

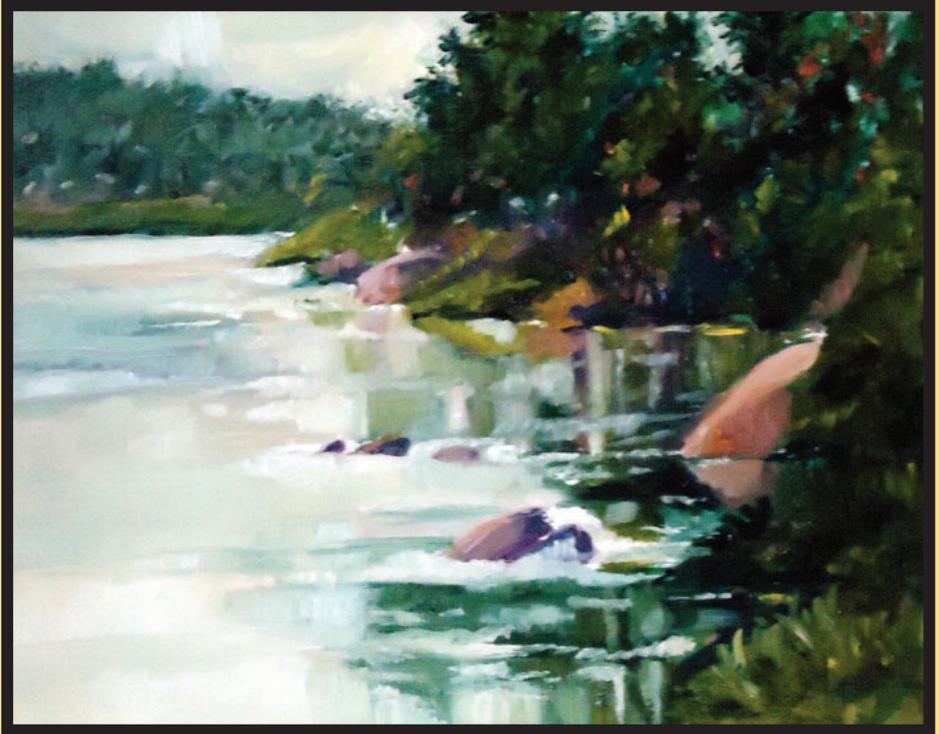


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for South Sudan and Sudan

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The Church and Peace in South Sudan

John Ashworth*

Abstract

The Church in South Sudan has a unique credibility and moral authority. It was the only institution which remained on the ground with the people throughout the 1983-2005 civil war. It has been involved in peace processes at all levels since 1972. This article seeks to trace some of those activities and show the relevance of the Church to resolving the current conflict.

Introduction

The current conflict in South Sudan which began on 15th December 2013 and is now in its fourth year needs no introduction for readers of this august organ. Suffice it to say that in mid-2017, the single word that sums up the state of the nation is “fragmentation” or perhaps “splintering” as the United Nations (UN) puts it.¹ No longer can the conflict be described as a power struggle between two political leaders or factions.

The opposition has indeed splintered. Although Dr Riek Machar is still the best known figurehead and cannot be ignored (despite the best efforts of many international actors to keep him sequestered in South Africa), he long ago ceased to be the effective director of the opposition. As well as the very early division between himself and the ‘Former Detainees’, (all ex-government members), and subsequent splits in the Nuer forces followed by the Collo (Shilluk), a new opposition has sprung up in Equatoria. Initially many Equatorians kept out of the fray – “let the Nilotics fight amongst themselves but not on our land” – but misbehaviour by government forces, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, guarding the cattle of the “big people”, which had been brought to Equatoria for safety, led to the resurgence of local self-defence forces (‘Arrow Boys’). They were not initially fighting against “the government” but only against what they perceived as invading or occupying forces of the SPLA. It became convenient for them to claim to be part of the formal opposition – seeking to legitimise their struggle, with the hope that they would be supplied with weapons – while it was to the advantage of the opposition to support the claim as it was seeking to portray itself as more powerful and broadening the ethnic appeal. At the same time, the lesson has been well learned that in South Sudan, if you want a share of power you must take up arms. While many leaders are known only locally, the defection of General Thomas Cirillo, a Deputy Chief of Staff, brings to the fore a household Equatorian name with a credible military background and it bears watching. Some

¹ United Nations, Splintering of South Sudan war makes peace more elusive June 20th, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southsudan-unrest-idUSKBN19B0AB>

relatively powerful opposition military forces exist and skirmishing continues in many parts of the country but so far, the internal conflicts within the opposition have precluded any unified offensive against the government.

