



SOLIDARITY with South Sudan

**From the Office of the Executive Director
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Written by Br. Bill Firman, FSC, former Executive Director and revised: July 2019

REQUEST TO LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Dear Congregational Leaders,

The seeds for the joint Inter-congregational initiative, *Solidarity with South Sudan*, were sewn at the Congress for Consecrated Life held in Rome in 2004, with the theme, *'Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity'*. The Congress challenged its members to think of new forms of missionary endeavour. So it was when the Bishops of South Sudan requested help in 2005, *Solidarity* came into being, *'A new paradigm ... born of compassion for the scarred and down-trodden of the earth, around new priorities, new models of organization and open and flexible collaboration with men and women of good will.'*

After initial investigations, consideration and decision by UISG and USG, the first members of *Solidarity* arrived to live in South Sudan in 2008. So this year is the tenth anniversary of our mission in South Sudan. By the time I arrived in 2009, there were 21 religious in South Sudan – 18 Sisters, 2 Brothers and 1 priest. *Solidarity* still has five of those religious Sisters who arrived before me. Our numbers rose to around 35 in 2013 but since then have been reasonably stable around 30. As I write, we have 26 religious from 18 different congregations from 16 countries and 3 lay volunteers (16 women & 13 men), plus many lay employees working in South Sudan.

As you are aware, conflict returned to South Sudan in late 2013 testing the resolve of all of us to continue the mission. As Bishop Erkolano expressed it so succinctly at a *Solidarity* Board meeting, *'If the missionaries leave, the people lose hope.'* We now live and work among a suffering people and identify even more with the Passion of Christ, and his challenge, *'Could you not watch one hour with me.'* The facts are that, although we have only been able to maintain our presence in Malakal through Maryknoll, Fr Mike Bassano, working as chaplain in the UN Protection of Civilians Camp, our other enterprises are thriving: we have 123 students in residence following three-year programmes to become registered nurses or midwives in our Catholic Health Training Institute (CHTI) in Wau; and we have 121 resident

students in our Solidarity Teacher Training College (STTC) in Yambio. The quality graduates from these well-resourced institutes are highly regarded throughout South Sudan and are now helping their own people significantly. Our Pastoral team continue to offer many programmes training local pastoral workers, including trauma healing facilitators, and provide two of the four permanent staff at the new Good Shepherd Peace Centre just out of Juba. Further, we have a thriving 50 hectare 'model farm' providing training in best self-subsistence agricultural techniques and employing up to 80 workers daily while providing food in support of our STTC and the 6000 Internally displaced people clustered around the Church in Riimenze. Thanks to very good work by our fundraisers, we now have in place several multi-year funding agreements as well as many annual grants from donor/partners who recognize us as credible service providers. In spite of the setbacks, we have had ten very productive years.

I will be handing over my responsibilities in April next year to my designated successor, Fr Jim Greene MAfr, for no other reason than, at age 75, I must face the reality of diminishing energy levels. So the *Solidarity* Board is taking this opportunity to review and renew our administrative structure at a time when fewer religious are available.

South Sudan is a good place for religious to be. Jesus in the synagogue chose to read from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4, 16 – 19),

*'The Spirit of the lord is upon me,
because he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and to the blind new sight
to set the downtrodden free
and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.'*

I know this is what we are doing in South Sudan. As I talk with my colleagues, however, I realise that we have significant need for new personnel in all areas of our ministry. It seems very likely we shall lose the leader and a key team member of our pastoral ministry next year. When I ask, in what pastoral areas are our critical needs, the answer is wide ranging. The designated mission of *Solidarity* is not to deliver the service ourselves but to train the South Sudanese people in service delivery. So, for example, we don't run parishes, but we train local priests and catechists on how to develop small Christian communities, seek grants for pastoral programmes (since the people are too poor to participate on a 'user pays' basis), run programmes on catechetics and trauma healing – and so on. We need persons with pastoral skills they can pass on to the local Church personnel.

