

# Sudan peace, advocacy are top priorities for U.S. Episcopalians

## American Friends visit congressional offices, call for urgent action

By Matthew Davies, September 11, 2009



[Episcopal News Service] Efforts to build up partnerships with the [Episcopal Church of Sudan](#) (ECS) and advocacy for Africa's largest country have been bolstered in recent months with U.S. Episcopalians recognizing the growing urgency to take action and ensure that the fragile peace agreement doesn't collapse and plunge the country back into civil war.

Among recent efforts by Episcopalians that support a lasting peace in Sudan are two resolutions passed by the 76th General Convention, an advocacy letter from 92 bishops to President Barack Obama, and a [joint letter](#) by Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Sudan Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Most recently, the [American Friends of the Episcopal Church of Sudan](#) hosted a September 10 symposium in Washington, D.C. that brought together its board members, advocacy experts and Episcopal Church leaders to gain a fuller understanding of the challenges in securing peace in Sudan and to strategize on the most appropriate steps for action.

During the afternoon, the group of 35 visited congressional offices and delivered an urgent message about the faltering nature of the Sudan's [Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) (CPA) and the need for senators and representatives to act immediately.

Sudan's 20-year civil war, which claimed more than 2 million lives and displaced about 7 million people, came to an end in January 2005 when the CPA was signed by the two warring parties -- the Government of Sudan (GoS) in the north and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the south.

Despite initial hopes for the success of the peace agreement, southern Sudanese leaders have been frustrated by the northern government's refusal to live into its major terms, including sharing oil revenues and drawing fair borders.

Sudan is scheduled to hold its first democratic elections in 24 years in February 2010, and a 2011 referendum will give southerners the opportunity to determine whether to secede from the north or remain a unified country.

In their letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jefferts Schori and Deng emphasized the need for a fair and transparent election and for resources to support an infrastructure and oversight capacity to ensure that this happens.

At its September 10 meeting, AFRECS agreed that its main advocacy positions for advancing peace in Sudan are to uphold the integrity and effective implementation of the CPA; enhance the U.N. peacekeeping presence and mandate; support procedures for fair elections; and continue to rebuild the infrastructure of southern Sudan and provide essential services to its people.

During their visits on Capitol Hill, the group called for congressional appropriations to supply sufficient funds "to ensure that the forthcoming elections reach all parts of Sudan and are carefully monitored to ensure their fairness," said Richard Parkins, AFRECS executive director.

Virginia Congressman Jim Moran, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, agreed to send a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton requesting an assessment of what resources might be needed to mount an effective election monitoring program.

The group also encouraged the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration to meet with Archbishop Deng when next visiting the country "to understand more fully the concerns of the ECS about the current crisis facing Sudan and to become aware of the potential of the ECS through its presence throughout Sudan to be a resource in enhancing the credibility of the 2010 elections," said Parkins. With four million Episcopalians, the ECS is the largest civil society institution in Sudan.

A delegation from the [Diocese of Southwestern Virginia](#) met with Congressman Tom Perriello of Virginia's fifth district and learned of his keen interest in Sudan, Parkins said. Perriello recommended to the AFRECS group that his leadership be sought in reviving a Sudan caucus as a way of keeping the country's peace issues before Congress.

Parkins said the AFRECS members and other Episcopal colleagues who spent time on Capitol Hill "felt encouraged that their message was heard but that sustained follow up was needed. One advocate noted that a single or occasional visit to a congressperson would not mean much unless reinforced with frequent messages from constituents about what needed to happen to make peace in Sudan a reality."

Other areas of major concern in Sudan include escalating tribal conflict and increased violence inflicted by the Lord's Resistance Army, a Ugandan rebel organization whose soldiers are prolonging a two-decades-long terrorist campaign gruesomely marked by widespread massacres

and child abductions. "The convergence of all these developments adds to the urgency of a global response to stem the tide toward another devastating humanitarian crisis," said Parkins.

