

A Brief History of the Relationship Between the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia and the Province of the Episcopal Church of Sudan

The relationship between the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia in the United States and the Province of the Sudan in East Africa began in 1979.

Bishop Ross Hook of the Diocese of Bradford in England had come to the United States and Southwestern Virginia for the consecration of Arthur Heath Light as the Fourth Bishop of Southwestern Virginia. A partnership had existed between Bradford and Southwestern Virginia for some years, growing out of a missionary strategy articulated through the Anglican Communion by the Anglican Congress of 1963, encouraging “mutual responsibility and interdependence in the Body of Christ” in relations between developed and undeveloped areas of the Anglican Communion. Because of the early recognition that neither Bradford Diocese nor Southwestern Virginia were “developing dioceses” in the sense of the MRI document, conversations were begun within the existing partnership to embrace and include a third partner. It is the author’s memory that this was to become the first three-way partnership established in the Anglican Communion.

Conversations continued, in person and through correspondence over several years. The Diocese of Bradford has an expressed desire to look for a relationship with an Arab/Muslim partner because of the large number of Pakistani people working in the wool mills in Bradford. On the other hand, Southwestern Virginia had, at one time, a considerable representation of Black Episcopalians, many of whom had disappeared as a result of the intentional integration of the congregations in this part of the State of Virginia. Therefore, Southwestern Virginia had an expressed concern to look for a third partner who would re-awaken an awareness of African presence in the diocese.

In 1981 Bishop Light was asked to be part of a “Partners in Mission Consultation,” under the sponsorship of the Mission Office of the Episcopal Church, out of 815 Second Avenue, New York. The consultation did not include representatives from the Diocese of Bradford, but representatives from the United States and Canada met in Juba with representatives from throughout the entire nation of Sudan and the three dioceses which constituted the Episcopal Church of the Sudan. Upon completion of the consultation, discussion continued between Southwestern Virginia and Bradford toward the end of negotiating for a third partner to the relationship. The relative stability of Bradford and Southwestern Virginia, their comparable geography, middle class constituencies, plus the expressed concern for expanded perspective racially, religiously, and economically, made the Sudan an attractive expansion for missionary activity and work, under the mandate of Mutual Responsibility and Interdependence, recognizing that each partner would have need of the gifts of the others, that each had things to give and things to receive.

Bradford and Southwestern Virginia agreed that the Sudan should become the third partner (if they chose). The Episcopal Church headquarters was asked to negotiate the

relationship. Bradford would concentrate especially on the northern diocese of Khartoum, essentially Arab and Muslim, while Southwestern Virginia would concentrate on the Black and largely Christian two Southern dioceses as “partners.” This arrangement was satisfactorily negotiated through the Province of the Sudan under the archbishopric of Elenana Ngalamu, who had requested help from Bishop Light toward the possible ordination of Marc Nikkel, a theologically trained Mennonite layman teaching at the Bishop Gwynn Theological College in Mundri in the southern part of Sudan. The strategy behind this inquiry and request was for Marc Nikkel to have the opportunity to do priestly work among the Sudanese as well as have the benefits of resources afforded ordained people in the United States. Financial support would enable Marc to continue his work in the Sudan, protect him with insurance and pension benefits not available through the Episcopal Church in the Sudan because of its utter poverty and, therefore, assist him to stay at Bishop Gwynn College for a longer period, greatly desired both by him and the Archbishop.

The accomplishment of this end would be more complicated than I, as a young bishop, realized.

The allowance for one to begin the process for ordination where neither the Commission on Ministry nor the Standing committee had laid eyes on him, much less examined him, was at least “non-canonical,” to put it mildly.

The financial support in order to assure Marc Nikkel the normal benefits of ordained people was accomplished by the joint funding for salary (at a missionary level) of the Episcopal Church Overseas Department and the Church Missionary Society in London. Again, if my memory is correct, this was the first such mutual and joint funding for a missionary. Our partnership with Bradford and the somewhat regular trips to England made possible the joint effort, managed largely by the staff of the two agencies. (As it transpired, Marc’s later development of cancer made this arrangement even more fortunate for his health benefits and ongoing periodic treatment some years later.) With the uneasy consent of the Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee, Grace Memorial Church, Lynchburg (largely through the efforts of the Rev. Robert Thacker, rector), agreed to sponsor Marc Nikkel for ordination under the irregular circumstances.

Marc received a sabbatical leave, came to the United States for studies at the General Theological Seminary in New York, and began his pursuit of ordination through the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia. Early in January 1985 Marc took the General Ordination Examinations, being given at the General Seminary, and passed them. The Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee gave their consent and Mr. Nikkel was ordained a deacon by Bishop Light at Grace Memorial Church, Lynchburg, on September 20, 1985, returning shortly thereafter to his teaching duties at Bishop Gwynn College. Later Archbishop Ngalamu ordained him as a priest in Mundri at the College, capping a rapid and surprising transition on behalf of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan.

The Bishop Gwynn College contributed significantly through its educational efforts to the rapid expansion of the Episcopal Church in the Sudan from its early three dioceses (in 1981) to 24 dioceses in 2009.

