

A Tribute to Marc Nikkel, Missionary to the Sudan 1950-2000

By Grant LeMarquand

In 1995 I spent two days in Kakuma refugee camp, a sprawling home to more than 50,000 Africans, most of them Sudanese who had fled war and starvation at home. Everywhere I went in the camp children would run up to me calling "Mak! Mak! Mak!" I was rather puzzled by this behaviour until I realized that it was actually a case of mistaken identity. The only white person these children really knew was Marc ('Mak') Nikkel. In fact everyone I met in the camp seemed to know Marc Nikkel, perhaps because one of the greatest joys of Marc's life was simply being with Sudanese, in the midst of their happiness, their struggles, their pains, their questions, their wisdom.

Marc Nikkel was born in a Mennonite family in Reedley, California. He took a first degree at California State University's School for the Visual Arts, studying some anthropology along the way. He spent two short periods of nine months in Nigeria and Zaire and studied Mission and Theology at Fuller Seminary. During his time at Fuller he was attracted to Anglicanism and was confirmed in the Episcopal Church.

He began service as a Mission Partner of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. teaching Theology at Bishop Gwynne Theological College, Mundri, Sudan in 1981. His first letters home to his friends on his mailing list are filled with the wonder of new things and the joy of being a part of preparing people for service in the Episcopal Church of the Sudan (ECS). One of his favorite duties between terms was to visit 'cattle camp', the traditional travelling villages of the 'Jieng' people. Here he learned not only their language but also a deep appreciation of their culture and traditions. Very quickly, however, his letters began to hint of the rumours of renewed war. After decades of civil war, Sudan had been living in a period of relative calm. New rulers and new policies discriminatory of the people of the Southern Sudan and especially of non-Muslims began to fuel the old fires. Life became more tenuous. His letters began to hint of the trials of being a Christian community in the midst of growing conflict.

My wife, Wendy and I met Marc in 1986. He was on leave from Mundri, doing a year of study at General Seminary in New York in preparation for ordination. My wife and I had presented ourselves to the Anglican Church of Canada as prospective mission partners and we had been asked to consider serving in the Sudan. The Church brought Marc to Toronto to meet with us. After that day we had hopes that we would soon be Marc's neighbours, working together in the Sudan. A few months later Marc was ordained deacon and returned to the Sudan where he continued teaching and where he was ordained as a priest. It was not so easy for our family to get to the Sudan. With our first baby, David, in tow, our mission board diverted us to Kenya when it was realized that the skirmishes in the Sudan were actually turning into a new and very dangerous civil war. Arriving in Kenya in January of 1987 we were immediately adopted by the Sudanese community at St. Paul's United Theological College in Limuru. Together we kept track of Sudanese events. In July we heard the horrible news that the Sudanese Liberation Army had overrun Bishop Gwynne College. The students, with most of the staff and faculty had been evacuated to Juba, and the rebels had abducted four expatriates, including Marc. For almost two months no one received any news of their whereabouts. Then, just as suddenly as they had been taken hostage, the four were released into northern Kenya, the rebels having presumably made their point by drawing a bit of the world's attention to the plight of Southern Sudan. I saw Marc at the Nairobi press conference the morning after the release, still wearing his Sudanese robe, his jalabiyya, the only piece of clothing he had had for those two months.

Upon his release Marc learned that his mother, Rosie, was dying of cancer in California. While Marc was still in captivity she had prayed that she might live long enough to see him again. He hurried home to be with her and, happily, was able to arrive in time to spend ten weeks with her before her death. After this time in California Marc returned to Africa, but he was unable to re-enter the Sudan. So for a time Marc was our neighbour, occupying a small house next door to ours on the compound of St. Paul's. For most of the academic year Marc taught our multi-national group of African students and built relationships with Sudanese living in a small refugee camp in Nairobi. My fondest memory (apart from Marc and some of his visiting refugee friends helping to put out a small chimney fire in our house one day) was the Pentecost service in St. Paul's chapel in 1988, led by Marc, during which I baptized our daughter Chara. Marc was

always a consummate worship leader and, as was his custom, he drew on many of the wonderful resources from that Christian body to make the service a truly communal event.

