



ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF MELBOURNE

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OODTHENONG EPISCOPATE

Meeting with South Sudanese Clergy and Lay Leaders
Anglican Centre, 9 January 2018



There are very many fine people in the Australian South Sudanese community doing their utmost to be good citizens in a new land.

As I have listened to their stories over the years, the traumas they have endured but have survived in order to give their best, I am filled with deep respect for them.

Even on Tuesday, in understated fashion, some were telling me how they'd just come back from Africa after funerals for murdered siblings.

On top of all this, now they have to deal with a media frenzy over a few of their children who have gone off the rails.

As if the anguish of seeing some of their children in trouble was not enough, they are dealing with negative stereotyping of their whole community. "Our youngsters feel frightened now to even go down the street to buy milk because of the things people say to them."

Away from the media, in our mean-spirited suburbs, cowards call out from cars as they walk along.

On top of this we have had senior political leaders fan these negative stereotypes for their own miserable political purposes. Seeing some electoral advantage, in their vanity, playing with the most dangerous of fires, they have sought to amplify the fears in the community.

One talks even of the dangers of going out to dinner!

In this context, a letter of mine was published in *The Age*. I shared it with a few of our fine South Sudanese leaders and invited them to a luncheon conversation.

Here is the letter:

Dear Editor,

Listening to some of the harsh commentary regarding the long- suffering Sudanese community , I am reminded of an apt wisdom: that if your immediate reaction- if the movement of your heart - upon hearing of some sadness is an ideological one rather than a human one, then your heart has been corrupted . You should therefore go straight away on pilgrimage , until your heart is cleansed.

This is a wisdom of enduring relevance for all in leadership. A time in the desert is better than just adding to the sadness of humanity.

I expected perhaps 6 or 7 to come to the luncheon but, as you can see from the photo, more than 20 turned up, including a number of the mothers who are doing their best to help these kids in trouble.

What did we conclude?

1. I invited a space in which they spoke about how the negative publicity had affected them.

Folk shared their sorrow, grateful that in our prayerful atmosphere this could be conveyed.

2. We recalled the diagnosis of how things had gone wrong.

Arriving in Australia traumatised they were unprepared for the dissonance between secular Australian culture and their own.

“The culture of Australia has made us the enemies of our own children”, they said, restating early problems with Police and Child Protection agencies; noting how their kids were quick to pick up new rights in a new land; their own problems acquiring language and employment, etc.

There was much elaboration of these matters as folk restated their efforts to settle well without the resources to properly keep everyone together. Much of this is what I have written about earlier. (See below notes of a meeting I held in March 2017.)

3. We moved on to solutions and recommendations, after some expression of the frustration of being relatively powerless and not feeling heard as the train wreck approached, as kids prematurely exited school into drugs, alcohol and the negative self-identity that leads to gangs and prison.

Some parents now wish they'd never come to Australia. Would prefer they'd died in South Sudan, such is the shame and grief of losing their kids in these ways, and feeling powerless to prevent this happening. Then to now feel humiliated in the media and the streets, as if they are all criminals!

The Revd Chaplain Soma helped us frame solutions by suggesting we think of young people in three stages.

- (i) Little kids, under 13, the ones nearly at risk and
- (ii) kids now at risk in early teens:

How do we prevent them getting into trouble, or further trouble?

The Church needs to better resource their large Sunday Schools; provide Youth Camps; more Homework Clubs for a positive transition from Primary to Secondary School.

The Church needs to give a stipend/salary so capable South Sudanese Clergy and Laity can work with these young, other than as volunteers.

The State Government needs to fund more teachers' aides, South Sudanese liaison staff in schools to be advocates for their kids, countering racism.

The State Government needs to resource parents to be better teachers of their kids at home.

Programs like the Brotherhood of St Laurence's HIPPIE Program:

<https://www.bsl.org.au/services/children-and-families/hippy/>

We heard from Ken Hutton, of successful Northern Territory programs with Indigenous Communities – "Families as First Teachers".

Families have to re-feel they are part of a solution.

The Victorian State Government should look at this NT program and Queensland's more culturally appropriate child protection program. As with Indigenous people, for whom generic welfare services do not work, so with the South Sudanese.

We need culturally-specific programs which close the gap between the community and Government services.

(iii) As regards young adults now in trouble, there were good solutions proposed.

The Church and State Government together should trial a Rural Boarding School for young offenders where there is a clean environment, without drugs and alcohol; where there is education and training towards durable employment options. Not a prison but not a place these young offenders can readily leave. A place which offers a redemptive narrative of a kind that won't happen if they just circulate between prison and their current community.

There are other suggestions which will involve some interaction with our Senior Police.

Very few South Sudanese are in the Police Force, how can barriers to entry be addressed?

There seem to be barriers preventing extended family members, who are primary care-givers (after the death of parents in South Sudan), from seeing their young people after arrests.

There are evolving plans, which should be shared with our Police, to create zones in Melbourne and Geelong so as to better monitor and manage kids at risk and in danger of being drawn to gangs.

Coming from all this discussion, there is the hope that:

- a) Premier Daniel Andrews will meet with a representative group from our meeting, as regards the possible solutions outlined;
- b) Senior Police, through Deputy Commissioner Andrew Crisp, will likewise meet with us about what is feasible and can be better done together;
- c) The Victorian Multicultural Commission will fund some "counter-narrative" advertisements, especially for social media such as Facebook and Instagram.

Distinguished film-maker Richard Keddie and I have spoken about this in recent days.

Richard has already shaped a proposal which is attached, and for which we seek funding, an initial \$10,000, as soon as possible.

