

# **COUNSELLING AND PRAYER:**

## **KEY OD 'TOOLS' POST-CONFLICT**

**By William Ogara**

“I just feel exhausted after many years of being in the field fighting for self-determination” the General Secretary to the Sudan Council of Churches said as he opened our recent training event. He looked so weak and tired. You could see he almost felt like giving up. Church leaders carry immense emotional and spiritual burdens during conflicts. They take on the pain of their communities. In his hand the General Secretary carried a one page document - a communiqué of some sort that he had put together for the church leaders present to sign to show solidarity with families who have lost their dear ones in the war.

These emotional and spiritual burdens do not evaporate as soon as conflict ends. They need to be dealt with, if we are to help church leaders rise to the challenge of change. My experience of working in Sudan and Congo in particular have shown me that OD with churches post-conflict must create the space to use two key methods:

1. Counselling (debriefing through active listening)
2. Prayer

These might not be commonly thought of as OD interventions, but in these particular situations, they are essential.

### **Counselling and active listening**

After the Sudanese General Secretary's opening words we realized that the planned training was not what the church leaders needed. Instead we took close to three hours of debriefing the leadership. This active listening approach is so key. Church leaders need the space to talk, reflect on their journey before they can start afresh. This has shown us at CORAT Africa, the value of simply listening as we seek to accompany churches post-conflict.

This learning was echoed in a recent two-day retreat we were involved in with church leadership in Sudan. This retreat provided a rare opportunity for partners present to recount their post-referendum experience. The idea behind experience sharing was to enable the church leaders to set new rules of engagement and seek to disassociate from a very bitter and destructive past. The Orthodox Priest who was wisely leading us took quality time at the beginning to enable almost everyone to open up.

### **Prayer**

Close to one month ago, we received a delegation of church leaders from Anglican Church of DR Congo (PEAC). Most of these leaders live in the affected regions. They made time to

visit our centre so that they could share with us their stories of change. We took time to listen and then to pray with them. The Bishops talked emotionally about the on-going fear in communities, their lack of confidence. They were concerned about how much time is needed to reconcile as people struggle with forgiveness, pain and loss.

When confronted with the immense hurt and grief of church leaders, prayer is the only fitting response. Mere words of comfort are not enough. Such prayer takes commitment and energy. We have to help people lay down their burdens, create the space for God to bring spiritual and emotional healing. Then and only then are they in a position to listen to what God is saying about the future.

### **Create the space**

We are learning that capacity building post-conflict is not just about rational planning exercises and trainings. As we create space to listen, we realize that healing and indeed forgiveness are needed at a much deeper level first. This takes time - often more time than we have planned. It takes skills - in our next visit to Congo we are taking a team from a counseling institute to accompany us. But unless we get to this depth, we are merely scratching the surface. OD post conflict has to start with listening and prayer.