

Working to Build Our part of the Country: Southern Sudan – Bishop Anthony Poggo

The book of Nehemiah resembles what we are going through. It tells the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. God used a man with vision and determination to do the job. Nehemiah continued his “impossible” task in spite of tremendous opposition. In rebuilding Southern Sudan perhaps the greatest dangers lie inside each one of us. We are the people of the Southern Sudan. Are we ready to do the work?

As a church we have a role in encouraging our people to develop responsive hearts to the needs we see all around us. If each one only helps themselves and builds the “wall” right next to their own life, we will soon all see a big change.

We have huge challenges before us. Poor health care, lack of pure water, poverty of education, with our natural resources not being used for the benefit of all the people.

In my consideration of why we are where we are, I have thought of a number of weaknesses in us, things of a negative nature that are holding us back from taking the lead and changing our own situation. We have to face the reality about ourselves if we really want to see change with a better future for the generations to come.

For example, (and we’ll see more on this below), we have to develop what we can call the “doctrine of work”. It is clearly stated for us in the book of Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians and others to work and to earn their own living, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10. It is not acceptable to depend on others for our food. I cannot understand how many young men stay the day in a relative’s home playing games or just laying on the bed, while their fathers are out working hard to support their families. We should feel ashamed of this! Some people are misusing and taking advantage of the welcoming generosity that characterises our people.

This is not the place for a chapter by chapter study from Nehemiah. We will extract what I consider relevant challenges to all Sudanese Christians today. Bible references are from Nehemiah unless stated otherwise.

Start from the Place You find Yourself In

If you are not in the ideal place to start rebuilding, don't worry. God knows where you are. When God was about to use one man to lead a project rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and bring social, economic and spiritual reform, He knew where to find him! Nehemiah was a man of spiritual integrity, human concern and faith in God. That was what counted – not where he physically was.

Nehemiah did not just feel sorry for himself! He was a refugee 1:1, but that did not stop God using him. While living and working in Susa, a luxurious royal city in modern day south-west Iran, Nehemiah learned of the deplorable condition of the returned exiles, 1:3. Our Lord Jesus was a refugee early in his life, Matthew 2:13-23. God looks for His people everywhere and He brings them to where He plans to use them.

Nehemiah made the best he could of his present life. The king could obviously trust him, 1:11. God uses people He can trust.

Jerusalem was a broken city 1:3. Today (2008) we know in Southern Sudan that many places are still in ruins due to the recently ended war. For example, Kajo-Keji is in ruins. Nehemiah could have just ignored the plight of his people. He was a trusted worker. He was secure working in State House. But he was not selfish. He talked, wept and mourned before God about the situation, 1:4-11. He was concerned for God's cause. A pastor needs to have God-given concern for his flock. That is why he is called a "shepherd", Acts 20:28. God's cause is for the lost to be brought to Him, and that believers should keep on living holy and useful lives.

Nehemiah prayed, 1:5-11; 2:4; 4:9. Prayer and bible reading are two important tools for Christian growth. They are essential for all Christians including leaders. Jesus told us to ask, to seek and to

knock the doors in prayer, Luke 11:9-10. Good prayer is a two-way conversation. If I visited you for two hours and I was the only one who spoke, something would be wrong. Pray with your Bible open. As Nehemiah shared with God what he understood, God put His vision into Nehemiah's heart. Listen to God where you are and learn what He wants from you.

Act on Your God-given Concern

Our concerns should be put into practice. There is no point in only talking! Because Nehemiah acted, the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt. God has given us a measure of peace in Sudan. We need to do God's work. We must return from "exile" and do the work God has called us to do. We must show courage and practicality in dealing with government authority, 2:7-8.

Patience, planning and participation are keys to being useful to God. God's timing is always the right timing, 2:11. People God moves to join a work make a good team, 2:17-18. Use your skills in organising and motivating other people, chapter 3. Prayer and hard work go hand in hand, 4:6,9.

Work Hard

For Sudan to catch up with the rest of the world in development, we will need to work extra hard. In our country and in church we need to have a change of attitude. We must see work as part of our God-given responsibility and not a curse, Genesis 2:15; Exodus 20:9; Ecclesiastes 5:18-19. Every individual has a role and can usefully contribute to the development of Sudan. We often think the government should do everything for us. The war has ended but we have another battle to fight, against ignorance, poverty and disease. We all have to work hard at this. A major issue we face is laziness.

The Bible encourages hard work. Any able person who does not work should not eat, 2 Thessalonians 3:10. Laziness is the mother of poverty. In the old southern Sudan, offices used to work from 7:30 am to 2:00 pm. One change we need to consider in the New Sudan is an increase in hours from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, with one-hour lunch break, like most countries. Others argue that high temperatures in Sudan, mean we need shorter working plus rest during the hottest part

of the day. If this is scientifically proven, we could make the working hours from 7:30am to 12:30pm, then a two-hour break, with work again from 2:30 pm to 5:30 pm. This does inconvenience workers who stay far from their places of work.

