

## Bishop Wilson - A First Century Disciple

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My anxiety grew as I circled the parking lot looking for a place to park. I had been invited to dinner with Bishop Wilson from the Sudan and the clergy from our church. I had been waiting for this day for some time. It was the culmination of weeks of planning; emails, phone calls and flyers. I had already had the honor of meeting Bishop Wilson at our Provincial Synod in Cleveland earlier in the month. He was introduced to the assembly and made a presentation about his ministry in southern Sudan. He spoke passionately about his people and their sufferings. In spite of these difficulties he was personally responsible for starting 150 churches. I was fascinated. During one of the breaks I found myself near him. I introduced myself and asked him “How did you start 150 churches? That is amazing.” He looked at me so patiently and said “I just followed the Holy Spirit”. Ah, yes – the Holy Spirit – right. Since that time so many questions about his ministry have been swirling around in my head. Starting churches is the work of the Holy Spirit, yes, but how exactly did he do it? What made his church different from other churches in his area? How did he make the gospel culturally relevant to a people who couldn’t even read? How could we join him in his work? What kind of help could we offer him?

I almost bumped into him as I came through the door of the restaurant; our table

was ready and the men were on their way, I joined them. After being seated a very tidy, metrosexual young man came over to describe the delicious specialties of the day. We struggled to hear him over the roar in the sports bar – the first night of the World Series. I was so embarrassed. I thought how foolish we all must appear to the bishop; so much commotion over a sporting event. And I'm sure he couldn't care less about "Tartare of Pacific Ahi, seasoned with sesame & curry oils served with sliced avocado, citrus fruits and toasted sesame crisps". Half way around the world the people he loved and cared about were starving. Determined to assure him that we weren't insensitive to his plight I leaned across the table and said "Don't judge our culture too harshly, it's all we know." His face lit up with a warm smile. He replied "Oh, sister I don't judge you. You are like the children of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land. Moses warned them that once they were 'in plenty' they would quickly forget God and all that he had done for them. You are 'in plenty' and these people have just forgotten God. That's all." How quickly things changed, we had instantly become friends. He understood – there was no need to explain another thing.

We struggled to find something on the menu that would interest him. He settled on a roasted chicken breast and a healthy serving of french fries. Now that the ice was broken I could ask in earnest how he had successfully started 150 churches in the Sudan, of course I knew it was the work of the Holy Spirit, but I wanted details. I asked again "How did you start 150 churches?" Deliberately setting down his fork he started with the story of his own

salvation.

He was one of the “Lost Boys” displaced during the Sudanese civil war in the 1980s. He became a Christian in a refuge camp in Ethiopia; evangelized by another “Lost Boy”. When things had settled down he began to search for his family. Thankfully they were all found. Reunited, he shared the gospel with them; explaining that they must accept Jesus Christ and get rid of their family idols. The lives of people in the Sudan are controlled by demons; locally referred to as “jōks”. What he described is so foreign from our lives it is hard to grasp. The demonic activity in primitive cultures is similar to what is described in the Bible. It is very real. The family demon may cause a child to die suddenly or it may demand them to kill an entire herd of animals. Many of the details surrounding these events are unexplainable, except through supernatural means. It is an integral part of their culture and people are compelled to obey.

After hearing the Gospel, Bishop Wilson’s mother and one of his sisters accepted Christ’s command to worship only him. They got rid of their idols and began to learn about Christ and prayed daily. A mysterious peace came over their home, demonic activity ceased, instantly. The difference was so profound that the people living near them wanted the same peace. More people in the village accepted Christ and quickly the word spread – miraculous things were happening. The sick, lame, and demon possessed were brought to Bishop Wilson for healing. He told us how he simply prayed for the person, in the name of Christ, and they were healed.

Over the past fifteen years he has watched God's grace spread from a simple, heartfelt time of sharing with his family to the establishment of hundreds of churches all over the region, some as far away as a two-week walk. Bishop Wilson now leads 85 ordained clergymen, 50 trained evangelists and several Mothers' Union groups. He has no secret; the Bishop is living the life of a first century disciple and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Lives are being transformed. The Holy Spirit is alive and working in the Sudan. Bishop Wilson is obediently following where he is led. Amazing how simple it is.

Being with him for several days has had a profound effect on me. It caused me to stop and really look at our own culture. We live "in plenty" and what do we gain by it? Nothing. All our things are simply distractions; distractions that take us away from a full life with God. With all the constant noise we invite into our lives it is difficult to hear his voice. We have so many important things to do that we barely squeeze in time for prayer and Scripture reading. What would happen if we put away our idols; our idols of pleasure and compulsion? What would happen if we turned fully to Christ, like Bishop Wilson's people? What if we decided to completely depend on him? What if we let Christ's peace really reign in our homes and in our hearts? We have no sorrows greater than those of the people filling Bishop Wilson's churches; why are many of us so unhappy?

How grand were our goals... "What could *we* do to help him?" I have realized that Bishop Wilson is really an African missionary to *us*. His New Testament approach to evangelism is inspiring. I believe our work with the people of the Sudan, Haiti and South

Africa will not only bless them but it will revitalize us. It will bring new life to our national church and our corporate faith. The pictures he shared of his people are beautiful; pictures of children laughing, huge warm smiles. They have nothing, nothing except their faith, their church and the promise of Eternal Life. Would we be content with just these?

At a moment during our good-bye's I realized that it was very possible I would never see the Bishop again. He thanked me sincerely. "Sister, please thank the people of St. Matthew's for me. I am so grateful for all you have done for me while I was in Orange County. Thank you for the gifts that will help in my ministry. I don't have anything that I can give you in return – nothing, nothing except my prayers. We will pray for you and your people." I assured him he had given us all a greater gift – the reminder that we are still called to remember God and all that he has done for us. We are called to put away our idols and turn fully to him. And as we live "in plenty" we are to reach out and help our brothers and sisters in need.

*During his visit St. Matthew's Church collected over \$5,000 for the Bishop's work. That money will go directly to purchase Bibles and Prayer Books for his clergy and evangelists. These unique books are printed in the local Dinka dialect. Additionally, a private donation was made that enabled us to purchase a lap top computer for him. Early next year a group from St. Matthew's Church will travel to the Sudan to see how we can help. Hopefully we will help to educate his people and provide them with the tools to rebuild their culture and continue to spread the Gospel. St. Matthew's Church offers many opportunities for Outreach; some international, some domestic and some within our county. Please take a minute to stop by our Outreach table in the Parish Hall.*

Pictures of Bishop Wilson and his work may be viewed at: <http://picasaweb.google.com/upperroomlisa/AweilDiocese>