



'Unimaginably Poor'

**SOMA-uk, trip to Kera in the Rokon Diocese of Sudan
18th March to 4th April**

Report by Dave McClure

The Namirembe Guest House in Kampala, Uganda would be our last sight of civilisation. After a flight to Arua, and two days road travel into Sudan on some so-called 'roads', we stepped out of the 4WD Land Cruiser in the compound at Kera. Much of the village had turned out to meet us, including some of the children from the local orphanage singing at a phenomenal volume a song with the refrain, "Welcome, visitors, we welcome you!". Our journey had been eventful to say the least with two flat tires, several immigration checks, an unexpected visit to a revival meeting and the chance to taste the Sudanese delicacy that was claw de la bush rat. The kindness of our African hosts in Kera, however, was exemplary and it was nice to settle into our tukuls (African huts) which would be our homes for the next week. Not just *our* homes, though. We were soon on friendly terms with the chickens, scorpions and lizards who also resided.

Doug, Roger and I were part of a team of seven people visiting a small village called Kera in Rokon Diocese, Southern Sudan. We were going at the request of Bishop Francis Loro whose diocese has been split by the front line in Sudan's 40-year civil war between the northern Government of Sudan and rebels in the south. Under the umbrella of Sharing of Ministries Abroad (SOMA) we were to help lead a conference for church pastors. Our team leader was the Rev. Don Brewin, SOMA's Director. Tom Gillum, a vicar in London was also with us as were two formidable ladies from SOMA Uganda – Rev. Lovey Kisembo, a bishop's wife and Rev. Evas, a young widow from Ruwenzori.

Our involvement really began on Sunday 23rd March when each team member was allocated a church to preach for. I was posted to Gumbiri, to a youth church of some 100 people who met in a clearing beneath trees. Doug rode to his destination on a bike. For his ministry to the church at Roja he received a chicken which came back on the bike with him. Roger got a pot of wild Sudanese honey (as did I) and I was also promised a goat which somebody brought along towards the end of the conference. It finished up as a nice stew for the delegates attending.

Monday morning brought with it the start of the conference. The small church at Kera was filled with the 80 to 100 church leaders and their wives who attended. Many had walked for three or four days to be with us and their sleeping quarters for the week amounted to the church floor itself. Teaching in the morning was followed by an afternoon workshop and then a more informal evening meeting with time for testimony, worship and praise to accompanying drums. Roger spoke on evangelism and intercession at one stage and Douglas led a study on leadership. We found it to be very effective to rotate the speakers frequently and to rely on story-telling to convey our points. The people loved to see the Bible opened up. I could sense that for the Sudanese, with the little literacy and theological training they had between them,

the chance to receive fresh teaching from God's Word was an opportunity not to be missed.

The people of Kera are unimaginably poor. There is no basic education or health care, no shops, economy or currency in this part of Sudan. Most people we met had lost or were displaced from family members as a result of war. Richard, the unpaid headmaster of the orphanage, lives apart from his wife and children who are refugees in Rhino Camp, Uganda. During the testimony sessions many spoke of losing husbands and children. Evas, the Ugandan widow with us, related well to the Sudanese at this point as she testified to her own struggle with suffering and forgiveness. These, and other issues of healing, family life and loss, were, therefore, also key topics covered during the week. Their enthusiasm and warmth in the face of such pain were poignant lessons for us to take back to our comfort zones in England.

Then there was the orphanage. 350 to 400 children attend for basic primary education, some walking seven miles to school each day. I was given the chance to lead an assembly one morning, and teach English to one class. The day after the conference finished we were invited to spectate a football match between the orphanage (St.Mary's) and another day school the Bishop started (St.Joseph's). Having received kits from a benevolent missionary the youngsters looked resplendent as they jogged out onto their makeshift pitch. Doug officiated in the 90F heat and I played for the orphanage. Despite the advantage of being the only player with shoes on, our team lost 2-0.

The children of the orphanage are a timely reminder that the future for Sudan is uncertain. One young man called Morris who I befriended (he was about 11), turned up one day to the conference in old army clothes. It struck me that if Sudan's very tenuous cease-fire does not hold, Morris may well be forced to wear his uniform as a child soldier. As we left Kera to the sound of the children singing "Bye Bye, visitors, we thank you!", We left praising God for this small chance to share in the lives of the Sudanese Christians, in their joy and in their suffering.

As a footnote, the journey was especially important for me for a couple of other reasons. Flying up to Arua and then driving into Sudan was a chance to retrace family history. My parents worked in Sudan until 1982 when the war broke out afresh. I was only a two year old at the time so this SOMA mission allowed me to acquire some memories of my first home. Whilst in Sudan I made sure to tell people this connection and would introduce myself in Arabic: "Mimi Ana Sudani" which means, "As for me, I am Sudanese!". Furthermore, on the way back out of Sudan I had the chance to visit the house of my grandparents, Seton and Peggy Maclure, who worked on Bible Translation in Northern Uganda for 44 years. We found their house, but it was derelict and empty. Just as we were heading off the Mothers Union trotted up in their pearly dresses. Word had gotten through that Peter's son had come back to bless them. One of the ladies kissed the picture of Grandma I had with me and I got lost in a cacophony of hand-shaking, hugs and laughter. As we finally waved our good-byes from the truck window, Roger made the observation that my Grandparents legacy was not to be found in the hulled out house they used to live in. Rather, the more permanent work was done in the lives of the people who remembered them so fondly. It was there that the church of Christ was being built.

Dave McClure