In a big soccer match there are usually spectators as well as team players. In our work, all Christians should be on the field working. Christians should not be spectators. Non-Christians are the ones who watch. They should see the difference Jesus Christ makes to our work ethic.

Keep to time

Another attitude to purge is the wrong use of “Sudan local time”. The understanding of “local” in many African contexts is “something that is worthless”. The Oxford Dictionary defines local as *“belonging to or connected with the particular place or area that you are talking about”*. For example, a local farmer is a farmer from a particular area, not a second-class farmer! “Sudan local time” means time that applies to Sudan in contrast to East African Standard time that applies elsewhere. In Yambio I heard people refer to “standard time”. An Across colleague said people in Yambio used it to refer to East African time then one hour different from Sudan. We must use our God-given time, 24 hours in each day, properly.

Work at keeping time. The idea that the more senior a person is the more he should delay a function to show his importance, will never help us develop our nation. When we are invited for a function that starts at 9:00am, do not leave your house at the time the function should start! Leave *to be there* at 9.00am. Catch up with the rest of the world in the small things and the bigger things will follow !

Play your Role

If we want to build our nation, we have to make our individual contributions to the work. God will not send us angels to do it miraculously. He will use you and me as His builders. He has given us talents to use in these roles. Southern Sudan needs more servant leaders and fewer bosses. Most governments refer to their workers as civil “servants”. This is similar to the Biblical view on

Christian conduct. Jesus expects people who want to be great in the kingdom to be “servers” or “servants of all”, Matthew 20:25-28, Ephesians 4:15-16. In today’s dictionary “servant” means “one who is employed to work for another”.¹

Avoid Corruption

The new government of Southern Sudan along with everyone of us faces a challenge to put into place mechanisms guarding against the abuse and mismanagement of resources. Transparency must be encouraged in all dealings. Individuals, the churches, Non Governmental Organisations and all sectors of society must be 100% honest. During earlier struggles, one leader was vocal in criticising the government of that day. He accused it of abetting corruption. When the Liberation Movement took over, this same person was appointed to a senior position. After his appointment, he became quiet. He did not criticise his colleagues who were involved in corrupt practices. When asked why, he hid behind his tradition. He said that according to his culture it is bad manners to be talking while one is “eating”. Our Christianity must come before our tradition, 1 Peter 2:12.

Focus on God not your situation

You will face different opposition, challenges and problems. Do not despair, complain or curse! Commit yourself to God and carry on the God-given work. “We continued to work”, 4:21, shows Nehemiah was fully working involved with his team. Leaders are not exempt from hard work! Keep yourself and your people focused on God, 4:14.

A leader should expect opposition. This is what I suggest to do. Continue the work. Trust God to protect people and reputations. Do not look back, look to God. Pray continually. Nehemiah’s confidence was in God, 4:20. Ours should be too!

¹ English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

Our challenges include lack of funds and lack of human resources. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (C.P.A.) faces challenges, including deliberate attempts to delay implementation and slow delivery of services. Many Southern Sudanese are expecting to see the benefits of the C.P.A. by now, in services like health and education. Instead, the outbreaks of cholera and meningitis show a lot remains to be done in the health sector. Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes", Mark 9:23. "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God", Mark 10:27. God is in charge, Romans 13:1.

Care for the poor

Nehemiah 5 describes an economic crisis, resulting in landlessness and shortages of food. It could be Southern Sudan today! Landowners were compelled to mortgage their properties to survive. Others were forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates. Some even sold their children into slavery.

National and local taxes must be fairly raised and the revenues evenly distributed. Christians must follow Nehemiah's example and lead from the front, 5:14-19. Live and work in the fear of the Lord. Jesus said we must pay our taxes, Matthew 22:15-22. Our treasure is not our money. Our treasure is in heaven, not on earth, Matthew 6:19-21, 33.

What is the role of a Christian in Sudan faced with exploitation, corruption and injustice? We live by biblical principles. We must practise our faith in everything we do. If God calls us to political leadership, positively influence community decision-making. Christian politicians can make tremendously positive contributions to society because of their Christian convictions. We can influence communities – like salt permeates and preserves food, and like light drives away darkness, Matthew 5:13-16.

It is important that Christian ministry is physical and spiritual. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus is saying his ministry is holistic, aimed at physical *and* spiritual needs. We cannot go and preach the Good News of Jesus then leave a person to die due to lack of food or an unjust prison sentence. Our

faith must be shown in our good works, James 2:14-18. This may mean campaigning for those who are wrongly arrested. It may mean pressurising governments that mistreat people. This is not primarily politics but a vital part of Christian mission.