Following that academic year Marc flew to Scotland to begin doctoral work under Professor Andrew Walls at the Centre for the study of Christianity in the Non-Western World. Although he was no longer in the Sudan, the Sudan never left him. In Marc's thesis research he collected, translated and analyzed hundreds of songs of his beloved Jieng. These songs are hymns of praise and lament composed in the midst of the devastation of Sudan's civil war, a war which has now taken the lives of as many as two million Sudanese. Marc's research combines Marc's early interest in the arts with his love for the Jieng. During this period Marc's letters told of his wanderings through Italy and Great Britain, studying in archives of mission societies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant and, as always, meeting with Sudanese. Only Marc could organize Easter services for Sudanese refugees in Westminster Abbey!

Marc's return to the Sudan following doctoral work was indirect. He maintained an apartment in Nairobi and traveled to refugee camps in Kenya, Uganda and the Sudan as the 'Theological Advisor' of the Sudanese dioceses of Bor, Rumbek and Wau. His main concern was the education of Sudanese Christian leaders, but more and more he was called upon to bear witness to the terrible atrocities taking place there. Speaking at the New Wineskins Conference for Global Mission at Ridgecrest, North Carolina in 1995 was just one of the many times when Marc poured his heart and his mind into a clear and passionate appeal on behalf of our suffering sisters and brothers in the Sudan. In the end Marc's witness, both by his powerful oratory and through his elegant writing, was to point to the cross, for it was only the cross that could make any sense of the suffering of the millions of persecuted, starving, and helpless people of Sudan. Often Marc would hold up the crosses fashioned by Sudanese artisans, crosses fashioned out of bullet casings, out of pieces of downed military aircraft, out of the shrapnel of grenades.

The last time I saw Marc on African soil was in May of 1998. He had just returned from one of the most desperate areas of the South, Bahr el Ghazal. There he bicycled around the barren countryside with a backpack full of peanuts. The cattle were dead, the crops had been burned. The people were eating the last leaves from the trees. Marc's peanut supply did not last long. The Canadian theological students I was with had been in Kenya for a month. They thought that they had experienced some of the pain and poverty of Africa in Kenya. After an hour listening to Marc and asking him questions one of them said to me that he didn't think there could be such a level of suffering. Our Sudanese sisters and brothers instruct us in the truth that only the cross can help us come to terms with such devastation.

Diagnosed with cancer in 1998, Marc was not expected to live for more than a few weeks, yet miraculously (the Sudanese will tell you that it was their prayers that kept him alive!) he lived for two more years. He settled himself into a retreat centre in Scotland where he was cared for by friends from his Bishop Gwynne days and where he thought he would probably die. However, during these two years he was able not only to write and reflect, but he amazed his friends by continuing to travel back to Africa where, among other endeavours, he participated as the secretary in the ongoing grassroots 'People to People' peace process between the Nuer and Jieng peoples.

In July of 2000 he came back to his home in the United States. Although he was very weak, he was able to spend a few days at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. He told there how encouraged he was that everywhere he went people were aware of the Sudan and wanted to talk about it. This was new for him. He may not have known just how much he was responsible for this increased concern and awareness.

Those who read this journal on a regular basis may have noticed that the listing for our Editorial Board includes people from a variety of places around the world. Under the heading of "Sudan" we have listed "Marc R. Nikkel, Theological Advisor, Dioceses of Bor, Rumbek, and Wau, Sudan" as one of our number since March 1999.

Marc died in his sister's home in Reedley, CA, on Sunday, Sept 3, 2000. He is now our ancestor in the faith, resting in peace with the two million martyrs of the Sudan who have gone before him.

The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan (based on letters from Marc Nikkel) and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.