

## Gabe Hurrish — Mission to South Sudan



Gabe pumping water in Riimenze, South Sudan, January 2018.



Gabe Hurrish teaching class, January 2018.

Jan. 26, 2018

Dear Friends,

I send greetings to you from Yambio town, in South Sudan. I have been here less than a month and just now am catching my breath. I have attached some letters and pictures for you to enjoy.

Thank you for all your support and prayers....  
Gabe

## **Arrival in South Sudan**

I reflect upon St. Paul a lot these days. He was a traveler for Christ and I seem to be in a similar boat. What is it like to travel to one of the poorest countries in the world? I arrived in the capital of South Sudan ( JUBA ) on Jan.03.2018. It was 100 degrees warmer than when I left Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Surprisingly, the airplane was full because there was a large contingent of mourners. Seems somebody's body was being brought back to South Sudan for burial. This person must have been important because upon arrival there were over 150 people standing on the runway apron with dozens of vehicles lined up along the fence line. Regular passengers on the flight debarked directly onto the tarmac apron of the runway. We walked 500 meters to the large unfinished airport terminal. In fact, I could see that the previous rundown arrivals building was now under construction. We passengers were herded to the right through a gate and to a series of large tents erected there.

The immigration control consisted of a smaller tent with gravel floors and a container at the end. We handed our passports through a small window in the dark container and the official inside would take it and stamp us in.

We muddled our way through the throngs of passengers into another tent. This was baggage claim. It consisted of a small tent with a temporary wooden floor and a large counter top to one side. There were no walls and not only were passengers crowded under this tent but a myriad of plain clothes people were milling about. They were grabbing at passengers luggage to "help" them for a small price. Finally, our luggage arrived stacked 8 feet high on the back of Toyota pick-up trucks. The shoving and shouting began. It was every passenger for themselves and luggage was hauled off the trucks and those who recognized their bag pushed forward reaching out. A mad scramble ensued. It was so hot under the tent and there was so much shouting and pushing that tempers flared. A fight broke out among an airport official and one of the boys trying to grab bags for a small charge. All activity was temporarily halted as these two actually went into a street brawl on the wooden pallet floor. Finally, stability was re-established and the baggage claim chaos continued.

Once you had your bag you now had to try to push and shove your way to the large counter only this time you had large bags to squeeze through the crowd. The bags were hefted onto the counter and the officials behind simply rummaged around in them for a few moments before drawing an "SS" on the outside with a piece of chalk. This meant you were cleared and you could go.

As you left the tent we were met by an army of boys who wanted to tote our luggage to the car for a price. There was a small man quietly standing in the middle of them and his job was to collect the baggage tags. I could easily have walked right past him but decided to be cooperative. He took the tickets and looked at my bag tags so quickly that there was no way he could have verified the numbers. Anyway, I was free to go and I wasted no time heading out into the parking lot where Sr. Dorothy had a van waiting to take me to the Solidarity office in Juba.

I was stinky, sweaty and a bit fluxed by the sheer exhilaration of it all. I had never experienced anything quite so chaotic in an international airport in my life. What a story I thought to myself. No one will believe this. Yet fact is stranger than fiction. Welcome back to South Sudan.

## **WELCOME TO SOLIDARITY TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE, YAMBIO, SOUTH SUDAN**

The last time I arrived at Juba International Airport I was shocked at the dilapidated and chaotic manner in which immigrations and customs control operated. They were using a ramshackle building next to the large skeleton of a terminal that has sat unfinished since way before independence in 2011. This time I was surprised to find that even that dilapidated building was now under construction. So what they were using now were Rub-Hall tents. The first tent had a container on one side with little windows in it and this was passport control. "Welcome to South Sudan." The man said to me as he stamped my passport.

Then the passengers are shuffled into an overcrowded tent number two where the newly arrived are required to wait in the 90 degree heat for a dirty old pickup truck to bring the bags from the plane. A mad scramble begins while everyone tries to push and shove their way to their luggage and then somehow get one of the officials to look at it so we can be cleared. "Welcome to South Sudan," the customs official says as he writes SS with a piece of chalk on the outside of my luggage to show he has formally checked the contents.

Sr. Dorothy and Br. Bill greeted me with a very friendly "Welcome to Juba" and took me directly to the Solidarity office in the capital. We had a good meal and caught up on all the happenings since last I was here 18 months ago. I was supposed to fly out the next day but all flights were cancelled for some reason. This is a frequent problem with travel in South Sudan. You just never know what will happen so you plan extra days in advance to make sure you get to where you want to go on time. Two days later I return to the airport tent city to clear through for my 90 minute flight to Yambio in the Western part of South Sudan.

