

History

The following is the abbreviated history of the events which led up to founding the Comboni Ministries in honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. May his name be praised in all generations! Amen.

In 1955, a civil war broke out between the north and south, and lasted 17 years in my country.

Born a few years before peace returned in 1972, I grew up hearing how terrible the war had been. My paternal grandmother Kuenyom Majok and many other relatives who had witnessed the violence of war often wished not to live too long to see the horror gain.

The survivors spoke in this way because some of them kept warning the rest that the country would revert to war and that the situation would be worse this time around. A social reform singer named Deng Kuot Thieec even composed a song about this very idea to reassure everyone that another civil war was certainly coming.

The war did come. It resumed in 1983 when I was only a teenager. Then tens of thousands of men got ready to march to Ethiopia for military training under a newly formed liberation movement called the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), led by a fellow southerner, Dr. John Garang.

At this time I was barely 15 years old, doubly bereaved of my parents and was living with my paternal relatives in Warawaar village. The war was most likely to concentrate in our southern region as did its first phase for nearly two decades. Therefore, when the rebel recruits left home for training in Ethiopia, uncle Ring and his elder brother Dut-Marial decided to take me with them to Ethiopia for schooling.

The journey would be the longest I had ever taken across our homeland, then the largest on the continent of Africa. After trekking the vast waterless terrains day and night for three months the expedition finally arrived at the destination, extremely exhausted but determined to achieve national independence from the north.

We Part Ways

The uncles trained at the Bonga Mountains bootcamp a few months later and then returned home, leaving me behind to seek an education in exile.

Unfortunately, the trouble of finding a shelter while I attended the only refugee school in Itang refugee camp soon forced me out so that I, along with other unaccompanied minors, wandered off to another refugee camp, Dimma, where several officers assigned by the leader John Garang organized us into a youth camp known as Multipurpose Youth Center.

Then, eager to glean as much education as possible, we plunged into taking classes under the trees by the river on the edge of the youth camp while engaged in constructing corporate dwellings and classrooms for ourselves, a feat no boys had ever attempted in our culture. Thus began my quest for education in Ethiopia.

However, it didn't take long before the difficult pursuit plus the precarious refugee existence heightened my awareness that I might not be able to make it in exile without a strong helper, and that God alone was this strong helper, sufficient for the challenges before me.

In search for the better refuge, the helper that would not disappoint, I started looking for a Christian to baptize me into the Lord Jesus, only to have the local Episcopal lay Christians tell me they could not do it, for to baptize a new believer was the prerogative of an ordained minister. They insisted on this religious dogma even though there was no pastor or priest in the refugee camp or anywhere nearby.

When a Catholic priest, Jonah Taban, visited the camp unexpectedly, I took the burning request to him, but he too refused to baptize me, saying that I had to learn catechism first. When I told him catechistic books were hard to find in the remote refugee camp, and that no one taught catechism there either, he said there was nothing he could do about it because he was leaving the camp in two days.

Crushed in spirit, I vowed that if he left the camp without having baptized me, I would no longer become a Christian until I died. He paused, staring at the ground as though he knew not what to do now.

He taught me a song titled, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” Then he said, “Come tomorrow morning at six o’clock; I and a witness will be waiting for you at the house where I am staying. I will take you to the river and baptize you!”

Full of great joy already, I hardly slept a wink that night. At six o’clock in the morning I came straight to the minister and he, accompanied by the witness to the river, kept his promise to me that morning.

So the baptizer released me like a bird, and I immediately went on my way rejoicing in the newness of life in Christ Jesus.

Dimma Refugee School

When we had completed the construction phase successfully and it was time to start learning in earnest, the Dimma administrator, an expatriate named Marko Chol Maciec, sold some of the rations against the UN regulations and bought us limited supplies, which included no textbooks.

Lack of teachers was another obstacle that would have threatened the school progress, but a few adult recruits who camped nearby while waiting to enter the Dimma bootcamp volunteered at the refugee school.

