

Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference, Rome, 11-13 April 2016

The People to People Peace Process, South Sudan

by John Ashworth

By 1991 Sudan's second civil war, pitting the southern Sudanese and their Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) against the regime in Khartoum, was already eight years old and had caused untold suffering. It was about to get worse. The second in command of the liberation movement, Dr Riek Machar Teny Durgeon, staged a coup attempt against the leader, Dr John Garang de Mabior. The coup failed, but it resulted in a split in the movement which led to bitter fratricidal infighting amongst southerners, including large-scale massacres of civilians.

Church leaders immediately tried to reconcile the two protagonists, but they failed. The time was not ripe. In July 1997, a meeting to iron out differences which had developed between the Church and the mainstream liberation movement, the SPLM/A, mandated the Church to handle peace and reconciliation. The ecumenical body in the liberated parts of South Sudan, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC)¹, after much deliberation, decided that since it had failed to bring together the two principles, Dr John Garang and Dr Riek Machar, it would start at the other extreme, from the grassroots.

A series of meetings with chiefs, elders and women of the two main communities involved in the conflict between southerners, Dr John's Dinka and Dr Riek's Nuer, led to more than a year's worth of grassroots peace mobilisation on the ground, exchange visits, and eventually a huge grassroots conference.

“A relatively obscure Dinka area called Wunlit was chosen as the site of the first main peace conference in February-March 1999. A whole new village of 150 mud and thatch houses plus a conference hall had to be built from scratch, cooking facilities provided, boreholes drilled, latrines dug, the dirt road repaired, and an airstrip created... Over one hundred bulls and many goats and chickens were brought... Hundreds of delegates (of whom one third were women) and hundreds more support staff congregated there, a total community of up to 2,000 people, all in the centre of an active war zone, with security guaranteed by the SPLA. Transport had to be arranged, although many people walked there, often from up to 160 km away. There were several working languages used at the conference. It was a community effort.”² It included traditional peacebuilding techniques, such as the slaughter of a white bull, and the telling of stories/truth, in which each community had the chance to “vomit out” the bitterness and hatred, and ended with the signing of a peace covenant. Everybody present, children, women and men, were able to put their thumbprint on the document, which was a very powerful symbol indeed.

Following the Wunlit conference, peace between communities came to the west bank of the Nile. After several more conferences in other parts of the country, there was an assessment involving participants from all the previous ones. Their conclusion was striking: “We have made peace. It is our sons (ie Dr John and Dr Riek) who are fighting”. The Church then organised a conference bringing together the grassroots with mid-level stakeholders – politicians, military leaders, intellectuals, etc. They agreed that the split between “the two doctors” must end. A few short months later, Dr Riek rejoined SPLM/A. The People to People Peace Process, as it was named, did not end there but the Church continued to shadow the national peace process and to feed

1 Peacebuilding and reconciliation in South Sudan has always been ecumenical. The strength of the Church is when it speaks with one voice.

2 Ashworth, John, *The Voice of the Voiceless: The Role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War*, Paulines Publications Africa, 2014, pp 154-155.

recommendations into that forum, while at the same time doing international advocacy for peace which had a major influence on the national negotiations.

The People to People Peace Process has been recognised as a model of grassroots peacemaking. Many secular NGOs in South Sudan have tried to copy it, usually without much success. To begin with, they lack the credibility and moral authority of the Church. In addition, they usually focus on the highly-visible conferences, neglecting all the years of patient prior preparation required before any major conferences are held. They also neglect the key elements which under-pinned the People to People process: the need to foster trust; telling of stories; the use of traditional reconciliation methods; acknowledgement that the community is the primary actor and must be ready to take responsibility for making peace; the importance of symbolism and imagery; a commitment to truth; a peace agreement that has practical measures for implementation and follow-up; and empowerment. Perhaps “patient preparation” should be underscored as well. A conference of several hundred people engaged in telling their painful stories and acknowledging the truth that is accepted by both sides cannot be tightly time-tabled, finished and agreed within three days. These conferences must be allowed to continue as long as is necessary, even for many days or weeks. The process must also be allowed to continue, for years if necessary. Quick fixes do not work.

It should be noted that NSCC did not have access to modern “peace studies” when planning and implementing the People to People Peace Process. At that time very little literature on peacebuilding was available. For the Sudanese Church, the call to peace and reconciliation dawned slowly. Much of the work was reactive; there was no long-term strategy or plan. The team sat together after each step and, after listening to the people, planned the next step. But they hardly knew where the process would go beyond that; it was very much “a story that grew in the telling” (J R R Tolkien). It was (and still is) an “emergent” process.

During those early forays into peace work, the Church in Sudan was unaware of the sterling work of Mennonite John Paul Lederach on peace studies, and his pyramid model in which he identifies grassroots, mid-level and high level components of peace building³. NSCC first attempted (and failed) to reconcile the leaders (high level), then went back to the grassroots. From the grassroots, the wisdom of the elders expressed at the first Strategic Linkages conference led NSCC to the mid-level (“We have made peace; it is our sons who are the problem now”). From there, pressure was exerted on the principals to make peace at the high level, and at the same time the Church entered the high-level national peace process via their shadow conferences and advocacy. Peacebuilding mobilises both horizontal and vertical dynamics. Elsewhere, Lederach says, “I am uneasy with the growing technique-oriented view of change in settings of violence that seems to dominate much of professional conflict resolution approaches”⁴. He speaks of “invoking the moral imagination... which is not found in perfecting or applying the techniques or the skills of a process... My feeling is that we have overemphasised the technical aspects and political content to the detriment of the art of giving birth to and keeping a process creatively alive”⁵, of leaving space for serendipity, intuition, art and the web of relationships.

All this would be familiar to those who work for peace in Sudan. Indeed, it could be said that rather than designing a process, People to People opened up a space whereby the people themselves could pursue peace and reconciliation; the process was designed as a result of what emerged within that space.

3 Lederach, John Paul, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, USIP, 1997, p 39.

4 Lederach, John Paul, *The Moral Imagination: the art and soul of building peace*, OUP, 2005, p 52.

5 Ibid, p 70.