Sr. Margaret Scott was waiting on the rudimentary, gravel runway and gave me a warm hug and smile. "Welcome to Yambio." she said. It was good to see her again after 18 months. She hadn't changed a bit and was her usual energetic and upbeat self. We chatted away during the 20 minute bumpy ride along the way to the college. Not one inch of the dusty roads of Yambio is paved. There are huge crevices everywhere and Sr. Margaret has to turn the truck this way and that to avoid the deep gullies. It is the dry season and super fine dust infiltrates every inch. Literally, everything is covered with the fine dust giving a reddish tint to every structure.

At the college, I was touched by all the people who remembered me and said, "Welcome back to Solidarity Teacher Training College." The nine religious brothers and sisters who live and work in the college were all smiles and hugs as we exchanged greetings. Some of the students remembered me and they too welcomed me back.

I had carried rosaries and crosses as little gifts for the staff. The staff were all so glad to see me back. I gave each of them little rosaries and crosses. The next day many of them were wearing the colourful beads around their necks. All of them gratefully thanked me as I met them along the way. One of the cooks says in broken English, "We happy to have you back. Welcome!"

That night as I lay in my little bed I thought of what Jesus said to his disciples, "...look for a worthy person in every town ...and stay ...until you leave." I thought of all the "nice welcomes" I had received and I felt truly blessed. These suffering people are so generous and grateful that I would come from so far to be with them. Yes, I think I will stay in this place for awhile sharing the Good News. Welcome Back Indeed!

**Solidarity Teacher Training College** is run by a group of international religious from various congregations and institutes. Our college has 15 tutors from 9 different countries. There are 125 students from all over the nation and a few from Sudan in the north. The compound has classrooms, a library, a computer room, dorms for women and men, a cafeteria and several warehouses. The religious staff have their own house and everyone has their own room.

Sr. Margaret Scott is the Principal and she has a very difficult challenge. She has to house and feed over 140 people every day. She has to constantly be on top of problems which may arise due to so many different ethnic groups and tribes living in close quarters for the first time in their lives. She also has to deal with all sorts of challenges like finding petrol, cash from banks, fixing broken vehicles, re-doing the class schedule when a teacher is sick or on leave and many other duties. She does it all with grace and style. She has asked me to assist her in these duties.

The daily schedule is rather regimented. We pray the Liturgy of the Hours at 6:30am. Mass is at the next door parish church....bring your own flashlight and chair. Teachers quickly eat breakfast on their own. Student Assembly and prayer is at 8:00am. 8:30am the classes begin. There are 6 classes every day and we end around 4:30pm. One might have an hour or so to rest but generally there are so many other things to do. Evening prayer is at 6:30pm followed by supper at 7:00pm. Sr. Margaret insists we all attend supper because it really is the only time during the day that we as a community have relaxing time together. So we sit around in the open air recounting the days stories and gossip. It is a nice peaceful time. We all take turns cooking food and everyone helps with the dishes afterward. Currently, I am the only lay person in the group. Everyone treats me with respect and dignity. I like the community members with whom I live and work.

I am still trying to find my balance here at the college. I have been asked to teach Social Studies to 4 different levels, Religious Education and sometimes I substitute for another subject if the teacher is sick. I am also helping with grant writing, donor relations, documentation, interviewing and tracking all students. I have community responsibilities too. I help cook meals, plan prayer, clean up around the staff house, and every Saturday morning I go with the sisters to the market and carry the heavy bags to and from the vehicle.

My room is the only place for solitude on the campus. I have a private bath with freezing cold showers which is not bad when the temperatures are over 90 during the day. Surprisingly, the mornings are quite chilly. One of my luggage's was lost on the way to Africa so it has just arrived in Nairobi. I am hoping someone coming to South Sudan will be kind enough to carry it for me. God willing.

Praise the Lord it is relatively quiet in the country at the moment. The government has run a campaign to incorporate some of the rebels that have been terrorizing the countryside into the regular army. This has calmed the violence in some parts of the country. But, the leaders have a lot of work ahead of them to secure a future for this impoverished country. Corruption is rampant and it is reflected in all sectors of society. God have mercy on us all.