The increased violence was addressed in a recent statement from Deng in which he called on the Government of Southern Sudan and the international community "to act swiftly" to prevent further attacks such as those that left more than 40 dead and many more wounded in Twic East County, Jonglei State, on August 28.

Among those killed were the Venerable Joseph Mabior Garang, "who was shot at the altar of the church in Wernyol during a service of Morning Prayer," according to a [statement](#) from Deng that was posted on the ECS website.

Deng cited similar violence in a letter to Jefferts Schori and the Episcopal Church ahead of its 76th General Convention. He also underscored the importance of partnerships between ECS and the U.S.-based Episcopal Church.

General Convention addressed the fragile situation in Sudan with [Resolution A033](#), urging "renewed international commitment to the successful political implementation" of the CPA and "increased and better-coordinated economic-development and investment efforts ... in southern Sudan."

Deng was welcomed as an international guest at the 76th General Convention, which in Resolution A033 also urged "continued advocacy and prayer from all Episcopalians for peace with justice in the Sudan." General Convention specifically called for "internationally coordinated efforts to care for and resettle the several million refugees and persons who have been displaced internally as a consequence of the Sudan's long-running conflicts."

Meanwhile, a separate conflict in the Darfur region of western Sudan has claimed more than 400,000 lives, according to the Coalition for International Justice.

The General Convention resolution issued a "condemnation of all violence perpetrated against refugees and [internally displaced people], specifically including the rape of women and girls in Darfur and elsewhere."

The Episcopal Church has long-standing partnerships with the Sudanese church through companion diocese relationships, Episcopal Relief and Development programs and the advocacy work of the Office of Government Relations. Current companion relationships include Albany (New York) with the Province of Sudan, Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) with Kajo Keji, Chicago with Renk, Indianapolis with Bor, Missouri with Lui, Southwestern Virginia with the Province of Sudan, and Virginia with the Province of Sudan.

"Our people have been uplifted by seeing the courage and faithfulness of our Sudanese brothers and sisters in great tribulation and by being asked to work together with them for the Gospel in a place where the Gospel's commands -- and life in general -- are tough," said Russell Randle, AFRECS board member and a General Convention deputy from the Diocese of Virginia.

"Our Sudanese work has been a point of unity and focus in a difficult decade," said Randle, noting that such relationships not only form friendships but also find bishops, clergy and laity, "actively working together with partners in Sudan to translate the Bible into native languages, to drill wells, build schools, clinics, and a cathedral, train new clergy, relieve famines when they occur, and witness to the power of the Gospel together."

In an effort to deepen and grow those relationships, Jennifer Ernst of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia was recently [appointed](#) as the new coordinator of partnerships for ECS.

"The Southern Sudanese Christians have a tried and true faith. They trust God with their very lives each and every day and there is no doubt that all blessings come from Him," said Ernst, a lifelong Episcopalian who began volunteering with the Sudanese refugee community in 1999. "Their hospitality is unlike anything I have ever experienced: they graciously give you the best, and oftentimes all, that they have. The Sudanese Christians have enriched my life immeasurably."

Ernst founded [Hope for Humanity Inc.](#) and has raised \$700,000 to support a variety of education projects in Sudan. In her new role, she will bridge the lines of communication between the ECS and its partners and will serve as an initial point of U.S. contact for the ECS provincial office and Deng's requests and concerns.

In another resolution ([D007](#)), submitted by Randle, General Convention urged each diocese in the Episcopal Church "to consider ... entry into a companion diocese relationship or other covenant-based link relationship with a diocese in the Episcopal Church of Sudan ... as a means ... to further the cause of peace in Sudan."

General Convention also requested the Presiding Bishop "to designate, after consultation with other interested denominations, a period of several weeks in 2010 as a Season of Prayer for peace in Sudan, where our churches are urged to include prayer for peace in Sudan in each public liturgy, and that such Season of Prayer culminate in a National Day of Prayer for peace in Sudan, including the celebration of relationships by TEC dioceses and churches with the ECS."

Following General Convention, Deng remained in the U.S. to meet with colleagues and potential partners and to speak about the urgent situation in Sudan at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington, D.C.

