

Authored articles

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Read StoryLiz Walker in DarfurIn 2005, Liz Walker, Host and Executive Producer of "Sunday with Liz Walker," Linda Mason, and Gloria White Hammond visited Darfur Internally Displaced ...

Read StoryWe Walk by Faithby Cynthia Hymes BellCynthia Hymes Bell is a public health consultant in Boston, Mass. She is a graduate of Tufts and Yale Universities and is the wife of the Rev. Gerald E. Bell, pastor of Southern Baptist Church in Roxbury, Mass., an American Baptist congregation. She shares below an account of her moving experiences as part of a group that worked in southern Sudan for several days last summer to assist in ministering to women and children.Southern Sudan. We are going to die—we are right in the middle of a civil war! I was gripped by this reality every waking minute. I was 10,000 miles away from home and terrified on that first day of my arrival in Sudan. I knew about the war in the Sudan between the north and the south. I knew that slave raids had been targeting the women and children in the south, and I was aware that many had lost their lives in the country's civil war that spans almost 20 years. I knew my life was at risk. We arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, after more than 20 hours in the air. I was tired, but very excited. This was my first trip to Africa, the motherland, the land of my ancestors. We were greeted at the airport in Kenya by Jimmy, who served as our host and guide for the first leg of the journey. Jimmy worked for the charter airline that would transport the delegation from Nairobi to Sudan. Christian Solidarity International (CSI) had chartered a plane and made all of the arrangements for our trip. Jimmy loaded our luggage into his jeep then drove us to a small clubhouse near the charter airstrip. It was at the clubhouse that I met Tanya and her mother, Harriet, the pilot and owner of the 12-passenger airplane that would take us to Sudan. Tanya and Jimmy gave us an update on what was happening in Sudan. Tanya informed us that the militias had recently bombed various areas in Gogrial County. Malwal Kon was one of the areas hit by a bomb one week prior to our arrival. This was disappointing news. It meant that the Western Upper Nile region, which was one of the areas where we wanted to meet with Sudanese women leaders, was now off limits. Fighting in this area had intensified and our delegation would be at risk. Tanya told us a story about a little old Dinka man in Malwal Kon who always sat under the trees in the center of town, singing and playing an instrument. Everyone who visits the village knows him. Several days after the bombing, Harriet had to transport some supplies into Malwal Kon by airplane. During this particular trip she didn't see the little man that normally sat under the trees in the center of the village. She didn't hear anyone singing or playing music. All she saw were the fragments of yellow fabric that represented the shirt he always wore swinging on the limbs of the trees. When the bomb exploded in the village it killed him and five other people. Fear spread like ether throughout the room. The room was silent. Everyone's eyes glazed over. Pat, one of the members of the group My Sister's Keeper, broke the silence. She asked Tanya, "Are we at risk of being killed in the areas we will be traveling?" Tanya looked at Pat in bewilderment. "Yes," she replied. "Didn't you know that before you left America?" I felt my own heart race. For the first time in my life I truly understood what fear feels like. I just wanted to help the people of southern Sudan. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of the Sudanese people—but I did not want to die! As I presented my passport and plane ticket for transit into Sudan my hands shook uncontrollably. The reality of the war, the threat to my life it represented and the very real possibility that I could be killed by a bomb or shot by a soldier hit me hard. I was paralyzed and could not move. My body trembled with fear. The muscles in my upper thigh trembled so rapidly that I thought my legs would give out from underneath me. I didn't want to die, but I knew I couldn't turn back. God had been very clear. Second Corinthians 5:7 had been my focus up to this juncture: "We walk by faith, not by sight." The plan had not changed. Sudan is Africa's largest and poorest country and it is shared by three religions. Northern Sudan is predominately Islam while the south follows tribal religions and Christian beliefs. For the past two decades the government in Khartoum has been targeting African villages in the south with slave raids. Armed militias bomb and attack villages, burn churches, destroy the crops, shoot the men and abduct women and children. Sudan has become a country divided by hatred. Over the past two decades more than two million people have been killed and four million have been displaced by the civil war between the north and south. It is estimated that approximately 50% of the deaths are due to the war, 35% from hunger and 15% from disease. I arrived in Sudan the week of the 4th of July as part of a rescue mission co-sponsored by the Swiss-based human rights group Christian Solidarity International (CSI) and the Boston-based American Anti-Slavery Group. I went with a delegation of Boston women from the human rights group My Sister's Keeper. We were in Sudan four days. We met with the women leaders in southern Sudan's war-torn communities and assisted CSI in the liberation of 1,116 slave women and children. Our goals were to help CSI liberate women and children from slavery; to learn from village women how American women can help facilitate the reintegration of the former slave women and children back into their villages; and to identify ways to support local women in rebuilding the infrastructures of their communities. It took three additional hours after an already exhausting journey to fly from Nairobi to the Wunrok, Sudan. After we landed in Wunrok the plane was met by CSI representatives John Eibner and Gunnar Wiebalck, who would accompany our delegation. Mangok was chosen by CSI as the primary base for the mission and would be our target destination. John informed the delegation that we would not be staying in Wunrok as initially planned. The area was not safe due to the escalating war. He instructed the delegation to re-board the plane quickly so that we could arrive at the next campsite before dark. We did so and headed for a town called Panliet, arriving there approximately 90 minutes before sundown. Panliet was a desolate and barren place. People were wandering, searching for family members who might have been captured by the militia and taken to the north, killed or displaced. Most of the children were nude or dressed in clothing that was worn and unclean. I was fascinated by their warm natures and how readily they smiled. Big beautiful smiles. One would think that they didn't have a care in the world. When we disembarked

