

Investing in Sudan: Space for healing

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [April 21, 2009](#) issue

“What would you say to someone who is hesitant to invest in Sudan’s schools or health clinics given the likelihood that violence will return to Sudan?” My colleague was addressing Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church of Sudan during a Lambeth roundtable on the church’s needs in his country. Archbishop Deng replied, “It is only by building schools and health clinics and supporting sustainable agriculture that we will have a chance that peace will come at last in Sudan.”

My colleague expressed what many of us were thinking. We worry about investing in infrastructure that may be destroyed by the violence of militias; we wanted reassurances. Yet Deng’s response was compelling. He pointed to the significance of visible institutions that form and support Christian leadership and care, thus bearing witness to God’s healing, redemptive love. He knows his people need them.

I found my heart breaking as I talked with Sudanese leaders who told stories of recurrent violence and of battalions mobilizing in violation of the fragile peace agreement. Would elections be held as planned? What would make the most sense in the face of so much violence?

I thought about Deng’s witness and his leadership team in Sudan. They know what is at stake, and they are committed to education, to agriculture, to health clinics—and to working on their interrelations. I could not help contrasting his gentle grace (a gentleness made all the more impressive by his imposing physical presence) with the vicious hostility of the militias.

That contrast was reinforced when I saw a performance of my favorite musical, *Les Misérables*, while in London. The contrast between those committed to violence—like Javert and the young revolutionaries—and the gentle grace of Jean Valjean resonated in new ways after my conversations about Sudan. Could it be that gentle grace is more important and powerful than the most vicious and violent militias?

Les Mis concludes: “Will you join in our crusade? / Who will be strong and stand with me? / Somewhere beyond the barricade is there a world you long to see? / Do you

hear the people sing? / Say, do you hear the distant drums? / It is the future that they bring / when tomorrow comes!" Deng longs to see a world beyond the barricades. He can hear the people sing, and he works and lives and prays that tomorrow will come through their witness to a message of hope.

On my flight home from London I read *Cutting for Stone*, a novel set in a mission hospital in Ethiopia. I had heard the author, Abraham Verghese, interviewed on the radio, and was intrigued by what he'd said about the practice of medicine as a calling. Toward the end of this novel I discovered a startling juxtaposition of revolutionary violence and a vocation of healing.

Several Ethiopian characters in the novel become part of revolutions, among them the narrator's childhood girlfriend and a military leader connected to the mission hospital. As readers we sympathize with the human plight of suffering, poverty and injustice that leads to desire for revolution, although we are not surprised to discover that the revolutions end badly for those involved.

Narrator Marion Stone experiences suffering as an Ethiopian, and eventually has to flee to the United States because he is mistakenly presumed to be an Eritrean terrorist (or at least a sympathizer) because of connections to his childhood friend. Then, for the sake of his vocation as a physician, he returns to Ethiopia—still in the midst of struggles—to serve as a physician at the same mission hospital in whose environs he was raised.

Stone describes his vocation as follows: "We come unbidden into this life, and if we are lucky we find a purpose beyond starvation, misery, and early death which, lest we forget, is the common lot. I grew up and I found my purpose and it was to become a physician. My intent wasn't to save the world as much as to heal myself. Few doctors will admit this, certainly not young ones, but subconsciously, in entering the profession, we must believe that ministering to others will heal our woundedness. And it can. But it can also deepen the wound."

At the end of the novel, it is clear that Stone's wounds are healing and that he is an agent of healing. He conveys the gentle grace that one longs for in a physician. His commitment to the mission hospital is similar to Deng's commitment to start health clinics and schools—institutional signs of the gospel bearing witness through healing, forgiveness and a sense of new life. Indeed, the Catholics who founded the mission hospital in *Cutting for Stone* undertook a risky venture to create space for healing; they made Stone's vocation possible.