These men, some being former teachers while others were just ordinary nationalists offering help, taught from memory. If a student happened to have a book, any kind of book he had brought with him from Sudan, the teacher borrowed and taught from it. He gave it back to the student at the end of the class period, only to resume the borrowing cycle the following day. This went on all weeklong every month because books were extremely hard to come by.

As for me, I had barely finished elementary school when the war indirectly thrust me into exile. Moreover, Arabic had been the language of instruction at Yargot Primary School back in my country, but now English was. So I had to start all over again, readjusting at a rapid pace under the refugee precarious circumstances.

UN Scholarship

By the time I was about to go on to 4th grade by the bush schooling standards, a UN official named Kantian came from his regional office in Mizan town to visit the bush school (his accent indicated he was not English but a European native).

Pleased with the large thatched living quarters and classrooms we boys had managed to build in pursuit of education, the helper from outside Africa took some of the senior students to Mizan High School for scholarship in Mizan town, Keffa region. Then he promised to extend the scholarship program to more students from the bush school the following year.

This was such a great development for me. Although I had made no progress past 3rd grade, I found the prospect of joining an established school next year very encouraging indeed. I waited most eagerly.

When time came for the second batch students to transfer to Mizan High School, I dared go along with them for fear that I might never be able to set foot in an established school like this one if I missed the opportunity this time around.

Two weeks later, the Ethiopian high school authorities gave entrance exam for 9th grade and I passed it, a desperate leap from 3rd grade to 9th grade! I knew the bold attempt would most likely encounter some insurmountable difficulties ahead, yet I hoped to overcome them by studying harder.

Unfortunately, the gap I had hoped to bridge loomed more and more a formidable challenge. However hard I studied, the high school subjects, especially math, physics, and chemistry, proved so difficult that I was getting low marks on one test after another.

Prayer for Help

Having become a Christian about two years earlier, baptized by the reluctant visiting Catholic priest, I took my troubles to the Lord in prayer. I asked him for a better school—4th or 5th grade so I could make a meaningful progress in my quest for knowledge. In my prayer I was hoping the Lord would make the school

authorities transfer me to the elementary school located a short distance south of the high school, but he responded differently.

Taking on the form of my Dinka kinsman Dr. John Garang but distinguishing himself with the mark of the cross, scarred on his cheeks, the Lord, who hears even the unsprayed prayer, came in a night vision not only for me but also for many other refugees whose needs I had failed to include in my cry to God for help.

The divine helper promised me that groups of people would come from abroad to take me and some of my friends overseas for our higher studies. In the vision, the Lord emphasized that the last of the groups to come from outside Africa was the one he was promising me and that I should wait for it then.

Overjoyed at the prospect of our higher studies overseas, but curious as to what could be the reason the Lord drew my attention to this particular last group, I woke up and wrote his visionary promise down while it was still fresh in my mind. Then I sat back to wait for it.

To Sudan and Back

While anchored in wait for the promise, a civil war which had been raging between the Ethiopian government and a rebel alliance known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) quickly reached the critical point no one had seen in decades.

After that, in another night vision I saw certain Ethiopian forces flush the SPLM/A out of the country, and I along with them fled to an unfamiliar part of Sudan where I stayed for a while and then returned to Mizan High School by myself after the EPRDF-SPLM/A war.

The prediction came to pass in May 1991, when the EPRDF suddenly ousted President Mengistu Haile Mariam, expelled the SPLM/A from the country, and I along with them fled to Jebel Rhaad, a southern Sudanese remote region where I had never been before.

However, the fact that I found myself in this new remote place according to the Lord's prediction emboldened my confidence in his promises as well as in my belief that I was still on the right track as far as the overseas promise was

concerned. Therefore, I settled in the area to wait for when the Lord would have me return to Ethiopia to follow up on his answer to my prayer for a better school.

Fearing the Unknown

As days went by, however, I began to doubt God's revelation in which he subtly implied that I would encounter no danger on my way back to Ethiopia. One thing fueling this doubt was the Anyuak tribe. The war had just ended and the Anyuak, who fought on the EPRDF side against the Sudanese, lived on the border where I must pass through on my way back to Mizan town.