the plane in Panliet we were greeted by a group of seven Dinka men. Four of them were injured in the recent attack on Gogrial County and needed immediate medical attention. The 12-passenger plane that we arrived on was their only hope for obtaining medical treatment. The abrupt changes in plan and presence of the injured men were all indications that the war had taken on a more aggressive presence, and we had landed directly in the middle of it. Nights are long and very dark in southern Sudan. The dark night and long distance to the nearest medical facility were high risk factors for air travel. The pilot had to inform the group of Dinka men that she could not transport the wounded for treatment until the next day. It rained heavily that night leaving the airstrip wet and muddy. The heavy accumulation of mud on the tires of the airplane created extra weight, which made it difficult for the airplane to take off the next day. The pilot could only transport two passengers, the most critically injured—a man with a gunshot wound to the throat and another who had been shot in the arm. Take one leave one. This situation sent chills down my spine and represented the type of choices people in this area of the world must make every single day. We traveled by truck through the thick mud and knee-deep water from Panliet to Mangok. Mangok would be where the first slave redemption would take place. CSI works through men known as Arab slave retrievers to bring slaves back from the north. Working in small networks and in association with black Sudanese community leaders, they deliver groups of slaves from bondage in the north to CSI representatives, as part of a negotiated exchange. Since its inception in 1995, Christian Solidarity International has helped redeem over 70,000 southern Sudanese slaves through its "Underground Railroad Program." We hiked through the fields and villages not knowing what direction we were headed or what to expect. I had a vision in my head based on stories I had been told about the slave redemption process, but nothing on this earth could have prepared me for what I experienced next. After walking approximately two miles we turned the corner and directly in front of me sat more than 500 women and children who had been returned from bondage in the north to this place in the woods where CSI would pay for each one to go free. They sat clustered row after row, woman after woman, child, after child. I looked into the faces of frail, very dark black women and children whose eyes were blank with hunger, some dull and vacant with pain. We learned through interviews and discussions with the leaders that many of the women had been repeatedly raped, violently beaten and made to suffer the most unimaginable pain. Many of the women had thick, herniated scars, the result of mutilation committed by their captors. I held their malnourished babies in my arms and wondered how a mother could nurse her child when she herself was starving. I was so moved by what I saw and experienced that I gave the shirt off my back and every expendable item that I brought with me—baby wipes, slippers, my night gown, canned foods, bread and granola bars, dried fruits and vegetables. Although I had three days left the only food I kept for myself was a bag of rice cakes and a bottle of water. I didn't have the resources at my disposal to feed every one, but I did what I could, and I also asked other members of the delegation to give. Armed men guarded our camp that night. No one talked about them directly, but I imagined they were there for two obvious reasons. First, after the redemption our location was known throughout the villages. Second, another redemption would take place the following day, and I was certain CSI had a large sum of money in their possession to purchase more slaves. The armed guards looked more like adolescent boys in tattered street clothing playing with toy guns than soldiers. A rebel war is tricky: I question if these boy soldiers would protect me or shoot me. I was a stranger in a foreign land. How was I to know the enemy from the protector? It was so intimidating. Clearly, I could not put my faith in them. I had to stay in prayer and allow God to guide me through this process. The next morning I heard the sound of gunshots from a distance. No one appeared concerned about it but me. Apparently there was not an immediate cause for concern, so I did not panic. Day three was the 4th of July. While America was celebrating its independence, I was in Sudan with Christian Solidarity International redeeming southern Sudanese slaves. I was given an opportunity to address the group and I spoke to them about hope and the love of God. The names of each slave was verified and compared to those on the redemption list. Next each slave was photographed and fingerprinted. On that day 600 additional people were bought out of slavery. The reaction by the group varied. It was during this stage of the redemption process that I witnessed the first smiles. Some danced with joy and others walked away quietly to begin their search for family members. The price of each redeemed slave was equivalent to the local price of a goat or two. Slave retrievers were paid \$33 per slave (in the form of Sudanese pounds)—a mere 33 U.S. dollars per human life. We spent our final day in Malwal Kon. I was very happy that we had reached the end of our mission. I was physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally exhausted. The aircraft would be transporting 12 passengers (a very heavy load) out of Sudan the next day and Malwal Kon was the closest and most durable airstrip in the region. There were foxholes throughout the large village, evidence that this was a risky place to live. Malwal Kon was the village where the old Dinka man with the yellow shirt was killed by the explosion from an enemy bomb. I would have been happier sleeping in a swamp than camping in that village. But I didn't have a choice. God knows what is best. We were shown the area where the bomb hit and the subsequent destruction it caused. This experience sent chills throughout my body. I was sensitive to every passing sound that night. We asked the village women what we could do to help. The initial response, unbelievably, was the same every time: "Thank you for coming. Your presence matters most!" My Sister's Keeper will respond to our experience by purchasing a grinding mill, soap-making supplies and sewing machines for designated villages. These items have been identified by southern Sudanese women leaders as vital tools to encourage self-reliance and micro-economic development. The long-term plan will include initiating schools and health facilities. The degradation and human misery I witnessed in southern Sudan is inexcusable. So many of the villages have been destroyed and many have been abandoned due to war. So many people have been forgotten and abandoned. Clearly the world community does not care if these people live or die. Personally I will never forget the story about the old Dinka man and the fragments of yellow shirt swinging on the limbs of the trees, or the initial sight of 500 slaves sitting under the trees awaiting freedom.