Once again, I thank all of you for the support and prayers. If you would like to continue to support my mission please send any donations to: MARYKNOLL LAY MISSIONERS, P.O. Box 307, Maryknoll, NY 10545 and mention my name. Love and prayers....Gabe

Trip to Riimenze – Jan. 9, 2018

On the Feast of the Epiphany, several of us from Yambio left to visit our Solidarity colleagues at the Agricultural Project located in Riimenze. It is a mere 30 kilometers from the Teacher Training College yet takes over an hour and 45 minutes to get there. The road has not been maintained in years and as such is in terrible shape. One does not speak of potholes in South Sudan but rather of craters and canyons. Some of the holes in the road are large enough to swallow a Toyota Landcruiser.

As we travelled along we noticed that there were fewer people travelling along the road and even fewer in the markets along the way. Insecurity and violence on this main road to the capital Juba has been rife since January.01.2017 and most people are still wary of travelling far from home. We pass one new village where several groups who had been scattered in the jungle decided to live closer in community for more safety and security. They were living in makeshift canvas huts with grass roofs. Most of these were very small dwellings.

Riimenze is where over 6,000 people who have left their jungle homes have come for safety. On New Year Day, 2017 rebels brutally attacked several villages looting, pillaging, raping and burning the homes to the ground. Many lost their lives. These rebels are not from this area and no one is sure what their purpose is. Certainly they want money and we are told that everyone carries little amounts of cash in case they are stopped. This way at least they have something to give to the thieves or they might get killed. This is especially true for women who are at increased risk to violence. Rape has been agreed by military leaders as a way of paying the soldiers since the government and rebel groups have no cash.

When the violence erupted the people ran to the Catholic Church in Riimenze for protection. At first when they arrived most did not sleep at all. They sat on the steps of the church and maintained an anxious vigil prepared to charge off into the jungle at the first sign of armed men in the area. The priest, Fr. Viktor has quite a bit of influence on the people and even the rebels themselves. He is well respected and has by the Grace of God been able to diffuse several potentially explosive situations over the year. He has told the people to stay

close and when rebels or other armed groups come, he confronts them and somehow has so far been able to make them go away. However, the nearby school run by the Brothers of Christian Instruction has been robbed 3 times at gunpoint. They were forced to build a large wall with razor wire around the house.

Solidarity in Riimenze is primarily concerned with the Agricultural Training and Experimental Farm but once internally displaced people began arriving at the church, Solidarity staff led by project director, Sr. Rosa Le Thi Bong, RNDM, went to work to assist them in any way they could. They offered produce from the farm and were able to get several other organizations to provide food, water, shelter and other necessities. Today, the entire Riimenze area is strewn with thousands of little shelters made from poles, canvas and grass. Sr. Raquel walks miles each day visiting the people in their ramshackle huts helping where she can and providing blankets, plastic containers, and other necessities to cook and prepare food.

Bore holes have been drilled and water points created but the water situation is still desperate. Too many people and too little water. Malaria and typhoid are major health concerns and the Solidarity nurse, Sr. Mariline is busy morning to night attending to the needs. Sr. Josephine works in the local kindergarten and her enrolment doubled overnight when the displaced started to arrive. She now serves well over 200 children under the age of 7 years old with only 4 classrooms and 2 teachers to assist her.

As we walked around everyone greeted us and chatted for a few moments. There is very little privacy in the area as these huts are built almost on top of each other. All vegetation has been cut down to build the huts. What was once jungle is now open. Latrines are nothing but a hastily dug shallow hole with four poles and a canvas sheet draped around them. A small market is slowly developing but most people have no income. Some of the braver ones have recently begun to return to their homelands during the day to plant or harvest what they can. This can be dangerous because if the rebels show up they could be killed.

As we strolled the vast area of white and blue canvas shelters observing how the jungle has been cleared for this new settlement, Sr. Raquel assures us that

the people are somehow better off now than the past year. There is a bit more security in the area. A small market is developing. Solidarity has begun to hire these unfortunates to work in the Farm so they can earn a bit of income. Some of the people have even planted mini-gardens on their little 10 square feet of land in front of the church.

After our College staff had a meal and community meeting with the Agricultural staff it was time to return. Along the road we stopped to assist a motorcycle which had something wrong with it. We lent some wrenches to the fellas and they quickly repaired their disabled vehicle and we both head off again after 10 minutes. On these isolated roads everyone looks out for everyone else.

It was a long day and I was tired and dusty upon returning. Bouncing around in the back of a Toyota jeep on a road like that takes a lot out of a person. But I learned the lesson to never waste water or food after that visit. God has helped me see how wasteful I have been so from now on I will thank My Lord for every drop and morsel I have.

I was touched by the very suffering souls of this isolated community. I wanted to reach out and heal them. I wanted to make everything better. But all I could do was smile, greet them, shake their hands and pray for them. One elderly woman said, " We are grateful for your presence." I thank God I can be here.