Another complicating factor was that the Lord himself hadn't revealed anything about this tribe except for the sweeping intimation that I would be safe on my journey back into the county. The intimation seemed good enough at the time of the revelation, but now I was not so sure about it because of the Anyuak.

Resorting to my own solution to the security problem, I planned to take a FN FAL rifle and multiple rounds with me when I returned to Ethiopia. But God objected to the idea of arming myself with a man-made weapon against the Anyuak. Instead, he replayed the night vision in which I had traveled across the border back into the land of Ethiopia and arrived at the destination safely even though I was alone and unarmed.

James Dut Mawien Comes

When I still balked despite the latest reassuring sign, the good shepherd gave me a companion. His name was James Dut Mawien, a former Mizan High School classmate, then living in Pakok refugee settlement near Jebel Rhaad.

In a night vision, this fellow came that we might go back to school in Ethiopia. However, fear of encountering danger along the way deterred both of us so that we lingered on the road near Jebel Rhaad to wait for a ride. (The idea of waiting for a vehicle to transport us to Ethiopia seemed naturally possible in the vision even though in the waking life all kinds of vehicles had literally ceased from moving across the border since the war.)

Old Man Helps

The vision continued. While we waited for help, an old man, who happened to have been engaged in a heavy construction work in a distant part of our country, left the project and came to help us overcome our fears. The helper who suddenly arrived in a utility truck heavily caked with mud from the unpaved roads of our pristine underdeveloped region, stopped the vehicle so we could get on board.

We sat with him in the cab, yet he appeared to be sitting a few feet before us. He drove on while gazing straight ahead. I wished the helper would look at us so I could see his face and get to know him better, but he kept looking ahead without glancing left or right. He uttered not a word either.

When I leaned forward to glimpse his face, some haze which gathered instantly around the head concealed his face until we arrived at the destination. He dropped us off somewhere in Ethiopia and returned to his work in southern Sudan where he labored alone. End of vision.

Vision Fulfilled

Early one afternoon, the James Dut Mawien I had seen come to me in the night vision literally joined me at Jebel Rhaad that we might go back to school in Ethiopia. I was glad that he came in accordance with what the Lord had revealed about him. But then I saw a troubling gap between that revelation and what actually transpired.

This is the gap I found troubling. In the previous night vision, James Dut Mawien came alone, and it was the two of us that the mystical old man gave a ride to Ethiopia. But now this James Dut Mawien came with a second person, another Mizan High School former classmate named Simon Kuol Monyjie, so that there were three of us instead of two.

The discrepancy concerned me because I believed the Lord would not do anything like this without a reason or purpose. Yet, he withheld his reasons for doing it even as he urged me and the companion James Dut Mawien to take the risky journey across the border.

When I couldn't fathom the secret of God, I leaned on the one he had revealed and now fulfilled—the coming of James Dut Mawien. I believed Mawien's arrival to help me return to Ethiopia was proof enough that the Lord was for us, and that I should therefore no longer hesitate due to insecurity between Jebel Rhaad and Mizan High School.

Trusting in the Lord's repeated security promises, then, I and the two companions ventured out of Jebel Rhaad in search of education beyond our native land, only to be reminded that God's promises must not circumvent dangers but pass through them at times.

One of the dangers we encountered upon entering the Ethiopian territory was a revengeful Anyuak man armed with a single shot rifle. This could have been the end, but the God of wonders miraculously intervened through the gunman's own mother. From there the Lord continued rescuing us from similar incidents until we reached Mizan High School unscathed.

These developments, especially how the old man transported us back to Ethiopia, served as yet another phase of reassuring signs that he who promised me higher studies overseas would certainly keep his word if I just continued following his lead by faith. In Mizan, therefore, I waited with my eyes toward the Lord for what he would signal next.

Word from Kenya

At that time word reached us from Kenya that a new refugee camp, Walda, had just been opened there, and that it was offering refugees resettlement overseas.