The government itself has also been weak and divided from the start. Individual politicians and political factions, pressure groups such as the Jieng (Dinka) Council of Elders, the military and indeed different figures within it (cf. the recent sacking of the Chief of General Staff, Gen. Paul Malong Awan), ethnic militias, the national intelligence organs, family and communal groupings, all have exerted pressure on a President who often seems to be isolated from decision-making. The entrance into government of Taban Deng's faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), albeit with virtually no power or influence, further complicates matters.

Added to political fragmentation, one must take account of the suffering and instability being caused by economic meltdown and the man-made famine. If there are two largely separate economies in South Sudan, the cash economy and the subsistence economy, it is rare that both have collapsed at the same time; usually one has been able partially to alleviate the suffering caused by weaknesses in the other. This time, they have crashed together. The third economy, the aid industry (and the associated peace, human rights and security industries), continues to sustain itself and to channel a little assistance to the people.

The current fragmentation makes a mockery of the 2015 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan' (ARCSS). As the Church leaders said in a statement issued on 23rd June 2017, ARCSS "has not brought peace to our nation... The agreement expires next year and virtually none of it has been implemented. We ask ourselves how we can move beyond this agreement." The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which mediated the agreement, worked on the flawed premise that this was basically a two-way power struggle and that the solution was a two-way power-sharing government, with a nod to the Former Detainees. This is a fiction which both the government and Riek Machar's opposition were anxious to maintain. However in reality, there are now numerous political and ethnic factions with differing agendas, most of them armed, who must all have a voice in any peace agreement – to say nothing of the ordinary people, represented by chiefs, church and civil society. While IGAD may wish to save face by insisting that ARCSS is still viable, in fact it must be renegotiated to an extent where it will be barely recognisable. And this is where the Church needs to have a voice.

The Church

The Church in South Sudan has a unique credibility and moral authority. It was the only institution which remained on the ground with the people throughout

the 1983-2005 civil war, during a period when there was no government, no civil society, no non-governmental organisations (NGOs), no UN and when even the standing of the traditional chiefs and elders was being eroded by the young comrades with guns. Wherever there were people, the Church was present and, unlike the aid industry, it had no “Level 4” evacuation option. Church personnel remained, suffered, lived and died with their flock. The Church provided many of the services which one would expect from a government – health, education, food and water, local peace and reconciliation mediation, even security, to the extent that the presence of Church personnel often moderated the violence. South Sudanese of all faiths, including Muslims and followers of traditional religion, looked to the Church for leadership during troubled times.

The Church in South Sudan (as in Sudan) is also an ecumenical church and in this article, the word “Church” is used to refer to the united churches unless the context is clearly that of an individual denomination. Around half a century ago, the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) was formed and, unusually for councils of churches internationally, the Roman Catholic Church was both a founder member and a full member, along with Anglicans and Presbyterians. Gradually, other denominations came on board, including Copts, Orthodox, Pentecostals and various evangelical churches. In the late 1980s, as the divide between areas under government control and “liberated territory” under the SPLA became more apparent and it became impossible for Church leaders to move safely between the two, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) was formed to cover the liberated territories which were inaccessible to the SCC. After the Independence of South Sudan in 2011, a South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) was formed in the new nation.

The Church’s engagement in peace building in Sudan and South Sudan has a long and proud history. The Addis Ababa Agreement, which ended the first civil war in 1972, was brokered by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the All-Africa Conference of Churches, as both parties felt they could trust the Church as an honest broker. In the first half of the second civil war, relations between the Church and the liberation movement (whose human rights record was appalling in those early years) were strained to say the least. However by the mid-’nineties, following the 1991 split (when Dr Riek Machar and others rebelled against the leadership of Dr John Garang), the subsequent loss of territory by the SPLA, the emergence of fighting between southerners rather than with northern forces as the main dynamic of the conflict, and the Chukudum Conference of 1994, the time seemed to be ripe for rapprochement. Hence in 1997 a reconciliation meeting between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army and the NSCC was held in the small village of Kajiko, near Yei. It was a very hot meeting. The NSCC accused the movement of human rights abuses, while the SPLM/A accused the Church of doing nothing for the liberation of the south. Eventually there was

reconciliation and the SPLM/A asked the Church to handle internal reconciliation within the south, as well as providing chaplains to the SPLA.

