19. When is a school not a school?

I believe it is true that almost all parents, including those in Southern Sudan, want their children to receive a ‘good education’ – whatever that might mean. Even parents who have not received much formal education themselves grasp the notion that basic literacy and numeracy is important and that children should go to school.

This morning I went to the Nile to fill some containers with purified water - which is provided free to the people of Malakal but one has to collect it. Not too hard for me in a vehicle, nor even those with donkey carts or containers tied on to push bikes, but it is a burdensome task for the women and children carrying full, 20-litre containers on their heads. One little girl at the taps caught my attention, with her very thin, dust-covered legs and very dirty feet. I wondered if she goes to school. Many children here do, well dressed in colourful uniforms, but many don’t.

I also found myself thinking of the Brother in Australia many years ago who tried to suggest gently to a parent that her son should wash more regularly. The mother retorted:

’I sent him to school for you to learn him, not smell him!‘

At various Education conferences I have listened to disturbing statistics:

‘96% of teachers do not have recognised qualification; 63% of teachers are completely untrained.’ ‘In our county, we have no competent teachers of English’. ‘We have several school with six classes and only two teachers’ ‘Many of our classes number more than one hundred students’. ‘Children in Southern Sudan have the least access to primary education in the world.’

‘Schooling’ in many places in Southern Sudan is delivered under a tree with children sitting on the earth. Many ‘schools’ simply have no classrooms. A few days ago I heard of a school of 420 students and only one teacher. Parents send their children to school because they understand that school is a good thing but one can rightly ask how effective is the education delivered? When is a school not a school?

There are resources here. In a visit to the Education Ministry I saw huge piles of text and exercise books and other materials, yes even chalk, sitting in the open – to be distributed, we were told, in February and March. Nothing has yet happened in February! All we wanted were 25 compasses for geometry. We searched for an hour, rummaging futilely inside a few of the massive stack of cartons but couldn’t find even one compass. I noticed packs of thin slates and crayons. ‘A school in a box’, one man told me – if only the boxes reach their destination. This disorder is one consequence of a lack of infrastructure and organizational skills.

Thankfully there are a significant number of NGOs focussed on building schools; but we are one of the few groups trying to develop better teachers. There are currently 204 teachers registered for, and mostly attending, our various programmes.

In Malakal, where I am at present, there are fifty-three teachers from Ministry of Education schools, following the first year of the four-year in-service programme and twenty-two in the second year. The subjects, delivered in accord with the Government of Southern Sudan curricula, and teachers are: English taught by Sr Betty Ryan, FCJ from Ireland; Mathematics taught by Sr Margaret Sheehan, FCJ also from Ireland; Science, taught by Sr Ninet D’Costa, FMA from India; Social Studies taught by a Sudanese man, Mr Peter Oyiejo; and Professional Studies taught by Br Heldon Fernando FSC from India. Sr Ninet is the coordinator of the programme.
We add a daily period of Religious Education, with a focus on peace building and reconciliation. That subject will be taught next month by Sr Barbara Pałęczny, SSND from Canada, who is presently in Juba, leading a special month-long programme for fifty Catholic school teachers, designed to improve their English and skills in teaching it. Teaching with Sr Barbara in Juba are Sr Luchita Galarzo, RRFF from Columbia, Br Denis Loft, FSC from Australia, and Sr Antonine Meleady, chf from Ireland.

Next month Sisters Luchita and Antonine will be in Malakal to teach the Religious Education programme with Sr Barbara while Br Denis will go to Yambio to teach Physics. Br Heldon will also relocate temporarily to Yambio to teach Professional Studies.

At Yambio there are thirty teachers engaged in the first year of a similar four-year in-service programme to the one at Malakal. Sr Margaret Scott, RNDM from New Zealand, who teaches English, is the coordinator of the programmes in Western Equatorial State, assisted by Sr Felista Nyamasyo, RNDM from Kenya who teaches Maths, Sr Jenny Cook, RRFF from Chile teaching Science and Religious Education, and Father John Gemboy, the Sudanese Parish Priest of Riimenze, who teaches Social Studies.

This month Sisters Margaret, Jenny and Felista are also the instructors at Nzara where there are 48 teachers following a none-month programme, most of whom have been brought from the town of Tombura by World Vision, the sponsoring agency.

The standard of English generally is so poor among teachers in Southern Sudan that we have reached the conclusion that the only possible distance education, initially, needs to be face-to-face with instructors travelling to the location. So a programme is to be offered to another 30 teachers in Nzara during term time, after school from 3:30 to 5:30pm in six three-week sessions, to cover the same material as in the Yambio programme. Instructors will travel from Riimenze.

A programme is also to be offered to 40 teachers in Leer during term time, after school from 3:30 to 5:30pm in five two-week sessions, plus Saturday instruction, to cover the same material as in the Year One Malakal programme. Instructors will travel from Malakal.

Construction of our own facilities on Catholic Church land is proceeding at both Malakal and Yambio and should be completed in the latter part of this year. We shall then offer be able to offer more support to teachers throughout the year. Further, the scope and cost of renovations of an existing complex at Torit is being investigated with a view to establishing a Solidarity community and centre in that diocese. All buildings become the property of the Sudan Catholic bishops with the goal of long-term self-sustainability.

Reports coming from Wau where our Health Training Institute is delivering its first programme are very positive. Readers may recall I wrote about the nurse-training programme two weeks ago. All of our programmes have a significant pastoral dimension but SSS is soon to welcome back to Southern Sudan, Sister Cathy Arata SSND from the USA, who will be Director of Pastoral Services with a brief to coordinate and expand our offerings in that area of service.

Presently at Riimenze we have Sr Josephine Murugi RNDM from Kenya running a pastoral programme with women and girls while Sr Joanna Hla Kyi RNDM is renewing her passport in Myanmar before returning to continue her work in community health. Sister Rosa Bong Le Thi RNDM, from Vietnam, is developing an agricultural project designed to assist the people to improve the use of the fertile land at Riimenze. There is diversity. There is productivity. There is a serious effort to stand in solidarity with the people of Southern Sudan. This is our SSS.

- Br Bill