

Create in us new and contrite hearts

By Archdeacon Howard Stringfellow, *Diocesan Life*, March 2006

Preparing for Lent has taken on a more biting urgency this year. Perhaps it's the result of hearing afresh what we ask of God on Ash Wednesday: "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts..." [Prayer Book, page 217]

New and contrite hearts we really need, because we all are more than capable of putting off or aside what we especially need to do. Lent awaits us as a time prepared for us to regain the "right" perspective of what we most particularly need to do.

Being of help to those in need, being of *substantial* help, calls me almost daily, and putting that call aside with the frequency that I do should come up for substantial review, so substantial a review that changing the *status quo* will most certainly require a new and contrite heart.

Others hear the call and answer it readily. They have little resistance to claiming a mission or apostolate and working to accomplish it.

One woman and her husband are on their way to the Gulf Coast, as I write, to lend a hand to the work being done there, still going on and still as much needed as ever, to rebuild after the disaster known as Katrina.

Some of you have answered that call and have told me about it. I congratulate you while I wrestle with a bit of envy.

The opportunity for us all to participate in helping others is coming. As a community of faithful people, this Diocese is continuing its markedly generous response to the strife in our sister Diocese of Kajo Keji, to those disadvantaged and marginalized in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and to parishes who need assistance to proclaim the Gospel, who have made a determination to be evangelistic.

Those three opportunities await the best efforts of each of us.

Quietly and very humbly, members of our Planned Giving Committee and the St. Matthew Society are raising the money needed to conduct a feasibility study to determine just how much the Diocese of Bethlehem can expect in the years ahead to be of help and to accept these opportunities for what they are: a mission at which our hearts can be made new and re-created, a step along the way in the reconciliation of the world to God through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit.

A year ago in January, Bishop Paul and Diana visited a country with no paved roads, no utilities, and very little health care – devastating results of fifty years of civil war in which Christians refused to accept Islamization. The costs of that resistance have been *human* losses, lives impoverished or brutally and untimely ended.

The Sudanese have not been overpowered by the devastation. They have not turned their heads toward a blank wall, defeated and enervated. Nor have they asked to be like us with our culture's advantages and lurking drawbacks. But they have asked for our help. They want to rebuild, and they need to construct a school to make a right beginning.

They have asked for our help, just as people do every day at the points of contact our parishes have with those who

are running out of options for food, fuel, and medical care.

Project REACH at St. Stephen's Pro-Cathedral in Wilkes-Barre, for example, understands itself to be the last resort for disadvantaged families. The mission of helping those who most need it is not going untended at *Reach*. The call is being heard, and people respond to it.

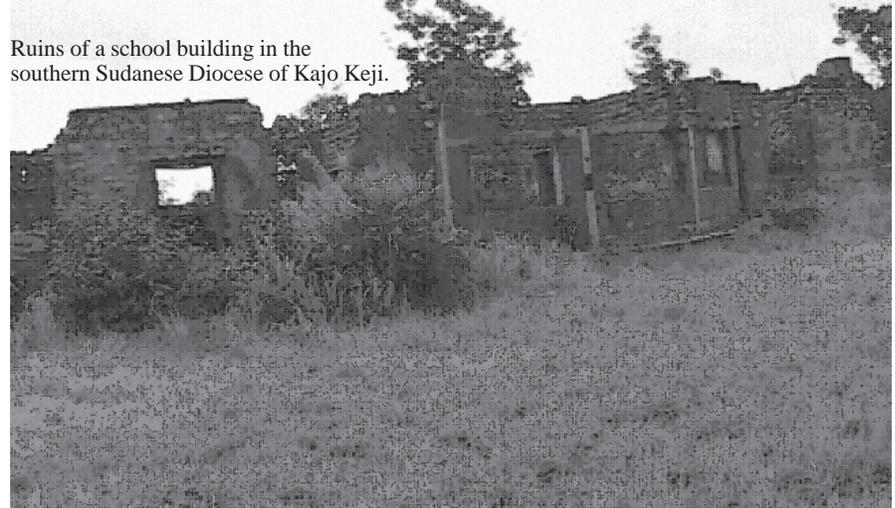
New Bethany Ministries in Bethlehem understands its mission to serve people who are poor, homeless, and mentally ill. Again, the call to help those who specially need help is being answered.

In moments of better clarity, I see other people answering the call on my behalf, and thus the need for God to create and make in me a new and contrite heart has that urgency with which I began.

The call to help those who need it, who really need it, remains a call that we defer at our peril and that we forget at risk of allowing our hearts to continue to be hardened. That peril and that risk cannot last for long before God's rebuke makes itself known. We do well to ask for new and contrite hearts when we begin the season given to us to renew our repentance and faith.

The Ven. Howard Stringfellow serves the Diocese of Bethlehem as archdeacon.

Ruins of a school building in the southern Sudanese Diocese of Kajo Keji.



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