

# “The Gathering”

## Report of the Sudan Youth Conference Held at Bishop Gwynne Theological Collage, Mundri, Sudan 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> December 2004

### Why this title ...?

... Simply because of the miracle the Lord performed, in bringing together leaders and delegates from different parts of southern Sudan, as well as from Kampala and Nairobi. Some took days on the journey; others were near death when their vehicle overturned in the middle of the night.

The SOMA team also came from a variety of home places: UK, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. It consisted of Sharon Aluoch, Andrew Lumbye, Merisa MacInnes, David Sharland, Manny Sharland, Estella Tusubira & Don Brewin. We were joined on the speaking team (when eventually he arrived – another miracle story!) by Simon Peter Kenyi, from Kajo-Kei, Sudan.

The theme of the Conference was **“Arise to Life in Abundance”** – with the stated aim “to raise the people from spiritual death”. As people prepare for the new and exciting period of Sudanese history, with the signing of the Peace Agreement, the majority of Sudanese are entering something those under 40 years old have never known before – **NO WAR!**

During the years of war and devastation, the Church has, unlike virtually every other organisation, remained at its post, in nearly every community. This has been costly – but it now gives Christians in the South the opportunity of assisting in the building of a new nation. The young leaders will be at the forefront of this process.

### What happened?

The first unexpected joy was that the Archbishop of Sudan, Most Revd Joseph Marona, a strong supporter of SOMA and of the work amongst young people in Sudan, was able to conduct the formal opening of the Conference. He and other Bishops were passing through Mundri on their way to consecrate some new Assistant Bishops to work in the Diocese of Rumbek.

The days during the Conference were divided into four sections. Before breakfast the delegates gathered for Group Bible Study on different themes from Paul’s letter to Ephesians – taking ideas such as unity, harmony, witness, homes, and spiritual warfare. (This had its amusing moments: for example when we discovered that part of the “armour of God” in Ephesians 6 had been translated in the local language of Moru as “the bra of righteousness” – not quite the meaning Paul intended ...!)

After breakfast there were two main teaching sessions, using sections from **“Renewal for Life”** as a loose basis for what the team were sharing. It was clear that there was a wide variation in the level of spiritual commitment and maturity – so it was important to establish a firm foundation in the faith, reiterating the truth of what Jesus has done for us, before moving on.

The afternoons were taken up with workshops, apart from one when we played a variety of ball games led by Manny Sharland! The topics covered included the work of the Holy Spirit (following up from the teaching of that morning), the Challenge of Peace in Sudan, and Youth in Society.

### Relationships

One of the most challenging afternoons was when the conference were divided up into Marrieds (and “nearly-marrieds”) and Singles (although some opted for neither and went to a workshop on Intercession!). There is a tremendous need for Christian teaching, and positive example, in the area of relationships and family life. We were concerned about the frequency of a dis-ease called “unwanted pregnancy” – which was sometimes described as if it was picked up by drinking water from an infected well!

We were able to do some honest teaching, and the degree of openness in discussion was refreshing. It is clear that in the present situation, with massive dislocation of family life, many young people have no one to talk to about these matters. There is also a serious concern that confidentiality will not be respected, even with pastors – we need to pray that this situation will be changed.

### Celebrations and prayer needs

The “formal” programme for each day had to conclude before it got dark, so the “Celebrations” – with lively worship, powerful drama, testimony and ministry – were scheduled to start at 5pm. But for many

the day did not end there – after supper the team enjoyed some good open-air fellowship around the fire, when some deep sharing took place. Different groups from the delegates led in praise near their dormitory block until late at night, sometimes keeping some others awake with their enthusiasm ...