Use Spiritual Discernment

A false prophet was hired to discredit Nehemiah, 6:10-13. We must learn to discern who each message comes from, God or Satan. We must learn the practical call of our Father from day to day. We must test every option we are offered against the Word of God so that we avoid being deceived, 1 John 2:4-6, Matthew 7:15-23; 2 Peter 2:1-3.

Avoid Tribalism and Nepotism

Another disease affecting most African countries is nepotism – favouritism shown to relatives or close friends by those in power or influence – also seen in tribalism. A saying often used to justify favouritism is, “blood is thicker than water”. There have been complaints about some appointments made by State governments and the Government of Southern Sudan. Civil service and political appointments must be merited. Even in church it is wrong to bring people on to committees simply because they are related. The right gifted and qualified person must have the right job. Joseph was put in charge of Egypt, Genesis 41:41. Daniel’s godly standards earmarked him to rule the Babylonian and Mede kingdom, Daniel 6:3. Holy Spirit filled wise people administered the early church’s charity donations, Acts 6:3.

Nehemiah put his brother Hanani in charge of Jerusalem. Hanani was “a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do”, 7:2. He was also concerned for the affairs of the nation, 1:2. His character – not his family relationship – made this a good appointment.

Be Where God Wants You

One of the difficult decisions that many Southern Sudanese refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (I.D.P.’s) have to make is when to return to their home of origin. Many refugees and

I.D.P.'s are moving already. Others will consider returning only when basic services like schools and healthcare are in existence. It is important that our Government expeditiously restores basic infrastructure including clean drinking water, communications, electricity, roads and bridges. Many people from Kajo-Keji are still living in exile. I want to encourage them back to build houses in our home places. I am making plans now to build my own tukul in our village.

God put into Nehemiah's heart to register the people by families, 7:5. Everyone who returned was on the list, from the first to the latest. This year's population census (2008) is important for Sudan. The results will govern distribution of future resources and the allocation of Constituencies. Local administrative levels will be determined by population. A County that registers a small population may not qualify to remain as a County. This information will determine the size of constituencies. The Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly in Juba has passed a Constituency Development Fund given to each Constituency for its development. The more Constituencies (population) registered, the more money becomes available for progress within our County. All record keeping must be credible, true and honest. 1 Chronicles 29:29-30; Luke 1:1-4.

Our churches should also keep records of their people, baptisms and confirmations, weddings, funerals, etc. It is a good idea to know who preached where and when, and what the subject was, Acts 6:2-4; 2 Corinthians 8:20-21; Colossians 2:5.

Read the Bible and Respond to it

Many of us look at our watches when Sunday services go for more than two hours! The visible attention and response of the people to the word of God is an indication of the effectiveness of ministry, 8:6,9. The result of Ezra's personal devotion to Scripture, Ezra 7:10, was that men and women listened carefully and understood his public reading, Nehemiah 8:2-3; 8:8. Always be attentive to the reading of the word. Read it with your family and friends. Explain and apply it understandably, 1 Timothy 4:13; Deuteronomy 11:18-21.

Confronted by God's word we may find promises to celebrate, 8:9-12, 18, and we may find sins to confess, 9:1-2 . Thinking about history helped Nehemiah's people see their mistakes. God's character is still the basis for His people today to come before Him in confession, 9:19.

As Christians our usefulness to God depends on our obedience to His Word. For us to be those who influence Sudan for good, we must follow God's plans for our own lives. As I let God change me, He will use me to change Sudan. As some of us have proven in our lives: huge journeys can be made, one step at a time.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. "In rebuilding Southern Sudan perhaps the greatest dangers lie inside each one of us".

In your opinion, what are those dangers?

Why are they "the greatest dangers"?

2. Explain in your own words the biblical "doctrine of work". Make Scripture references clear.

How do you see it being ignored in today's Sudan? What can be done about this?

3. "Patience, planning and participation" are generally necessary for a work of God.

Share *one* idea you could be involved with in helping to rebuild the people and the places of your area. Take the time to work out several practical steps to follow in doing this.

How will you follow Nehemiah as your model?

What lessons can you take from his life and work?

4. If "local" is taken to mean "worthless", what is the best way to change that understanding?

5. Why must our "Christianity come before tradition"? Give examples from your own life.

See 1 Peter 2:11-12 as a guide.

6. Why is our own spiritual discernment so important?

Consider Nehemiah 6:10-13 and 2 Peter 2:1-3.

How would you realise that God had *not* sent someone to your area?

7. Give examples – good and bad – of holistic ministries by Christians and churches.

Think of constructive ways of making your own ministry more holistic.

Luke 4:18-19; John 13:34-35; John 20:21.

Share these ideas with one another.