

October 2011

How Do You Build a Country?

I'm writing this note from the lounge of the Imperial Hotel in Juba, South Sudan, the capital city of the newest country in the world. South Sudan officially became a separate nation from the Sudan on July 9, 2011, drawing a close (sort of) to a conflict that lasted for over 20 years before a peace treaty was signed in 2005, ultimately leading to South Sudan's recent independence. It has been an incredibly long and difficult journey for these amazing people.

South Sudan is home to some of the greatest contrasts I have ever seen in the world. A country roughly the size of Texas, it has a population "guesstimated" at about 8 million, mostly clustered in the extreme south along the borders with Kenya and Uganda. Further north, where we have been on this trip, you can fly for long periods without seeing any sign of civilization. Only the occasional isolated Tukul interrupts the unbroken landscape. Even the wild animals left during the civil war, apparently because of the fighting. It is a huge, largely empty country, although it has vast natural resources.

It is also one of the most impoverished nations in the world. The list of "first place" standings for this country can be really depressing – one of the highest illiteracy and child mortality rates, appalling health statistics, and more.

And yet, aid (particularly relief) is pouring in from around the world. Juba is like a gold rush town. Western style (well, sort of) hotels are springing up everywhere, they are busy paving roads and building offices, and the number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating here is staggering. The UN even operates a quasi-airline called UN Humanitarian Air Services just to shuttle NGO people around. It is a busy place!

For all that activity, however, there is very little visible effort teaching people to earn a living in a sustainable way. All of those basics are crucial, of course, but it seems to me that any effort that does not acknowledge people's need ultimately to stand on their own abilities is inadequate. That is where Five Talents comes in. Our work here, in conjunction with World Concern and the Mothers' Union, is aimed at helping people with a hand up, not a handout. Our hope is that this combination of savings groups and business training will lead our clients to a future that will create jobs, fight poverty, and transform lives. I think we are helping to make that start here!

As we finished our training session in Kuajok this week, one of the students asked me for my impression of South Sudan. My answer to him was that I saw a place where the people have literally nothing, and yet the enthusiasm, energy, and optimism is so prevalent in the air that you can literally feel it everywhere. Combine that attitude with their natural resources, some capital, and a little business training, and it is enough to make me hopeful about their future. They do indeed have a difficult road ahead, but with God's grace, I think they can do it!

I am so grateful to have been on this trip, and to have seen a land in the midst of an amazing transformation. I have travelled with two wonderful teammates, Tim Purnell and Stoddard Lane-Reticker. I have enjoyed the journey, and have learned much from both of them. It has been a trip I will not soon forget.

Jim Oakes

Five Talents

Fighting Poverty, Creating Jobs, Transforming Lives

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KUAJOK SOUTH SUDAN: So we are sleeping in a cell with no bathroom, no water, no power, the door locks with a padlock from the outside, and from the inside you just slide a bar over. There is a 4 poster bed, with mosquito netting, a hat rack and a plastic coffee table--no chairs. Let's just say it is rustic, it is hot, and this morning's ride out was teeth jarring, bone rattling and organ shifting. Wow, this is pretty far out--and YET, there is an internet cafe that for 8 Pounds South Sudanese (about \$2) I can get an hour of internet time!

There are many people in here--called a cafe, but they don't sell food.

So I've thought of a BUSINESS PLAN: Buy a satellite Dish and a generator and you can open an internet café!

As we came here to teach Christian business principles to the locals, we found another great example of a small business. A boy of 7 or 8, with an antifreeze jug pierced to hold a loop of string hung around his neck. He cut a door in the back side of the plastic container and from it pulled a few cloths, a brush and some neutral colored shoe polish. He placed himself just next to the front door of what appears to be one of the only restaurants in town. While we ate lunch, I watched him shine 5 pairs of shoes, mine included. Since my topsiders were being worn without socks, he brought me a pair of flip-flops (here called 'bathroom slippers') to wear while he shined my shoes.

When he finished, he brought them to his customers, collected his fee (1 South Sudanese Pound—worth about a quarter) and moved on. He repacked his kit, slung it around his neck and headed to the outdoor pavilions of this same restaurant to find more customers. In this 30 minute period, if you annualize his income, for working 6 days a week for only one hour, he would earn approximately 1,500 Pounds—almost \$400 (about double the average per capita income in this very poor country).

It is businesses much like the shoe shine boy that we are here to train folks to start and run. Low cost businesses that can succeed with very little capital and a little bit of effort and thought. This young boy, without taking our training, followed our strategies of improving customer service, operating from a good Location, and providing a quality product at a good price. I wish I could say I trained him!

Kuajok was quite an experience. The students came from a cross section of community leaders. We had a Presbyterian pastor, the female head of a Sudanese-based NGO, a Nun from the local Roman Catholic Diocese and other leaders in the community. The promise these students made to us at the conclusion of our two day training was that they would "teach these things to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2)."

Was it worth it to be out of the USA for 15 days to teach 65 individuals in two small towns in South Sudan? In God's economy, if they fulfill the commitment made, it is a great investment and I am delighted to have left my law practice and come to South Sudan to be involved in this next step in growing the church, by assisting them to make a living.

If you speak English, can read a simple curriculum and Love God enough to trust him to care for you, then I encourage you to get involved as a trainer or a sender, or just a supporter.

Those are my impression of my first Five Talents trip.

Tim Purnell