Following the 1991 split, the Church had attempted to reconcile John Garang and Riek Machar but had failed. With the impetus of the Kajiko meeting, the NSCC turned from the top level to the grassroots and began the 'People to People Peace Process' (often referred to as "Wunlit", after the village where the most visible reconciliation conference was held in 1999). It began in 1997 with a meeting of chiefs and elders in Lokichoggio, followed by chiefs visiting each others' areas and the subsequent mobilisation of the population. While it is tempting to focus on the high-profile meeting in Wunlit, the success of the process depended on the years of patient preparation and grassroots mobilisation by a trusted body, the Church; this is often forgotten by those who try to replicate the process and call "reconciliation meetings" at the drop of a hat. Wunlit brought peace between the Nuer and Dinka on the west bank of the Nile. Subsequent large meetings in Waat and Liliir were more complex and the results more nuanced, and there were also many smaller conferences. In 2000, an evaluation workshop in Wulu (near Rumbek) brought together chiefs, elders and women participants from all the previous conferences. The unanimous message was, "We have now made peace; it is our sons who are causing the fighting", the sons, of course, being Doctors John and Riek. The next step was thus a conference to bring together not the two learned doctors themselves but representatives from the movements, with intellectuals, church leaders, chiefs, elders and women; this was held in Kisumu in 2001. Once again the message was pretty unanimous – the two doctors must reconcile. A few months later, early in 2002, Dr Riek rejoined the mainstream SPLM/A. Around this time too, the United States Agency for International Development took an interest in the people-to-people process and invited bids for a huge grant. NSCC was part of the winning consortium but was soon marginalised by powerful international NGOs and from that point on, the Church played a lesser role in reconciliation except in certain very local situations.

Recognising the need for international advocacy for peace, in the early 'nineties the Church formed the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF), bringing together the Sudanese Church and international church partners under the auspices of the WCC. By the turn of the century, SEF had recognised three priorities for advocacy: stop the bombing of civilians, stop the exploration and exploitation of oil until the war ends, and advocate for the right of self-determination for South Sudan and other areas (Abyei, Southern Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains). In early 2002, the Church issued an influential paper on self-determination entitled 'Let My People Choose', when international envoys were literally laughing in our face at the very thought of self-determination; just a few months later, it was a central element of the Machakos Agreement of July 2002.

As the IGAD peace negotiations gathered pace in Naivasha, Kenya, it became clear that the preparations for a ‘Comprehensive’ Peace Agreement, as the subsequent accord was named, were anything but comprehensive, being only between the two main warring parties and excluding all other political parties and military factions, as well as the Church and civil society. Undaunted, the Church set up its own parallel process in Entebbe, Uganda, consisting of a series of meetings bringing together Church leaders, civil society from north and south Sudan (the first time that had ever been done) and the various militias (again, a first) subsequently known as “Other Armed Groups”, a label they themselves chose at the third Entebbe meeting. Of course many of the SPLM delegates in Naivasha were church members, so the resolutions and recommendations of the Entebbe process found their way informally into the hallowed halls of the Naivasha process.

So the war ended in 2005. At an SEF meeting held near Pretoria in 2003, South Africans shared the experience of their own liberation and warned that the Church could not rest after peace came but would have to work twice as hard to sustain it. However the Church in Sudan had suffered badly during 22 years of war and many more years of religious discrimination from the Khartoum regime, and so the personal and spiritual renewal of Church personnel and the rebuilding and revitalising of church institutions and structures became a priority. During the same period, the merging of the SCC and NSCC during the Interim Period after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the subsequent splitting of the SCC into two new councils after Independence in 2011, consumed a great deal of time and energy. The Church took its eye off the ball.

