



Leadership in a time of war

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When I met Daniel Deng Bul Yak, my first impression was: "This is a bishop who really wants to learn." It was the fall of 1996, and Deng Bul had come to study at Virginia Theological Seminary, where I was teaching. At that time he was the new bishop of Renk Diocese, a strategically sensitive border region between northern and southern Sudan.

"This is the first school I have ever attended that has not been destroyed," he later told me. Sudan had been at war most of his life, and was then suffering the genocidal agony that would last more than two decades and cost the lives of more than two million people in southern Sudan, many of them Christians.

Deng Bul, who now is the archbishop of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, had left his people and his family and come to the United States to devote a year to learning academic skills that someone else might consider irrelevant: how to write an essay in English -- and patiently rewrite it, at my request; how to read the Bible with a critical perspective.

"Why are you willing to do this, with everything you have to worry about?" I once asked him. And then he told me of his dream: to build a seminary for young evangelists and clergy. He had been one of those evangelists, walking barefoot from village to village to share the gospel with a people suffering the kind of persecution we now see in Darfur. Now he wanted to build an institution to educate such indigenous leaders.

Deng Bul has a quietly commanding demeanor, accented by his physical stature; like many men of the Dinka tribe, he stands well over 6 feet tall. However, it is his vision that commands attention.

"He addresses the issues directly, and he puts the real needs of people first," said Jennifer Ernst, co-founder of Hope for Humanity, a Virginia-based organization working to improve education in southern Sudan.

One of those needs is education, and a commitment to education — his own and others' — has shaped Deng Bul's ministry. It is vital both for the future of the church and of the new country that is now emerging after a long, annihilating war. In an address this summer to the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA, he said his mission is: "to leave [the Episcopal Church of the Sudan] as a church built upon the rock and sure foundation of educated, indigenous, trained people, both clerical and lay, who are honest in their business, ambassadors of peace, and are trained in the faith as well as being filled with the Spirit."

In 1999, Deng Bul fulfilled his dream of building a seminary in Renk Town, and Duke Divinity School and Virginia Theological Seminary now regularly send students and faculty there as visiting teachers.

As archbishop of Sudan, his vision for theological education continues to grow. With the help of Duke and other partners, he is working to establish what he calls “a holistic model of theological education” for women and men, which includes courses in community health and nutrition, peace and reconciliation, and sustainable agriculture, as well as such conventional subjects as Hebrew and Greek, church history and pastoral care.

“Education is a light,” Deng Bul says. This is an educational model that can light the way forward not just for a church, but for a nation. His aim is to provide moral vision for the disparate peoples seeking to become a nation in the wake of war and in the face of ongoing local conflicts. He is keenly aware that the church is the only institution in Southern Sudan that commands sufficient trust to begin building a national infrastructure, in most places literally from the ground up.

Despite the challenges, many of his efforts have been successful. He was instrumental in the remarkable growth of ECS through the years of intense conflict; its membership is now estimated at four to five million and is one of the fastest growing churches in the world. He also has emerged as a national leader in the work of reconciliation.

Despite the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2005, the needs of people in southern Sudan are huge; to an observer like me, they seem overwhelming. In response Deng Bul has reached out and cultivated partnerships – across the ocean, between Christians and Muslims in southern Sudan and with Christians from different tribes – in order to provide communities with the concrete components of what the Bible calls shalom.

“Peace is more than an end to shooting,” Deng Bul said. “It is also good schools and health clinics, food security and access to clean water.” To those of us who partner with him, he insists: “We need to be concrete.”

I have come to see that Deng Bul is talking about our needs as much as those of the Sudanese people. By drawing American Christians into active, productive relationship with the people of Sudan, he is teaching us what it otherwise might be impossible for us to learn: “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:42).