Randle, a senior partner at [Patton Boggs](#), a public policy and lobbying firm that hosted the AFRECS event, said: "We hope we can avoid the outbreak of war and help our colleagues, who have persevered through much tribulation, to spread the Gospel in Sudan and to work to implement the Millennium Development Goals in one of the poorest nations on earth. Their enormous faith in the face of their tribulation has proven a great blessing to those of us who have seen it and worked with them. We hope more of our friends here can share in that blessing."

The AFRECS briefing included presentations from:

- Roger Winter, former U.S. Special Representative to Sudan and longtime advocate for the rights and welfare of the southern Sudanese;
- Bishop Joseph Garang of the Diocese of Renk, Episcopal Church of Sudan;
- Christina Hartman of the [National Democratic Institute](#);
- Buck Blanchard from the Diocese of Virginia; and
- Alexander Baumgarten, interim director of the Episcopal Church's [Office of Government Relations](#).

Winter, who worked closely with Episcopal priest and former Senator John Danforth in negotiating the CPA, provided a historical perspective on the peace agreement, its purposes and the factors now contributing to its possible demise.

He underscored that delaying the implementation of the CPA has been a deliberate tactic of the National Islamic Front, the dominating political party of the northern government, Parkins said. "He felt that such behavior was intentional and reflected the insincerity of the Khartoum government in seeing the peace and stability of the CPA realized."

Hartman described the work of NDI in supporting an extensive on-the-ground educational and public awareness effort to educate the people of Sudan about the elections, how to participate, and how to identify and report fraud that brought into question the honesty of the election process.

Garang offered an account of recent violence in his community and called on advocates to urge the U.S. government to address the importing of weapons which is feeding the violence by arming warring tribal factions in the country.

Blanchard, coordinator of World Mission for the Diocese of Virginia, has traveled extensively throughout Sudan to assess the needs of the various dioceses of the ECS. During the AFRECS symposium, he urged U.S. Episcopalians to visit Sudan and to use these visits as a way of developing new relationships with the ECS. Blanchard noted that at present about 26 dioceses lack a U.S. connection of any kind.

Commenting on the longstanding efforts of the Episcopal Church to advocate for peace in Sudan, Baumgarten assured the group that that priority would continue, even in the midst of the many other policy concerns. Baumgarten also acknowledged the challenges in getting congressional attention on Sudan, given the many major domestic and international issues now being handled by the Congress and the Obama administration.

He advised participants to be succinct and focused in presenting their action objectives and said that their attention on enhancing the credibility of the election process was a worthy goal which should resonate well with congressional offices.

"We have an obligation to speak out forcefully, to urge our government to take tangible steps to help preserve the peace," said Randle. "Like good queen Esther, we must not keep silence at such a time as this, for we may be placed here in order to speak up for our brothers and sisters in Sudan."

The American Friends will also continue to collaborate with international partners who are involved in similar advocacy work in Sudan, including the Church of England's Diocese of Salisbury, which has shared a partnership with the ECS for more than 36 years.

What can you do to help?

According to Randle, Episcopalians concerned about the impending outbreak of war in Sudan and their brothers and sisters there can do several things:

- Pray for peace in Sudan and for the church's efforts for peace there, and get your parish to do so as well. Resolution D007 provides for a season of prayer for peace in Sudan next year, but there is no reason to delay starting;
- Contact Richard Parkins, executive director at AFRECS, 3737 Seminary Road, Alexandria VA 22306, [parkinscr@gmail.com](mailto:parkinscr@gmail.com), and participate in AFRECS advocacy efforts for the U.S. government to work harder for peace in Sudan and to increase development assistance;
- Work with your diocese or parish to help set up a partnership with colleagues in the church in Sudan, as urged by Resolution D007, a partnership which might include support for Bible translation and literacy there, as well as various development projects which have so far included schools, well drilling, medical clinics, micro-finance, and similar efforts to empower the people in Sudan and to spread the Gospel.

Another way to support Sudan and its people is through Episcopal Relief and Development [here](#).