



Solidarity with South Sudan

Brother Bill Firman, FSC is Director of Education for *Solidarity with South Sudan*. On a regular basis Br Bill writes a reflection expressing his experiences living and working with the people of South Sudan.

Affirmative Action

'Which way to go?' asks the Cheshire Puss in Alice in Wonderland. 'Any direction is better than no direction' comes back the reply. South Sudan is not quite like that but one does wonder, at times, exactly where the country is heading. The president, Salva Kiir, is reportedly very definite that he does not want to take the country back to war. That direction towards continuing peace may be a broad one but it is an important one.



Sr Anne with female students

It is noticeable that some prices in the market, after a period of very high inflation, have begun to fall. Upwards galloping inflation was not a good direction. This is a welcome reversal of direction but the best signs of new directions I actually see in our own enterprises. We now have 76 resident students in our Catholic Health Training Institute in Wau. We have had more than 1500 teachers follow our in-service programmes and this week we began the delivery of pre-service training in both Yambio and Malakal for non-teachers wishing to become teachers.

One problem in South Sudan is that teaching has not been a highly regarded occupation. I surmise that when ones own teachers have been untrained or very poorly trained, one does not become inspired to become a teacher oneself. 'Example' said Edmund Burke, 'is the school of human kind and they will learn at no other'. Good teachers may inspire children to become teachers themselves but a poor teacher does not inspire anyone!

Teachers, moreover, are also not paid well in South Sudan and sometimes have to wait months for the meagre pay they do receive. A further problem is the lack of educational opportunity for women and girls and the fact that there are very few women teachers

Expressed pithily in the English spoken in South Sudan, 'What to do?' Last year the first eight girls graduated from Loreto Secondary School in Rumbek. In the normal course of events, these girls would have returned to their families and marriages would be arranged for them in the near future. Loreto,



Br Geoffrey Kennewell FSC - Teacher Training Yambio

however, has significantly raised the expectations these girls have for themselves and six of these girls have returned to be part of a teacher-training programme we are offering at Loreto. Their families are happy to see them continue to be educated in a place where they are safe and secure. It is very unlikely, in this Dinka culture, that these girls would have been permitted to go elsewhere to do teacher training. One other girl has joined the class - and three men. I guess it would be the only teacher training class in South Sudan where women outnumber men!



Trainee Teachers in Dormitory

Now we are finding that the girls who will graduate from Loreto Secondary School over the next couple of years are asking will they receive the same opportunity. Taking training to the girls is creating a new dynamic. The idea of becoming a teacher is now firmly before them as a possibility. No doubt not all will become teachers. Some will rightly aspire to attend university or go into other professions but the girls are continuing to study and will be better prepared for future opportunities. Thanks to a gift of money from Canada, we have also been able to invite two women from Abyei and two from Nuba Mountains, both of which are disputed border regions where insecurity and violence are on-going issues, to begin teacher training in Yambio. It is a great step forward that these women are now in our programmes. It will inspire more to follow. It is normally not easy to be a pioneer but the affirmative action with these women and girls will not only help them on their personal journeys but also lead others to adjust their thinking to new possibilities.

I asked the class in Loreto was there any cultural practice they would like to see changed. One girl readily responded that women should be able to select their husband. One of the men in the class immediately disagreed! As an old priest once said to me as he walked with the aid of two sticks, 'I may be slow but I am still moving'. While he was slowing down, I think we are speeding up maybe taking small steps initially, but significant ones in the right direction. When the Loreto Sisters first came here five years ago, they struggled to get a full class. This year there were 90 applicants for 30 places. SSS is pleased to be helping them in their important mission.



Sr Orla with students



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