

Witness in Sudan: An interview with Oliver Duku

by [Richard Lindsley Walton](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

As a German-trained medical doctor, Oliver Duku was director of health services for Southern Sudan until the government based in Khartoum forced him from his job. Duku turned to the Episcopal Church of Sudan for help. The church recognized his gifts for ordained ministry and sent him to Virginia Theological Seminary for formal training. Duku, a priest in the Episcopal Church of Sudan, is now the dean of Bishop Allison Theological College. The college was founded during Sudan's civil war and has been forced to relocate twice, once when the seminary was burned to the ground. The seminary is now located in northern Uganda and is raising funds to return to Sudan.

What gives you confidence that Sudan's peace agreement of 2005 can be implemented? What are the greatest threats to the peace agreement?

The comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) signed in January 2005 between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM and SPLA) was reached through international pressure, not through the victory of one party or the other. The CPA differed from earlier North-South peace agreements in that the security arrangements have been better. The SPLA remained intact and responsible for security in the South, and there are United Nations peacekeepers in the war-affected areas.

As for challenges to the peace: First, the Khartoum government of Sudan has not given up its desire to control the economic and mineral resources in the South. Nor has it given up the plan of Arabizing and Islamizing the South. It is doing all it can to discredit and destabilize the government of Southern Sudan.

Second, the government is encouraging conversions to Islam by giving money to indigenous entrepreneurs, both in Southern Sudan and in neighboring countries like Kenya, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In order to build a peaceful, united and prosperous Southern Sudan, we need to put aside our tribal and ethnic

differences.

What about the Darfur region? What impact can the church in Sudan and the church in the West have in bringing peace to Darfur?

The Darfur situation is different from the Southern Sudan situation, though the two regions share the same general problem of having been marginalized by the Khartoum government. Darfur is predominantly Muslim (over 95 percent). There is fear in the ruling circles in Khartoum and Darfur that if peace is brought to the region through the intervention of the West, there may be a reduction in the Islamic population and possible increase in the number of Christians. This is why churches both inside and outside of Sudan may not play a significant role in bringing peace to Darfur, in contrast to their role in Southern Sudan.

The second issue in Darfur is the fragmentation of the forces fighting for their rights. The CPA was possible because the main factions of the SPLM came together to face the Khartoum government forces as a united front. Unless the rebel factions in Darfur come together and confront the government, it will be difficult to achieve peace. The government in Khartoum is expert in the divide-and-rule strategy.

Equally important is the need for the international community, including the church, to act to forestall the activities of the government in Khartoum and its Janjaweed militias on the ground in Darfur. Foreign governments are in a better position than the churches to act decisively in Darfur, because any action by the churches would be viewed not only by Khartoum but by most people in the Arab-Islamic world as an attempt to convert the Darfurians to Christianity.

With atrocities still occurring in Darfur and millions of Sudanese still displaced, why is Bishop Allison Theological College seeking to resume operation in Sudan?

In spite of the tenuous security situation, we believe that the presence of the school inside Sudan is essential. BATC needs to be in Sudan to contribute to the rehabilitation and reconstruction effort, both spiritually and physically. Our presence will also build confidence in those of our people still in exile to think of returning to Sudan to participate in the physical and spiritual reconstruction, just as Nehemiah and the Israelite exiles once did. We need to offer a holistic ministry of seminars, workshops and capacity-building exercises, and we must address issues of environmentally sustainable agriculture, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, the

development of skills, such as carpentry, and various forms of counseling.

Civil authorities have rejected a call for a truth and reconciliation commission. What is the church's view?

The Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church have already set up a Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission. Even before the CPA was signed in 2005, this commission was working to bring peace, justice and harmony among the Christians and others in Sudan. The work of this commission needs to be expanded, and the government of Southern Sudan (and even the central government) needs to be involved in a more formal truth and reconciliation commission that will include Muslims and other religious groups.

The church can take the lead in this effort. The fear of revenge or retributive justice may not allow the perpetrators of crimes to come forward to confess. The possibility of honest confession and forgiveness is a better inducement for those who have wronged others and those who have been wronged to come forward and confront each other. This is not possible when revenge or retributive justice is the norm. Hence the South African truth and reconciliation process or the Rwandan postgenocide processes offer a better model. This should not, however, rule out the possibility of payment of compensation for property damaged, although it can never compensate for the lives of murdered relatives.

If there is genuine confession, apology and forgiveness, the truth and reconciliation process can heal the wounds in the hearts of the victims and also remove the feeling of guilt from the perpetrators of the crimes.

Are the Christian community and the Muslim community able to work together?

As far as the Southern Sudanese are concerned, there is no problem for the two religious groups to coexist. As a matter of fact, before the introduction of Islamic Shari'a law and the intensification of the Islamization and Arabization policy, Muslims and Christians lived together, even in one family, for decades without any tensions. And during the civil war, Southern Sudanese Christians and Muslims, and Muslims from the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile regions, fought shoulder to shoulder against their oppressors. So there should be no problem for the two races and religious groups to work together, provided justice and equality is recognized and observed for all.

Are you fearful of being the target of reprisals in Sudan, especially since you have spoken of how BATC was persecuted?

Not at all. Jesus asked us to speak the truth, and the truth will set you free. All that I have spoken is the truth. And if I am victimized for speaking the truth, I am ready to suffer for it.