

Rev. Thomas Anei

Rev. Thomas Anei was born on December 25, 1980, in Aweil, Sudan. He is the fourth born of nine brothers and sisters. In 1983, Sudan's president, Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiri, declared that Sudan would become a Muslim state and that sharia law would be the law of the land. In response John Garang, a Dinka from Southern Sudan, formed the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to resist the government. In 1986, when Thomas was 6, this conflict reached his village.

Thomas and one of his brothers fled their home and walked across Sudan to Ethiopia as a part of a group that became known as "The Lost Boys of Sudan." In the height of Sudan's 21-year civil war, more than 27,000 boys were separated from their families as they escaped a deliberate campaign of annihilation and ethnic cleansing by successive regimes in Khartoum, which, if successful would prevent these young boys from growing up and joining the SPLA. Boys as young as 5 trekked across the Sudan's vast tropical and desert lands to Ethiopia in order to find safety and basic survival in a refugee camp. During the trek, children were forced to swim across a branch of the Nile River, and each night they faced attacks by lions, hyenas and other wild animals. Thomas was one of these boys.

Tragically, Thomas' brother died in Ethiopia, and when Thomas eventually made it back to Aweil, he found that his parents as well as an older brother had been killed in the civil war. This war, which lasted from 1983 until 2005, ultimately claimed the lives of 1.9 million civilians and displaced another 4 million.

With the hope of revenge for the killing of family members, Thomas joined the SPLA as a child soldier. But, God had different plans for him. In 1989, Thomas began reading the Bible. "It really changed my life," he said. "In Matthew 5:44-45 Jesus says, 'Love your enemies! And pray for those who persecute you that you will be acting as true children of your father in heaven.'" It was through this study that he says, "Jesus showed me a different way."

In 1994, Thomas was able to leave the army. He then traveled with an orphan he brought from Aweil to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwestern Kenya. He attended school while in Kakuma and was part of a church opening in 1997. (Kakuma is the Swahili word for nowhere, epitomizing the seclusion of the area.)

During his time at the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Thomas came across four more children who were from his home area, but who were without their parents. "I found myself in the middle of nowhere with them, and I said just come and stay with me, whatever I have to eat we will eat together." And, with that, Thomas took these children in as his own.

He eventually moved to Nakuru, Kenya, where he gained formalized Bible training and began working with Bishop Henry Riak who was stationed in Nakuru because of the insecurity of his home area – the Diocese of Wau. In 2001, Thomas was ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church of Sudan by Bishop Riak, and in 2006, he was ordained as a priest. Over these years, Thomas has had the opportunity to return to Aweil to open churches in Aweil West County.

In May 2007, Thomas was selected by Bishop Riak to represent the Diocese of Wau, along with two others from Kakuma, at a Christian Economic Development Institute in Nakuru, Kenya – a 10-day training course organized and sponsored by Five Talents. In December 2007, the Bishop asked Thomas to travel with Five Talents to Lietnhom, which is in the same region as his home area of Aweil. His visit to the program was a turning point for Five Talents and Thomas. The keen understanding of the community and communication skills that Thomas displayed during this trip earned him an invitation to begin a fellowship with Five Talents. In early 2008, Thomas began working alongside a project manager to develop his skills in project management, development and training. In early 2009, Thomas took over the Lietnhom project area as a project officer, where he provides business and discipleship training for the village savings and loans project. "I want to make sure that in every place, the people of Sudan hear about this program," he said.

And the five small children that Thomas cared for in Kakuma? They are still his children, and he is their single father. They are now teenagers and live in Nakuru, Kenya, where they can attend a secondary school. During his absences, they are cared for by the wife of a cousin. With the income Thomas earns, he pays for their school fees and visits whenever he has leave from his work in Sudan.