Nevertheless many localised peace initiatives were still led by the Church. Heightened violence broke out in Jonglei State before the 2010 elections and again in 2011. Church leaders began to engage with the communities from an early stage and organised a series of local peace conferences which ultimately failed when violence escalated again around Christmas 2011. Early in 2012, President Salva Kiir Mayardit formed the Committee for Community Peace, Reconciliation and Tolerance in Jonglei State, led by Anglican Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul, which included a number of experienced Church leaders and facilitators. Grassroots mobilisation and a further series of local conferences led to an All-Jonglei Conference in Bor in May 2012 at which all six main communities in Jonglei State were represented. An agreement was signed, many abducted women and children were returned along with stolen cattle, and there were several months of peace. SCC began a new programme entitled Peace from the Roots, engaging with cattle camp youth, due to culminate in an All-Jonglei youth meeting early in 2013. Unfortunately when a new conflict emerged, led by David Yau Yau, that meeting became impossible. Once again the Church intervened and a team led by

Bishop Paride Taban succeeded in brokering an agreement between Yau Yau and the government early in 2014.

International advocacy had also come to the fore again late in 2010, when it seemed that the referendum was not going to take place in January 2011, a situation which Church leaders were sure would lead to an immediate return to war. A high-level Church delegation was sent to meet the UN Secretary General and to brief US White House advisors, and they communicated that message loudly and clearly. The referendum duly took place on time. The Church also made contact with rebel George Athor, who had threatened to disrupt the referendum, and persuaded him to put aside his grievances temporarily in the interest of the nation.

The Action Plan for Peace

In December 2013, during a controversial meeting of the SPLM leadership, heavy fighting broke out between Dinka troops loyal to President Salva Kiir and Nuer soldiers loyal to Riek Machar (who had been dismissed as Vice-President earlier in the year). The fighting quickly spread beyond the barracks into the streets of Juba and took on an ethnic dimension when Nuer civilians were targeted by the President's troops. Within 48 hours of the conflict beginning, while fighting still raged in the streets of the capital city, Church leaders gathered in Juba and issued their first statement calling for an immediate end to the conflict. Over the next four years, their statements echoed common themes: the conflict must stop immediately and unconditionally; this war is senseless and has no moral justification whatsoever, indeed it is evil; there is no military solution; the conflict must be ended through dialogue; the killing, raping and looting by all sides is unacceptable. Church leaders met political and military leaders from all sides but it became clear that although the Church was speaking, nobody was listening.

By 2014, people on all sides and internationally were calling on the Church to take the lead in bringing peace but the SSCC, newly formed two years after Independence, was still a weak institution. It was not until 2015 that it was able to hold a series of meetings of the Heads of Churches, including one in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in April where they met the Prime Minister. This led to a retreat for reflection and discussion in Kigali, Rwanda, in June at which the Church issued its 'Statement of Intent' to move ahead with a peace process which eventually came to be called the 'Action Plan for Peace'. The APP consists of three pillars: Advocacy, Neutral Forums and Reconciliation. Later a fourth pillar, the institutional strengthening of SSCC, was added.

The Advocacy pillar

The Advocacy pillar includes not only the international and regional advocacy of which the Church gained such experience during the period of the SEF but

also internal domestic advocacy to change the narratives of violence within South Sudan and to address the hate speech, incitement, tribalism, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda and rumours which cause so many problems. At the time of writing (June 2017), a group of senior Church leaders is doing an advocacy tour of neighbouring countries, including visiting refugee settlements and camps in Uganda and Ethiopia, while Bishop Paride Taban is in London speaking at Chatham House,² having just accepted a peace award from the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 2015, the Ecumenical Network South Sudan was formed as a replacement for the old SEF, again bringing together South Sudanese and international Church partners. A number of South Sudanese Church leaders and international partners in the United Kingdom, USA and elsewhere have also begun to work with the diaspora on the issue of hate speech, much of which seems to originate overseas. SSCC has also reached out to the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Their planned joint visit to South Sudan has been postponed for various reasons but it is still very much on the agenda.