The civil war between the black Christian south and the Arab Muslim north continued sporadically, becoming what is reported as “the longest continuing civil war in the history of the globe.” The dynamics leading to that circumstance have never been authoritatively stated. In the early years, global politics and the tension between the United States and Communist Russia were a factor, as each sought to control the largest country in Africa for its own benefit—the United States looking for a buffer against the spread of Communism across East Africa, and both countries seeking access to the oil reportedly beneath the land. The Episcopal Church served as a Non-Governmental Organization for relief purposes as well as developmental ones. Efforts to establish local small cottage industries, such as furniture manufacturing and agricultural development, were a main part of the Episcopal Church's participation. The distinct racial differences between the Arab North and the Black South, largely Muslim and Christian respectively, probably contributed as well. The healthy land for agriculture was perhaps another point of tension as the southern Sudan was extremely fertile while the north was more desert area. The north has access to the sea at Port Sudan, while the South is land-locked. In one form or another the civil war has continued off and on for forty years, and tribal animosities and differences in languages and mores are matters which further complicate the situation. Marc identified closely with the Dinka Tribe (although, I am told, they now prefer to be known as *Jieng*, the name from which the word *Dinka* is said to be a mispronunciation). A longer and more nearly complete exposition of the circumstances referred to above can be found the book, *Why Haven't You Left?* edited by the Rev. Grant LeMarquand and published by Church Publishing (2006). This is a book with a thread of the history of the Sudan, but is largely a book of the letters of the Rev. Marc Nikkel. Both the letters and the book speak eloquently of the combination of suffering and Christian joy which was characteristic of both Marc and the Sudanese Christians. Marc contracted stomach cancer in 1998 and died in 2000, shortly after a visit to Southwestern Virginia.

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In the diocese of Southwestern Virginia, mention has already been made of the Rev. Robert Thacker. He and his wife used sabbatical time to spend time in the Sudan and wrote an educational curriculum, available through the Bishop Marmion Resource Center. Grace Memorial Church has continued its support of the work between the diocese and the Province of the Sudan.

Other people and congregations in Southwestern Virginia have played significant roles in the ongoing relationship. R. E. Lee Church and the Gadsden Fund (handled by that vestry) have been long and generous participants. Additionally, M. J. Mayerchak, of R. E. Lee, "mothers" many of the Lost Boys of the Sudan now living in southwestern Virginia, and the Rev. Sue Bentley has welcomed them to her parish, St. James, Roanoke, where many of them have found a new church home. Parishioners of St. John's, Waynesboro; Christ Church, Martinsville; Christ Church, Blacksburg; St. Paul's, Salem; St. James, Roanoke;

St. Paul's, Lynchburg; St. Thomas, Abingdon; St. Mark's Fincastle; Trinity, Buchanan; St. Elizabeth's, Roanoke; St. Peter's, Callaway; Grace Memorial, Lynchburg; Good Shepherd, Galax; St. Luke's, Hot Springs; St. Thomas, Christiansburg; St. Peter's, Altavista; Trinity, Rocky Mount; and the diocese's chapters of the Daughters of the King have been loyal supporters of the companion relationship. Christ Church, Roanoke, has lay people who have played an active role in the ministry. St. John's, Lynchburg, supported the program and allowed the Rev. Robert Marshall to represent the Rt. Rev. Neff Powell, current Bishop of Southwestern Virginia, at the enthronement of Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul in 2007. Christ Church, Blacksburg, continues an interest begun in the late 1980s when David Jenkins and David Bernard visited the Sudan. The Rev. Karen Howard utilized a sabbatical leave from Trinity, Rocky Mount, to live and work extensively as both a priest and nurse in the Kakuma Refugee Camp. The diocese has continued to fund activities between Southwestern Virginia and the Episcopal Church of the Sudan over the years, most recently supporting a team of lay and clergy who visited the Sudan in 2006. Those people included the Rev. Dr. Ellen Hanckel, of Christ Church, Martinsville; David Jenkins, from Christ Church, Blacksburg; Hal Stallworth, from R. E. Lee, Lexington; and The Rev. Kim Webster, from St. John's, Waynesboro. The people of Southwestern Virginia contribute generously to the ministries of the Marc Nikkel School in Bor Diocese, the Hope School in Kadugli Diocese, and the Provincial guesthouse in Juba, as well as to programs at the Renk and Bishop Allison Theological Colleges.

When asked at a public meeting establishing the American Friends of the Episcopal Church of Sudan (AFRECS), Bishop Light observed that perhaps the most significant offering to the Church in Sudan from the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia was in the person of Marc Nikkel and also of the Rev. Dr. Richard Jones, a priest of this diocese, recently retired as Professor of World Mission at Virginia Theological Seminary and founder of AFRECS. Virginia Seminary has supported many clergy from the Sudan to enable them to study in this country for varying periods of time. Not the least of these is the Rev. Dr. Oliver Duku. Dr. Duku, a medical doctor and layman, chaired the original Partners in Mission consultation in Juba in 1981, later was ordained, and presently is one of the leaders in the effort to coordinate and strengthen theological education throughout the province. Another Sudanese priest who benefited from the educational opportunities at the seminary and who maintains ties to Southwestern Virginia is the Rev. Bartholomayo Bol Deng, Archdeacon of Bor Diocese and founder of the Marc Nikkel School.

The violence and suffering in Sudan continues unabated, threatens efforts at a national peace accord, and disrupts any plans for national unity. Nevertheless, the Gospel of Christ continues to be proclaimed, the people continue to work in faith and trust, and the growth of the Church, even in spite of the suffering, identifies it clearly as the Body of Christ rooted and grounded in the resurrection experience.

The Rt. Rev. A. Heath Light
Fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia
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