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The JPRC Juba Conference



Thursday 2nd – Saturday 4th September 2010

From 2-4 September 2010, the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission (JPRC) of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan in partnership with Trinity Parish Wall Street, New York, held their Juba Conference, a conference bringing together traditional and government leaders at community level, members of the clergy and Mothers' Union representatives from Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei and Upper Nile States at the ECS Guesthouse to discuss today's pressing issues.

With an average turn out of 85 for each day, those gathered were privileged to hear presentations, generally on CPA Implementation and the Referendum, from a number of presenters including representatives from the New Sudan Council for Islamic Affairs, the Senior Legal Advisor to the Assessment and Evaluation Commission, the Deputy Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator of the UN in Sudan, Juba University's Assistant Professor for Peace and Development Studies and PACT Sudan's Country Director.

The presenters spoke on a number of different topics ranging from how indigenous institutions and international organisations can better work together, CPA implementation to date, and plans for the post-Referendum period. The Church and the audience made the most of their time with the different presenters by asking pertinent questions including how helpful (or unhelpful) Non-Governmental Organisations are in contributing to peace-building efforts and development in southern Sudan. It was clearly an opportunity for the audience to ask the kind of general questions that the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), for one reason or another, had failed to answer over the last five and a half years.

The Government representatives ranged from the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Presidential Advisor for Religious Affairs, the SPLM Secretary for Political Affairs and Mobilisation, and the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs in Central Equatoria State. Neither were they spared difficult questions from the audience when they were questioned and questioned again on the actions of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) in different parts of Sudan and SPLM-NCP relations.

The list of speakers was undoubtedly impressive but what certainly impressed the most was the nature of the conference, the harmonised and honest forum in which individuals irrespective of tribal, lingual, cultural or religious differences could dialogue. This was evident from the balance of the listed presentations. The Chairman of the JPRC, Rt. Rev. Micah Leila Dawiidi, gave one of the opening addresses on the role and importance of the Church in Sudan and the JPRC in particular in fostering stability over the coming months. The Muslim contingent rounded up the presentations with a talk explaining the nature of Islam, and Muslim-Christian relations as they are and as they should be in southern Sudan. Perhaps the fact that the event was organised by the Church somehow helped to create an environment conducive to an honest and open dialogue. Perhaps also, it was indicative of a willingness amongst many, if not most, southern Sudanese to talk about issues affecting them and come to peaceful solutions. Suppositions aside, the remarkable political maturity of southern Sudanese despite extremely limited exposure to democratic processes shows a side of the Sudanese character that is still overshadowed by a persistent violence, hunger and illiteracy, but that nevertheless subsists.

Many topics and discussions were packed into the three days giving the participants a taste of the kind of popular event that one expects to see more of, as the Referendum gets closer. The concluding comments from the audience, particularly endorsing further conferences in elsewhere and commending the JPRC for their contribution to civil education on CPA and Referendum, denote the essence of the conference on the whole. We believe such comments mandate the JPRC to create awareness in other parts of the country. We give a special thanks to Trinity Parish Wall Street and their representatives at the conference, Rev. Canon Benjamin Lubega and Rev. Canon James Calloway for their continued support, guidance and fellowship without which this conference would not have been possible.

Conferences Past and Potential Conferences to Come

The ECS has already conducted conferences and forums in Juba, Twic East, and Rumbek for Western Equatoria and Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal on issues from conflict resolution, the roles and actions of civil based institutions and government, and on Referendum. However, this still leaves the states of Unity and Warrap not to mention the northern states that the JPRC need to reach to fulfil its goal of civil education across the Sudan at a time crucial to the whole nation. The JPRC has divided the Sudan into six zones, which will allow for clearer coordination of further efforts to educate civil society and create awareness on Referendum. The JPRC are very encouraged by the enthused responses from participants. Therefore, we appeal to our partners to keep the JPRC and its programmes in their prayers and if possible, to make a financial contribution towards the costs of further conferences and activities.

As said by one of the presenters, 'Where the Church leads, others will follow'. A participant also highlighted that, 'People should be talking about the referendum in their own homes'. The JPRC believe both to be true and will endeavour to see both of these statements fulfilled in tandem with the efforts of the Government and other organisations to ensure that our vision of a free and fair Referendum comes to pass. For further information on the conferences or to support the work the JPRC does please contact Rev. Nelson Fitch on peace@sudan.anglican.org or Rebecca Coleman on international@sudan.anglican.org

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