taken by many NGO personnel are also reasonable for them. But as religious who publicly profess faith in God and try to live by the meaning that brings to our existence, it is not a hard decision for us to stay in solidarity with the Sudanese people. Sudan is their country. Most of them have nowhere else to go. We will continue to offer programmes to help them have better opportunity.

If north and south separate and good relations, especially in trade, are not maintained, there will be great shortages of supplies in the south. This could lead to unrest and conflict. But it is likely such violence would build up gradually and we would have time to reassess our situation. Nonetheless, let us all pray for a peaceful referendum, followed by a mutually respectful transition process that maintains the peace. - Br Bill