The Neutral Forum pillar

The Neutral Forum pillar is basically dialogue. It aims to create safe spaces where South Sudanese stakeholders from all sides can meet to build trust, and discuss the root causes of, and develop a home grown indigenous resolution to, the conflicts. It has not yet become visible but a great deal of patient behind-the-scenes preparation is ongoing, including holding sensitive conversations with stakeholders from all sides and creating the conditions where they can begin to establish a dialogue under the auspices of the Church. It is hoped that in the second half of 2017, the formal Neutral Forum dialogues will begin.

The Reconciliation pillar

The Reconciliation pillar will benefit from the long experience of the Church in the previous civil war and will build on the methodology of the independent ‘Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation’, led by Archbishop Daniel Deng; this was formed early in 2013 before the conflict began but was soon overtaken by events. Since then, the Church, often in collaboration with Muslims, traditional leaders and the protagonists themselves, has already brokered local agreements in Yambio, Yei, Wau, Bor, Pibor and elsewhere, with mixed success. Reconciliation is long term: the Church expects this process to last for ten to twenty years. One of the reasons for the latest conflict is that the need for reconciliation arising from previous conflicts was not addressed. This time, the Church is determined not to make the same mistake. While it may take time to

² Bishop Paride Taban spoke at a public meeting at Chatham House, ‘Mediating for Peace in South Sudan: The role of the Church’, on 21st June 2017.

end this conflict, the hope is that the conditions will be created to prevent another conflict from breaking out again in two or five or ten years' time.

The APP has attracted interest and funding from many quarters, including the USA, Norway, Switzerland and the European Union. The SSCC is working closely with a number of its international Church partners, notably Norwegian Church Aid, Catholic Relief Services and Finn Church Aid, with the UK's Christian Aid playing an important role in the Advocacy pillar.

National Dialogue

In December 2016, President Salva Kiir issued a decree creating a National Dialogue. While many welcomed the prospect of dialogue, concern was expressed about its independence and inclusivity and it was rejected by many in the opposition. Since then, the Dialogue has gone through a change of leadership and a reshuffling of the members of its Steering Committee, and the President has reportedly recused himself as Patron in order to emphasise its intended independence. It has not begun its work yet.

Church leaders issued an official statement on 23rd December 2016 welcoming “unreservedly” the language of dialogue: “it seems to us almost a miracle to hear positive and peaceful language from the highest civil and military authority in the land”. They welcomed the “climate for dialogue”, the “space he is opening up for those who seek non-violent paths to peace” and “his assurance that non-violent dialogue is now the national policy”. However they also reiterated their longstanding call for the killing to cease immediately, expressed the need for “positive changes” in the security environment and spoke of the need for inclusivity: “All South Sudanese must own it”. Anglican and Catholic bishops have also issued their own statements broadly welcoming the National Dialogue.

While the presidential decree appears to have incorporated SSCC into the Steering Committee and while some individual Church leaders have taken up their places on the Committee, nevertheless SSCC has not yet officially joined the endeavour. Church leaders have been seeking a meeting with the President to clarify various points and concerns but, six months on, that meeting has not yet taken place. While offering the Church's expertise and advice, and expressing a willingness to “liaise” with the National Dialogue, nevertheless the Church leaders made it clear that they intend to go ahead with their own dialogue process in the Neutral Forum pillar. The President's National Dialogue is “the beginning of a long process, a movement, and a space to be filled by all those who seek peace in South Sudan through non-violent means” – including the Church. No further official statement has been issued.

The Church as microcosm

The church is a microcosm of society. Church leaders as individuals are citizens with

their own political views and sympathies. As a result of the colonial Condominium policy of dividing southern Sudan into spheres of influence for different Christian denominations, certain denominations have come to be associated more with one community or geographical area than others. This provides internal challenges for the Church but so far, Church leaders have remained united on the important issues: the need for the conflict to stop immediately, the need for non-violent dialogue; the central role that the Church must play in bringing about peace. If the Church as microcosm can overcome these tensions, then this is a hopeful sign for the macrocosm.

It is also true that communication between and within churches is not always as good as it should be, and you will hear some church leaders complaining loudly and publicly that the Church is doing nothing for peace. They are misinformed. Much of the work is still sensitive and has not been made public; some of the less sensitive work is supposed to be made public but advertising itself is not one of the Church's strengths; some of the work is out there for all to see but busy people (including Church leaders) tend to overlook it.

