

Experience in Cross-Cultural Collaboration with South Sudanese Diaspora Congregations

This information is taken from the January 27-29 minutes of the South Sudanese Diaspora Task Force established by General Convention Resolution D088, passed at the Austin General Convention. This excerpt is shared to illustrate some of the specific practical issues arising in connection with efforts by Episcopal Churches in the United States working South Sudanese congregations. All involved in the Task Force are there because of long-standing, current, and passionate engagement with the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, and previously with the Episcopal Church of the Sudan. These observations offered below come from those deeply committed to this ministry.

Identified Obstacles to Mutual Engagement by South Sudanese Diaspora and TEC

Much of our morning discussion reported past difficulties encountered at the parish and congregational level when South Sudanese congregations and “Anglo” or more conventional TEC congregations sought to work together and to share space.

Past and current difficulties identified in bringing diaspora congregations more fully into the life of TEC, their dioceses, and Anglo congregations.

A. The frequent local difficulties or obstacles include:

- Friction over the credentials of South Sudanese clergy, a periodic issue with local TEC clergy, as well as with diocesan commissions on ministry, standing committees, and TEC bishops;
- Noting the absence of any TEC training in such issues, U.S. parish clergy are often ill prepared to address the issues presented by a very different kind of congregation in their midst and under their nominal supervision;
- Disparate personal incomes for recently arrived South Sudanese worshippers, who have entry level jobs and who are often remitting most of their income back to family in South Sudan, and Anglo worshippers, who are often more settled in their jobs, more senior with higher incomes and fewer dependents than their South Sudanese counterparts, and whose pledges are the financial mainstay of their Anglo congregations;
- Entry by most refugees into the United States through poor sections of large U.S. cities, very different than the rural social context familiar to most South Sudanese, and a very challenging context for South Sudanese parents to supervise their children;
- Widespread ignorance by worshippers in South Sudanese and Anglo congregations of each other’s different economic, family, and cultural contexts and very different expectations of congregational and church behavior;
- Different styles of worship with Anglo congregations using a restrained, reserved approach to worship, considered dull by the South Sudanese, and a more robust style used by the South Sudanese, considered poorly organized and much too long by Anglo worshippers;

- Widespread traumatization of South Sudanese worshippers by the harrowing circumstances of South Sudan, not only the events causing their flight from South Sudan, but the ongoing violence and killing of tens of thousands of people at home with the civil war which broke out in December 2013, and which has continued to the present;
- Periodic internal strife within South Sudanese congregations arising from tribal differences;
- The “tentmaker,” i.e. self-supporting, status of most South Sudanese clergy, who must work at a secular job in order to support themselves and their families;
- Differences in the languages used in worship, and in the liturgical and scriptural resources available or not in the native languages of the South Sudanese worshippers
- Differing expectations about financial support of the hosting congregation, with some South Sudanese congregations evicted for failure to meet rental expectations;
- Differing expectations about supervision of children, cleanup and avoidance of equipment breakage between South Sudanese congregations and hosting Anglo congregations;

B. Additional obstacles were identified, arising more from institutional factors and theological differences with TEC and ECS. These obstacles include:

- Theological differences springing from the strong evangelical and Bible-centered focus of the South Sudanese congregations and their clergy, and the more modern and liberal emphasis of hosting Anglo congregations;
- Double allegiances by South Sudanese congregations and clergy to the ECS and to TEC, and divergent understandings by clergy and bishops of both churches over which bishops were responsible for oversight of clergy and diaspora congregations;
- Lack of a TEC focal point for South Sudanese diaspora ministry. It was observed that the work we are now doing is beginning two decades later than when we should have started;
- Widespread ignorance of differences between TEC polity and the role of bishops and ECS polity and the authority of bishops;
- Repeated uncoordinated pastoral visits by ECS bishops, without notice or coordination with the TEC diocesan bishop responsible for the congregations under our polity;
- Lack of protocol and common understanding for recognition of incoming ECS clergy expecting to work in the United States, whose expectations of local and diocesan financial and other support are often seriously mistaken, and whose academic preparation in English is often insufficient to make the usual U.S. training of Anglo “tentmaker” clergy successful for these immigrants;

In our later discussions, we noted additional local and wider church obstacles to fruitful collaboration with the South Sudanese diaspora.