

SOUTH SUDAN: HOW IS THE CHURCH RESPONDING TO AFRICA'S FORGOTTEN WAR?

The Church is urging a radical reliance on active non-violence to bring peace to this perennially war-torn country. They have the trust of the people, but will their leaders listen?

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Juba, the capital of South Sudan, December 2016: It is hot and dusty. Half the shops are closed, inflation is skyrocketing, the economy is in meltdown. The town is calm, but the tension is palpable. People are hungry. Many have fled to the bush, or to neighbouring countries, or are still sheltering in camps under the dubious protection of the United Nations. The outbreak of violence last July is still fresh in everyone's minds.

Outside the capital, roads are unsafe due to ambushes. Skirmishing between government and rebel forces continues in many parts of the country. "Unknown gunmen" has become the euphemism for armed men, often in uniform, who appear to be above the law and who kill, rape and loot with impunity.

Just before Christmas, President Salva Kiir Mayardit announced a national dialogue, but already it appears to have become politicised, with many opposition groups rejecting it. There was no midnight Mass. The Archbishop of Juba, Paulino Lukudu Loro, instead appealed for restraint and the avoidance of killing or stealing as people did their best to celebrate.

In December 2013, less than three years after a joyous celebration of independence following a liberation struggle lasting 50 years, violence broke out again in South Sudan. What began as a power struggle between two of the new state's leaders, President Salva Kiir and his then Vice President Dr Riek Machar, and their factions, rapidly took on a chilling ethnic dimension.

Systematic rape became a routine weapon of war. The new conflict was driven by the baggage of the past. A lifetime of violent conflict had left a legacy of trauma, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, authoritarianism and militarism. Issues such as reconciliation, developing a constitution owned by the people, creating a national identity, the rule of law, transition from an armed liberation movement to a multi-party democracy, integration of the various armed forces into a national army, and developing basic services such as health and education, were neglected.

Neither the government nor the rebels are unified entities; both are a hotchpotch of different movements, factions, militias, parties, tribes and other vested interests whose nominal leaders constantly have to make compromises to balance competing interests. The situation becomes ever more polarised, fragmented, unstable. The curse of oil, which made up more than 90 per cent of national revenue, gave the government little incentive to develop a well-rounded economy; when oil prices dropped, what little economy there was broke down. The lion's share of government funding is spent on the military, with very little servicing the needs of the people.

And yet ... hope remains. People look to the Church, as they have done so often before. “The Church” in South Sudan is ecumenical, with all the main denominations working together through the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), which has a Presbyterian moderator as chair and a Catholic priest as secretary-general. Church leaders recently went to Rome to meet Pope Francis, followed by a trip to London to visit the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope has been invited to visit South Sudan, and the indications are that this may happen this year.

The Church is still the only institution in South Sudan that is really trusted by the people. It cuts across ethnic, political and geographical divisions. Building on its track record in previous conflicts, the Church is currently rolling out its Action Plan for Peace, based on the three pillars of advocacy, creating neutral forums for dialogue and reconciliation.

Advocacy will seek to change the narrative of violence and hate speech, as well as influencing regional and international power brokers. Neutral forums will create a safe space where South Sudanese stakeholders can address the root causes of their conflict and contribute to the process of dialogue. Reconciliation will build on previous Church-led initiatives to restore broken relationships and bring healing to communities. There is no “quick fix” to peace; the SSCC is telling all-comers that the process will continue for 10 to 20 years.

There are also many small and inspiring signs of hope. Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban’s Holy Trinity Peace Village is an oasis of peace in a conflict-ridden nation. His own spirituality and the experience of living in the peace village community form the basis for personal transformation, the only real way to overcome violence and build peace. A grass-roots movement called Ana Taban (“I am tired”) is promoting non-violent action by artists and young people. Women in Juba hold a prayer rally on the first Saturday of every month, marching through the streets and concluding with prayers at one of the city’s churches.

The Church continues to provide pastoral and spiritual care, schools, hospitals, clinics, teacher-training colleges, a Catholic university, development projects, relief for the poor, and much more, despite the problems and the dangers in the country. Unlike the UN and the NGOs, the Church does not evacuate its personnel when there is insecurity and danger; they live out a theology of incarnation by remaining with their people – and often pay the ultimate price for doing so. Many pastors lost their lives protecting people from different ethnic groups during the initial violence in December 2013. As recently as last May a missionary sister was shot dead by armed men while driving a clearly-marked ambulance after she had just transported a pregnant woman to hospital.

The people of South Sudan are truly weary of war. Yet many of their leaders still seem to believe that violence can resolve the country’s problems. It was refreshing to hear President Salva Kiir speak recently of unity, forgiveness and dialogue, and ask the people to forgive him for any mistakes he might have committed. But the fighting continues, and for it to have any credibility, the government must now match its words with actions. All the leaders – both government and rebel – have spent virtually their entire lives at war. It is as if they have no other lens through which to view the country’s problems.

With this in mind, the South Sudanese Church is finding itself increasingly drawn to the language of active non-violence and just peace being developed by Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (now part of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, under the leadership of Cardinal Peter Turkson), following their conference in Rome last March, in which the SSCC participated.

In its Christmas message, the SSCC quoted extensively from Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Peace: "Can violence achieve any goal of lasting value? Or does it merely lead to retaliation and a cycle of deadly conflicts that benefit only a few 'warlords'?" The new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, echoes these sentiments, saying: "No one wins these wars; everyone loses."

Miraculously, Christmas in Juba was peaceful, but the killing continues in other parts of South Sudan. Guterres has appealed to the whole world to "put peace first" in 2017. Pope Francis says the same: "In 2017, may we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming non-violent people and to building non-violent communities that care for our common home."

The churches of South Sudan chose two Scripture verses to head their joint Christmas message: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2) and "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me" (Psalm 23). The ordinary people of South Sudan take those words to heart – they have indeed walked in darkness. Yet despite all the suffering, the killing, the rapes, the violence, the trauma, ultimately the light will shine and the desire for peace of this resilient people will triumph.

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