Holy Trinity Peace Village, Kuron

One cannot speak of the role of the Church in peace building without mentioning an initiative which has a track record stretching back more than fifteen years. Retired Catholic Bishop Paride Taban grew up in a multicultural village where the Condominium government brought workers and their families from all over Sudan; he was educated in Catholic national seminaries containing students from all communities and later in life, experienced living in a peace village which brought people together from all sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In a remote part of Eastern Equatoria he subsequently created a peace village to bring peace and reconciliation to communities in conflict, mainly over cattle and other resources. Although development activities were the initial tool and the village now boasts agriculture projects, a primary school, a clinic, a vocational training school, bridges across the river, community mediation services, improvements to the main road between Kapoeta and Boma, and even an internet cafe, it is not primarily a development project – it is a peace village, demonstrating the virtuous circle of peace and development. A key element of the experience is personal transformation and Bishop Paride has his own unique spirituality of peace and reconciliation which he shares with all-comers.

As its Founder passed his eightieth year, many in the Village asked themselves the question, “Can we just sit here as an oasis of peace while the rest of the country burns? What can we do to help?” The Village cannot expand too much without diluting itself (although it has already opened an office in nearby Boma to address inter-communal conflicts from that direction) and it is not practical to

try to replicate the village elsewhere. The solution – a Peace Academy. Already groups such as the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and SSCC have held their own conferences in Kuron, and now the village is planning its own programme of inviting groups and individuals to experience life in the peace village, to undergo personal transformation, to learn whatever lessons they need to take back to their own community and begin the process of conflict transformation in a manner appropriate to wherever they find themselves.

Non-violence

In many ways non-violence is alien to South Sudan. After the best part of 60 years of conflict, violence is a way of life. In many communities violence was traditional, if on a lower level than currently, through cattle raiding. In some communities, justice is revenge and revenge is justice – more violence. During the 1983-2005 civil war there was a strong sense throughout the southern population that violence was justified in the liberation struggle against the oppressive regimes in Khartoum. Even certain individual church leaders had been known to ask for defensive anti-aircraft missiles to counter the dreaded Antonov bombers.

This war is different. There is a widespread view throughout South Sudan that it is a senseless conflict with no moral justification whatsoever and that violence is no longer justified. Indeed, in a statement issued on 25th September 2014, the Catholic bishops of South Sudan stated: “In our Prophetic role as bishops, we state without hesitation or fear that the current conflict is evil and must be stopped immediately and unconditionally, regardless of any other considerations. We call on every political leader, every military officer, every individual soldier, every armed civilian, whether government or opposition, to avoid any further killing. It is immoral and evil. The question to ask ourselves is: do I have the sincere will to renounce violence, to compromise and to bring peace?”

SSCC participated in the conference on ‘Non-violence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Non-violence’, held in Rome in April 2016, and the specific language of non-violence has gradually crept in to the documents of the SSCC, along with quotes from Pope Francis’ Message for the World Day of Peace in January 2017, ‘Non-violence: a Style of Politics for Peace’. There is no doubt that the ordinary people of South Sudan want the conflict to end through non-violent means. Maybe even many of the perpetrators would like the same end but they are out of ideas; so steeped are they in the culture and politics of violence, that they literally have no idea how to bring peace, how to look at the very real problems and disagreements through the lens of non-violence. This is yet another unique dynamic which the Church can contribute to the nation.

Ending this conflict will not happen quickly and even once the active killing,

raping and looting ends, South Sudan faces decades of hard work to ensure a just and lasting peace. Reconciliation, at which the Church can take the lead, is only part of this task – it must include political and military reform, good governance and the rule of law, development, education and many other aspects which can best be done by others. But the Church can and will continue to focus and refocus the nation on non-violent dialogue in all these endeavours.

* John Ashworth has worked with the Church in Sudan and South Sudan since 1983 in a variety of fields, including education, humanitarian aid and development, advocacy, peace and reconciliation. He has worked in several African countries since he first arrived in Africa in 1976 as a young volunteer teacher; he now lives in Kenya and still spends much of his time in South Sudan acting as an advisor to the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference, the South Sudan Council of Churches, Holy Trinity Peace Village Kuron and other Church-related bodies. His most recent book is *The Voice of the Voiceless: The Role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War 1983-2005* (Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2014).

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