

# VISIT TO CUEIBET DIOCESE: 29 JANUARY – 9 FEBRUARY 2024

Report by Geoff Taylor

## BACKGROUND

Salisbury Diocese has had a link with the Church in the Sudans for 52 years. In 2013, Chalke Deanery Synod voted to link with the Diocese of Cueibet, part of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan (ECSS). Since then, groups from our Deanery have made 5 visits to Cueibet and Bishop Elijah, the Bishop of Cueibet, has made 3 visits to our Deanery.

As with previous visits, this sixth visit had 3 main aims within the theme of education:

- Teaching at a conference for the clergy and lay leaders
- Monitoring progress on projects, particularly children's education
- Affirming the relationship between Chalke and Cueibet.

As the last visit was in 2019 because of the Covid pandemic and the situation in South Sudan, it was something we had been looking forward to very much. This year the visitors were Revd Alison (Ali) Alexander, Curate at St Thomas's Church, Salisbury and Geoff Taylor from the Chalke Valley Benefice and a Trustee of the Chalke Cueibet Partnership Trust.

## ITINERARY AND TRAVEL



The journey to Cueibet involved 3 flights:

7½ hours overnight

Heathrow – Addis Ababa, Ethiopia -

1½ hours

Addis Ababa – Juba, South Sudan -

1½ hours

Overnight in Juba, then to Rumbek -

hour

Drive Rumbek – Cueibet - approx 1

Flights in South Sudan are with the Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), a Christian charity working in Africa supporting other charities and mission agencies. As Cueibet is a remote diocese, access is limited and we were restricted to flying in and out of Rumbek on Wednesdays. This allowed 6 full days in Cueibet for teaching and a service on Sunday.

On arrival in Rumbek, we were met by Bishop Elijah and then on to Cueibet. His Diocese owns only one motorbike so for visitors like us; he has to hire a vehicle and driver. The journey to Cueibet is about 30



miles. On this visit, it took just over an hour but previously has lasted 3 hours because of the state



of the dirt 'road'. The 'road' which is part of a state highway from the capital Juba to Wau in the North West, was being upgraded. Phase 1 - the basic hard core layer - had been completed by Somalis who had the skills to operate the heavy plant machinery. They were now waiting for the tarmac layer to be completed by Chinese contractors, joining the thousands of miles of roads built by the Chinese all over Africa!

## THE SITUATION IN CUEIBET

The security situation is very quiet across the Cueibet area and Lakes State in general. Although there were armed military in Juba, we saw only one armed soldier after landing in Rumbek. The majority of the population is Dinka. Any disturbance comes from fighting between rival clans and incidents such as cattle raiding, none of which we saw. Lakes State is not affected by the wider politically motivated violence which occurs in some states.

We arrived in Cueibet to be greeted by the usual exuberant welcome of singing and the humbling experience of having our shoes dusted while we sat listening to the singing. The genuine pleasure on the faces of our hosts and the warmth of the welcome was amazing.



Part of the package of these visits is that the visitors pay for all their travel and costs while in South Sudan and contribute to the costs of the clergy or pastors attending the annual conference. We were accommodated in the 4 room diocesan guesthouse which Chalke Deanery funded in 2018. Arrangements including meals followed a similar pattern to previous visits. Breakfast and lunch were taken in my bedroom. On my last visit in 2018, this had been shared with Archdeacon Alan Jeans. One bed had been moved out to provide more space. Supplies for breakfast – cereal, tea, coffee, powdered milk and a small amount of fruit had been purchased from the town market by Bishop Elijah – not food which was eaten by the local inhabitants.



Lunch, which we did not really need, was usually beans and rice. Supper which was always a hot meal, occasionally included goat or chicken and was accompanied by the inevitable dollop of maize and locally grown sorghum. The latter two are the staple diet in Cueibet. Supper at about 7.30pm was taken outdoors in the dark and shared with others who were attending the conference. This was followed by singing and readings in Dinka and talking which often lasted until 10.00pm. On the first night we were told that we did not have to stay till the end, so normally retired at 9.00pm. This all took place in the new fenced off area of the guesthouse compound which was also used for other gatherings when they did not occur in daytime under the shade of a tree. At this time of the dry season there were no mosquitos so no fears about sitting outside, although we still slept under our nets indoors.