At these celebrations, as well as at other times, the team were involved in all kinds of prayer ministry. The variety and severity of the needs threw us as always on the Lord. Here are some examples:

- A child with “Nodding Disease” – a distressing problem only affecting children in that area, so-called because the patient suffers uncontrollable head movements when faced with food or water. There is at present no clear diagnosis of the cause (so many people think it is demonic), and no cure. Most patients die slowly and in great distress.
- A man who joined the Sudanese Army (therefore fighting against his own people); was abandoned by his wife and family, and is now struggling to be reconciled to them and his community.
- A young baby with a fungal rash on his body, but whose mum has no access to a clinic and no money to pay for treatment
- A boy with an eye problem (possibly a cataract or glaucoma) which isolates him from others
- Problems linked with drunkenness and/or HIV. (Although AIDS is not yet as prevalent in Sudan as in other parts of East Africa, the increased movement of people that is resulting from the more peaceful situation is likely to change this, unless the Christian Church gives a strong lead.)
- Situation of demonic attack, which needed careful discernment and power-full ministry.

### **A spiritual battleground**

We were in the midst of a serious spiritual battleground. Here are some of the headlines:

#### **(a) Transport**

• The minibus carrying the group from Arua, Uganda broke down between Yei & Mundri. A second vehicle was sent to pick the group up. Late at night it swerved to avoid a porcupine and overturned at speed, landing in a ditch on its roof. Mercifully no one was seriously injured but they were bruised, cut & shaken, in the middle of nowhere. By God’s grace the original vehicle, now repaired, was able to pick them up and bring them (after emergency medical attention at a clinic) to Mundri.

• On the way back the same vehicle broken down again (after hitting the gearbox on a rock) and the group had to complete their journey over the border to Uganda on the back of a trailer. (It might be hard to convince some of them to go back to Sudan ...)

• The group from Kajo-Keji got stuck in Yei for 3 days until transport could be sent to bring them to Mundri. However they did not waste their time, but went evangelising in the town and brought 6 people to know Christ ...

- All these problems had serious implications for the already over-stretched budget ...

**(b) Health issues** Illustrations have been given above – but in every case, the spiritual and emotional pressure on the team (we were so grateful to those from Sudan who assisted us) were immense.

- What, in these short-term situations, can we do?
- What should we do, in cases of longer-term need which cannot be followed up ...?
- How should we deal with problems which are intrinsic to the devastation of 40 years of conflict and fragmentation?

**(c) Family breakdown** We are experiencing the break-up of family life in the West; but the degree of dislocation (physically and metaphorically) experienced by families in Sudan never ceases to distress me – although I remain amazed how well most people cope:

- the effect of long-term war – most have never known anything else
- parents and children who have not seen each other for 10 years or more
- some who have joined the “opposition” army (maybe for money), so fighting against their own people; they are regarded as traitors when they return
- chronic unfaithfulness resulting from long periods of separation.

### **Thanksgiving**

As we look back on this visit, our hearts are full of thanksgiving. In spite of massive problems with transport (one of the ongoing problems in Sudan) everyone arrived, and returned home alive. Their determination to get to this gathering touched our hearts.

Equally wonderful was the work the planning group had put in, to provide accommodation and food for so many people – and no one got stomach trouble! As always, we on the team were overwhelmed with the care shown to our every need – even if there were bats in the long-drops!

**And now ...?**

A Peace Agreement has been signed, which has given new hope to the battered people of Southern Sudan. And yet the appalling suffering in Darfur continues, making many people doubt the sincerity of the Sudanese Government. In addition, the jealousies between the different Southern tribes, and their leaders could easily spill over into civil war: forming a “government” for the South will be as difficult as fighting the war. The movements of large numbers of returning refugees to Southern Sudan, from Uganda and Kenya, is already putting huge pressure on already overstretched resources of food, water, schools & medical facilities. As an example of this, one urgent present need in the Mundri area is for a resolution of the quarrel between the Morus and the Dinkas (from the east) who have brought their cattle to Moruland in search of food, and are eating the Moru people’s crops. This is often leading to violence.

But we must work and pray

- That the desire of the vast majority of the people, to be allowed to reconstruct their lives and communities, will be fulfilled.
- That the blessings received at the Youth Conference will be translated into practical action in the dioceses
- For wisdom over effective follow-up

Don Brewin

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