We now have only three religious in the CHTI in Wau who are health professionals - plus a good supporting staff of trained lay tutors. Hence, we need more nurse and midwifery tutors as well as good clinical supervisors who can supervise and guide the students in that very important part of training - clinical practice in hospitals and health care centres. In our STTC, we need more tutors who can help the students learn how to teach at the primary school level. The standard of education in South Sudan is very low, especially in Maths. We need tutors for Maths and Science – and English. For many of our student teachers, English is their second, third or fourth language.

South Sudanese are very good and appreciative students. In both of our large residential Institutes we bring people of many tribes together where they learn to respect and help one another - our tutors train our students to be ambassadors of peace. This is the key to building a better, more peaceful, South Sudan. Our variety of congregations and countries of origin show that there can be unity in diversity. Our mixed communities are very enriching. The conditions in the country can be a bit harsh, but we can still enjoy good community life.

Next year, Sr Rosa, the leader of our Agricultural programme, will have a period of renewal granted by her congregation. Rosa would appreciate someone with an agriculture background to assist in her ministry, but also someone who would 'keep the books' and supervise payment of the workers each day. Such a person could also help with pastoral care of the many displaced people at Riimenze. Each day, we feed the most vulnerable and we have a clinic providing health care for these needy people along with a preschool. The needs are many. A critical need for us is to maintain viable community numbers in this somewhat isolated rural location.

There are also some ancillary jobs to be filled. We have many guests passing through our administrative centre in Juba. A religious prepared to assist with giving a warm and hospitable welcome would be helpful. We would also be interested in having a religious in our Rome office, full or part-time, who could help in maintaining links with the congregations and the Vatican as well as promoting our Solidarity ethos.

The first ten years have seen us become a well-established, recognised and credible Church agency. We have developed strong support structures through our Fundraising Office in Rome, Friends in Solidarity in the USA, and the administrative and the financial expertise in our Rome and Juba offices. The board has developed comprehensive Governance, Personnel and Finance Manuals along with clear policies and a well-articulated Strategic Plan to take us forward.

For the next ten years, however, we need an infusion of new personnel and increasing focus on self-sustainability and transition of the administration from our expatriate hands to the local Church. I think it is true to say the in-fighting and destruction in South Sudan has slowed us down but has not deterred us from our purpose. Some of our energies have been diverted into trauma healing and humanitarian aid but our principal mission is to set up self-sustaining institutions and programmes that will eventually be handed on to the local Church in South Sudan. The pressing present need now is new personnel. Hence this letter.

I would be very happy to hear from any congregation who may be able to provide someone to work in South Sudan. They need reasonably good health and a resilient spirit. I know the publicity about the country has been bad, but the Board has supported every step we have been able to take to upgrade security. We are not fearful or worried about safety but, yes, we are cautious and do not do some things we would once have done, such as drive between towns.

We also appreciate your continued financial support. Funds from congregations can often be used more flexibly than those governed by strict grant agreements. It helps us especially to be able to continue to offer considerable support to the local congregations who often lack resources or even enough funds to

sustain a basic standard of living. I firmly believe those best placed to assist the local people with emergency humanitarian aid, and the Church long-term, are the members of the local congregations. This is their country and they know the needs of the people better than we do. They usually get better value for the funds they receive than we do. We are very pleased to count two, local Sacred Heart Sisters among our membership in South Sudan.

If you would like more information, or wish to discuss the possibility of making a member of your congregation available, please contact me. I also give you advance notice that the Annual Assembly of those supporting *Solidarity* will take place on WEDNESDAY, 28TH NOVEMBER, at the FSC Casa Generalizia, Via Aurelia 476. It would be a good place to learn more about the mission of Solidarity. More information about the Assembly will be sent to you later but it is a wide invitation to you and other members of your leadership group.

What we have achieved is quite remarkable; what is still to be done is formidable. There is absolutely no social welfare system in South Sudan, no Government support network. We, and our fellow religious are it! We are needed now and, at least, for the next decade. I invite new and continuing participation in this impactful project.

Every best wish,

Faithfully and sincerely,

Br Bill Firman FSC
Solidarity with South Sudan
Former Executive Director

Note: this letter was written by Bill at the end of 2018 and has been revised for 2019.