- d) We are planning a beautiful and uplifting Service of Worship in St Paul's Cathedral on Sunday 4 February from 3.00 – 5.00pm to gather with the South Sudanese community in ecumenical worship.
- e) We are beginning to plan a National Conference of South Sudanese community leaders to address major issues and find agreed solutions, in partnership with Federal and State Governments, the wider civil society, including the Church. This might be Canberra-based at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

Conclusion

These notes convey a recognition of the problems and a readiness to find solutions.

After our concluding prayers, as people departed, I was gratified that there is hope renewed.

Bishop Philip Huggins



Memo: Meeting Friday 17 March with young South Sudanese and with mothers of some of those in trouble.

At St John's Anglican Church, Footscray with Premier's advisers, Cal and Naomi along with the Revds Chaplain Soma and Duku Wolikare and Archdeacon Bill Beagley.

This note captures some of the conversation and makes suggestions about the way forward.

It was very moving, especially listening to the anguish of the mothers.

A follow-up meeting would be good, once we are clearer as regards how we can all be helpful, into the future.



Some points from my listening can be elaborated by your reflections:

1. The young leaders and mothers spoke of the effect of the negative media stereotyping
 - All black young people face stigmatising, unfair attention because of the behaviour of a few.
2. The young leaders and mothers spoke of how relieved and pleased they were to first get to Australia as refugees – leaving all that death and violence behind in Sudan.
3. They spoke of how warm and helpful was their welcome to Australia.
They were safe. There was food. Help with English, Centrelink, Medicare, housing.
They had such high hopes for their children.
4. Some have flourished, like the youth leaders (not the troubled youth who are in gaol or on drugs or too ashamed to come to such a Friday meeting).
5. It all started to go wrong in the schools:
 - Kids placed in Year Groups according to age, even though they didn't have the same literacy, numeracy or other skills;
 - Kids facing racism
 - "Black monkey!"
 - Kids scapegoated and excluded from schools through incidents poorly investigated; kids therefore moving schools, losing confidence, their interrupted education leading to truancy, stress at home, mothers not sleeping, frustrations that the kids were not flourishing.

The kids rebelling, going out with their friends, very visible big black kids soon attracting police and other attention.

6. Listening to these depressed and grief-stricken mothers (which I have done before) is heart-breaking.

“He’s a good boy”, they’d say while recounting how some relatively minor but badly handled incident began the deterioration.

There were claims of police misbehaviour, some serious allegations which need fuller investigation. One boy’s alleged ‘suicide’ is simply not believed as explanation for his death.

7. There is, above all, the grief that their high hopes for their children upon arrival are now a nightmare of prison visits, kids at home in wheelchairs from that toxic mix of drugs, alcohol and fast cars; fears for kids being deported back to the failing State of South Sudan where there is no one to look after them.



8. What to do?

There are two levels to the answer.

First, what can be done now for the children of these grieving and depressed mothers and the mothers themselves?

Duku is going to begin his work listening to the mothers, bringing some extra care and healing to them; seeking clarity as regards those unresolved matters needing further investigation.

- He will work with Prison Chaplains, the Ven Bill Beagley (also at the meeting) as regards anything we can do or recommend to bring the young men future rehabilitation.

The second level is the work to prevent this sadness continuing to happen, wrecking more young lives in the future.

As regard preventative work, Sarina Greco, former Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Ecumenical Migration Centre, reminded me that 20 years ago the Youth Detention Centres were filled with Vietnamese and Cambodian kids.

Then and thereafter, the Brotherhood focused on programs to:

i. To support parents

- Eg, Saver Plus, to help them with financial literacy and goals;
- Hippiie, to help their skilled and confident engagement in their kids' education;
- 'Stepping Stones': to help them develop their own enterprises/businesses with what skills they had (while still acquiring greater facility with English as a second/third/fourth language).

ii. To support the kids

- With programs and people to help their education/employment pathway and thus their positive social identity (kids, with all that energy, have to be someone, so they will find a negative self-identity if a positive one doesn't open up and get supported).

Such an approach is reasonably obvious but effective.

Conclusion:

With Government, we might review whether, nuanced for the particular of Sudanese and other African countries, we can do more to support parents and young people currently at risk or in trouble.

After some consideration of my notes and after the addition of your own reflections, we might meet again.

Bishop Philip Huggins



Richard Keddie – media proposal

This needs a strong creative driver as discussed. Perhaps a thesis along the lines of your letter to the Age, giving an historical context to the issue., and creating opportunities for understanding and co-operation, through empathy and compassion.

I have ideas on how we could do this.

The process would involve the following steps.

STAGE 1

Sending my team out to research the issue and find the stories. The team would be Rob Innes and Sebastian Broadbent and myself. Apologies in this instance that it is all male. I rarely do that! But I have them working on other projects so it is the best model for efficiency and economy at present. They have terrific experience working with communities and are very sensitive to the issue. Unrelated, Rob was posting his distress on Facebook today about this very issue.

STAGE 2

Designing the creative narrative.

STAGE 3

Creating a series of short form filmed stories and anecdotes and possibly some music clips conveying the key messages.

STAGE 4

Releasing the stories - ideally through strategic paid placement on social media, supported by a strategic publicity campaign, possibly with profiled Australian.

COSTS

I realise that money is short - so there's a cheap option A, and a decent option B

OPTION A

I guess \$10,000 could get us a fair way to making some films, and an additional \$5,000 would pay for a limited social media campaign that could still make a bit of a splash and perhaps generate some decent publicity.

OPTION B

\$50-100,000, if there was a philanthropic or NGO or even govt support could make an impact for sure.