

# After seminary, `Lost Boy' headed back to Sudan

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (RNS) It has been more than two decades since Deng Alier fled war in his homeland. Now, armed with a master's degree in educational ministry, the former "Lost Boy" is ready to find his way back to Sudan.

Alier, Deborah Makuei and Rebecca Deng were among 63 students graduating last week (May 6) from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary.

"This is a time to thank people who have made a difference in my life," said Alier, 28. "This is the moment they've been praying for me."

Alier, Makuei and Deng began their studies three years ago free of charge when the seminary launched a program to inject young, educated Christian leaders into the country torn by civil war.

Deng, who plans to marry in June, will receive her master's of arts in ministry leadership, said John VerBerkmoes, the seminary's vice president and academic dean.

Makuei, 26, who came to the U.S. in 2000 through Bethany Christian Services, is graduating with a master's degree in counseling. She is interning at Bethany and looking for a job here, with plans to counsel women in Sudan.

"For me to go there, that will encourage young girls to have the passion for going to school," Makuei said. A member of South Sudan's largest tribe, the Dinkas, Makuei graduated from East Grand Rapids High School and Albion College.

"I can tell them, `I don't have to get married when I'm 12 years old,'" she said. "Going here (to seminary) has set me up really well."

The students spent a semester in Sudan through the seminary and will have their undergraduate loans repaid as they return to work there with their master's degrees. In July, the southern part of Sudan where the students lived will become independent from the northern, Muslim part of the country.

"From the beginning, we saw it as an opportunity to invest in the lives of students that had tremendous passion for their homeland," VerBerkmoes said.

Living in the United States, Alier said he has learned that different people can live in the same place and get along. Seminary education has given him a deeper understanding of biblical principles that can help Sudanese Christians live in harmony with "our Muslim brothers," he said.

A Dinka who also has a degree from Western Michigan University and works at Walmart, Alier taught at Gideon Theological School in 2009 during the semester in Sudan and now plans to teach there with a mission agency.

"We are so blessed to be here," Alier said. "Now we have transformed ourselves. I think God will use us to transform Sudan in a positive way."