The keyword "overseas" in the message from Kenya reminded me of the Lord's promise of higher studies overseas. Therefore, I, my companion James Dut Mawien, and many other fellow southern Sudanese refugees who had returned to Ethiopia after the war moved to the new refugee camp with hopes of higher studies abroad.

As for the other classmate, Simon Kuol Monyjie, he declined to proceed with us to Kenya, saying he preferred to pursue his studies in Africa. Consequently, we concluded that his decision to part ways with us at this juncture explained the

reason the mystical old man did not have him aboard his utility truck when he transported the two of us from our country back to Ethiopia.

By excluding Monyjiei from the visionary scene, the old man demonstrated not only his own foreknowledge of this outcome, but also that his sovereign will counted Monyjiei not among those he had called to higher studies beyond the continent. So Monyjiei remained behind in Mizan, Ethiopia, while we moved to Walda camp in Kenya.

Walda Camp

The UN authorities, who were unaware of the promise we followed to Kenya, used the term “refugee resettlement”. So we started the process of seeking higher studies overseas under that term.

Now, in Walda camp it turned out that the groups the man of the cross had said would precede the last group did come first. Before we entered Kenya, these groups took a small number of the fellow expatriates for resettlement in countries like Australia, Canada, UK, and the United States of America. However, he who initially promised this expanding development still didn’t specify the name of the country to which he was taking us overseas.

When we had been in the camp for almost a year, refugee Muslims from Somalia objected to sharing the camp with Christians, and then created a serious insecurity situation which forced the UN agency to close the camp down and move us Sudanese to another camp, Ifo.

In that camp, the UN authorities once again transferred most of us, this time along with some Somali Muslims, to Langata in Nairobi to finalize the resettlement process overseas. This was in July 1993, three years from when the man of the cross gave the promise that led us to Kenya.

Farewell Address

When we were in the final stages of the resettlement process, word came in a night vision that we needed to gather for the leader was coming to give a farewell address. Although there was a strong indication that the leader had been with us

from the beginning, we remembered him dimly. Nevertheless, we gathered in the open in anticipation of his speech. He was late.

Suddenly, only a small boy appeared in front of us as the leader who was to come. Pointing, he began his anticipated speech by saying, “Do you see that Mountain over there?”

We looked up and saw it in the distance. It was a high Mountain with a flock of sheep grazing on top of it. Some of them moved about leisurely while others lay down resting. Then the boy continued, “Go, and be grazing on that Mountain until it is time for you to go home from there.”

As soon as he said that, we realized the home he was talking about was Africa, and we did not like it. So we booed him, “Noooo, we will not come back here.”

“If you do not come back here when the time is ripe, I will kindle my fire and turn you back the way you came,” so he who appeared only a boy silenced us with incredible authority to turn us back to dust; we obeyed him mostly out of fear. End of vision.

The Eagle Airplane

Some days later, during the cultural orientation, we learned that the Pastureland Mountain to which the boy had sent us for a season was the country called the United States of America. From this land came a passenger plane, the American Airlines, bearing on its tail the image of an eagle swooping down between AA letters colored red and blue respectively.

The American Airlines company would later modify the swooping eagle image by giving it a white body and head. Also, the company would remove the letters and make the swooping image fly diagonally with the colors switched so that the right wing was blue and the left wing red. The company would call the modified eagle “flying image” as if to replace the swooping flying image with the diagonal flying one was the reason for the overall alteration.

As for the last group which the Lord had singled out as the one he was promising me, it also turned out to be an American Christian organization aptly named “World Relief”. Through the relief agency the man of the cross fulfilled his promise on

August 28, 1993, when his swooping eagle plane brought more than three hundred of us to graze on his Pastureland Mountain till we were ready to leave for Africa.

World Relief

World Relief was a big organization with branches in parts of the country. This meant the organization was ready to resettle us in various states. For me and my companion James Dut Mawien, our sponsor was a long-bearded man named John Parsons. His world Relief branch was in Fort Worth, Texas. Therefore we flew from JFK International Airport to Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, where two of his staff, Gina Godfrey and Doug, received us.