Throughout the visit I was most struck by the care shown to us both, and to me personally. Clearly Bishop Elijah had told them, many of whom I had met before, about the recent loss of vision in my left eye. Ali who was formerly a nurse, described them as treating me as an 'elder statesman'. There were many unnecessary occasions when I was offered help up the step into the guesthouse, chairs were carried for me and whenever I walked off around the diocesan compound which I knew well from previous visits, someone appeared by my side!





## CONFERENCE

The visit's main purpose was to run a 4 day teaching conference for the pastors. Although some of them spoke varying degrees of English, most of it was in Dinka with Bishop Elijah interpreting. Attendance varied between 35–50 (about 50% female). Ali spoke over 4 mornings on the subject of the 5 Marks of Mission (Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, Treasure) which much impressed Bishop Elijah. The pastors were very engaged applying it to their local context. Bishop Elijah taught in the afternoons and Ali led some sessions with MU members on health matters.

Ali also followed up the theme in a sermon at the Sunday service - 3½ hours of ECSS BCP Morning Prayer in Dinka including vibrant singing and dancing by the Sunday School. Most of the service was led by the female Acting Dean and other clergy. It was interesting that there were a number of mothers with babies at the front for the Thanksgiving for their new babies, similar to our BCP 'Thanksgiving (Churching) of Women after Childbirth'. On the last day of the conference, in a very moving short ceremony, we were both presented with gifts which had been made by the women of Cueibet.



## PROJECT MONITORING

As always, it was difficult to find time while in Cueibet to talk to Bishop Elijah as he was engaged in individual conversations with pastors and others when not teaching. The main conversation did not take place until we spent a night at the Roman Catholic Guesthouse in Rumbek on our return journey to Juba.

**Church Primary School and Classrooms** The number of pupils is now approximately 400. This is mainly because it has never recovered from closure during the Pandemic and competition from the local state school and a private school. There are now 4 government funded staff although rates of pay are less than that at the private school. The school did not return from its 'Winter' holiday until the week after we left. Fortunately, I was able to have a conversation with the Deputy Head, Moses Mayom and a new teacher, Gabriel. Our Rural Dean, Revd Mark Hayter and I first met Gabriel in 2015 when he was working unpaid in the then Diocesan Office. He returned to complete his education at the state Secondary School, paid for by the Diocese and is now beginning to teach in the Primary School. I handed over 1,000 pencils from the children of Coombe Bissett Primary School and others to Gabriel. Bishop Elijah sent me a photo of pupils and pencils the following week.



The 4 classrooms suffered considerably from storm damage and flooding in late 2022 and despite some immediate repairs, there is much work to be done. The original first classroom with the rusty roof needs renovating / rebuilding and more work is required on the others. The walls have not been plastered. For the first classroom, in addition to having an overhanging roof, better quality bricks need to be used with a firm foundation. Based on conversations with the



Deputy Head and Bishop Elijah, the current priorities for funding are:

1. 4 blackboards and more double desks and benches
2. Classroom renovation and plastering.

**Pastor Training** In the past we have sponsored students on diploma and degree courses. We have no involvement at present but it was encouraging to learn that there are three pastors in theological training:

- Episcopal University, Juba completing a degree in July 2024: John Luk and James Meen
- St John's College, Wau studying for a diploma: Daniel Mador

**Security Fence** Bishop Elijah is still clear about the need for the security fence and we walked the boundary with him. We obtained clarity about the positioning of the fence in relation to the water pump which will be inside the fence. From the Guesthouse Compound, the use of the track through the main compound by motorbikes and cars was particularly obvious and is the main area of concern.

## SUMMARY

The enthusiasm of the pastors who are the leaders in their local communities was very encouraging. Links with their local primary schools are being developed and they have been given training in teaching Dinka in the schools. There seemed to be younger pastors and more females than on my last visit in 2018 which bodes well for the mission of the Church in the diocese. The education of children is laying the foundations for securing the future and developing stability in this world's newest nation. As a deanery, we are privileged to be part of this process through our link with the Diocese of Cueibet.

The reception and hospitality that we received were both humbling and inspiring. The conditions in which the people live, their generosity and their faith are a reminder, if ever we needed it, of why we must continue to keep this link alive.

We need to raise at least £20,000 for work on the school alone. However, it can be carried out in phases. Are you able to help us?



Pencils from  
Coombe Bissett  
to  
Cueibet

- Worlds Apart -



If you wish to support the people of Cueibet, please use the QR Code to donate through Give a Little



There is more information about our Deanery link with the Diocese of Cueibet on our website page: <https://chalkevalleychurches.org/cueibet>

If you have any suggestions on how you might help to keep this link alive, or want further information, please contact:

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