Godfrey subsequently became our caseworker, assigned to help us resettle on the Pastureland Mountain. When we learned that she was a Christian, we told her how the God she served was the one who brought us to America by promise for our higher studies.

She promptly relayed the testimony to the rest of the believers at the office, and that was when they realized their World Relief Christian organization had indeed lived up to its name, a reassuring sign that they had not served the Lord in vain.

Multifaceted Mission

Ironically, we ourselves did not know the purpose for which the heavenly boy sent us onto his Pastureland Mountain and then commanded us to return home when the time was ripe. Return home to do what?

The answer unfolded gradually, beginning when the World Relief branch office, after failing to find employment in the city, transferred us to Comanche, a small town about two hours away by car.

One day a stranger named Lonnie knocked on our door to invite us to church, the Trinity Worship Center, shepherded by Rev. Curtis Jones, a minister after God's own heart.

At his church we encountered yet another faithful Christian, Jeanne Andrews; her husband was Bernard, himself a worshiper of the God of heaven. As did the influential faith of those in Fort Worth, the faith of these other believers in Comanche also encouraged ours so that we couldn't help sharing our testimony with them.

Upon hearing us, Jeanne Andrews readily reinforced that which the Lord had commanded. She said to us, "When you finish your studies, we do not want you in America—there are too many educated people in this country. Rather, we want you to go back and help the people you have left behind in Africa."

Only then did we understand that to go back and help those we had left behind in Africa was the boy's purpose for favoring us so much all those years until he landed us in America. It was for them that he even threatened to turn us back to dust if we refused to go back to the continent of Africa after all he had done for us.

Helpless Children

Over two decades later, after having moved to the state of Kansas, I began to have a recurring dream in which I would be organizing and ministering to a group of helpless children somewhere in Africa. I did not know what part of Africa this was, or who the children were. Still, the repeated dream left me restless each time.

Finally, I called the relatives back home to see what the situation was like. That was when I learned nothing had changed that much since I left home for exile more than three decades ago.

Most of the children born to my people while I was away in exile were growing up in grinding poverty and illiteracy, just like their own parents and the preceding generations who had never seen a classroom or held a pen.

Moved despite my own financial hardship in exile, I accepted the calling to see to it that at least some of the children got the help they needed.

By now the civil war, which dragged on for 22 years, had culminated in partitioning the largest country in Africa. Our southern region had seceded from the mainland Sudan, but the new makeshift elementary schools, which subsequently sprang up

here and there throughout the nascent nation, were no different from the refugee schools I had seen in western Ethiopia.

This meant that for some of the children to get a decent education, I would have to transfer them to a neighboring country with a better education system, which is what I did. Starting out in one small step, Atong Anei, the only one who had managed to finish high school in Aweil town, was the first to send to an established school, the University of Eastern Africa Baraton in Eldoret, Kenya. Then I waited to prepare for the next step in this direction.

Achol's Testimony

Several years later, a fraction of the remaining children followed to Alpha Junior and Eldo Baraka Elementary schools, also in Eldoret. Two Christian ladies, Atap Anei and Achol Ayueer, accompanied the children as overseers.

Upon arrival in Eldoret, Achol called with a riveting testimony. Over the phone her voice came through clearly, full of joy and hope. "Now I understand!"

"What do you understand?" I enquired.

"When I was living in Warawaar (Warawar) town, in my dreams I would find myself in a big city, and I woke up asking myself, 'Where is this big city, and how did I get there?' But now I understand that the big city I used to see in my dreams is Eldoret in Kenya, and this is how I got here."

Get Ready

After all these things came the following divine message for all the people, not just the helpless little ones.

In spirit I returned to Africa and found the people sleeping in the open. Dry leaves covered the ground and the wind was blowing them about. While I stood by, looking on in sadness, a missionary from a distant land, the West, came on the scene and spoke to the people:

"Wake up and sweep the ground; get ready for the Lord is coming."