

My new understanding of ashes to ashes

BY DANIEL GUNN

Lent began early for me this year. Rather than being driven into the wilderness for this annual time of spiritual introspection, I was flown into our companion diocese of Kajo Keji. I do not intend to give the impression that the place is desolate or the people uncivilized. Rather, I reflect on what the experience of being with our brothers and sisters meant to me. It was a Lenten journey in which I found a new understanding to an old verse.

Every aspect of our visit was meaningful and deserves to be reported. The school construction is moving forward at a positive pace. The other projects that our diocese has undertaken have already or will soon bear much fruit. At times, especially at the orphanage, I was moved to tears to see the need and to witness the love and care of our Anglican companions. You have seen and you will likely see more about these in *Diocesan Life*. I want to take a moment, however, to focus on two activities in which we were privileged to participate: church dedications and the Ash Wednesday service. One could be described as a journey out of the ashes while the other as a journey into the ashes.

On the Sunday and Tuesday of our visit, we were invited to participate in church dedication services at Tipere and Lubulu parishes respectively. The churches were built by Samaritan's Purse. They intend to build some 40 churches for the Episcopal Diocese of Kajo Keji alone. At the beginning of the dedication a representative from Samaritan's Purse handed the keys to the building to Bishop Anthony. He gave them to the Archdeacon, who gave them to the pastor of the congregation. After processing around the church three times in song and dance (unfortunately I could do neither), Bishop Anthony knocked on the doors that were opened from the inside by the pastor and we entered the church. The service of dedication followed.

This event was so important to me simply because they are opening churches. Many who had been in exile returned to their homeland to find their homes, schools, and churches destroyed, but like the ancient people of Israel they determined to rebuild. Congregations that had met under mango trees in the shadow of their war-ruined churches did not lose their faith.

Even though I was reared in an Evangelical tradition, I have always been a theological snob. I know well the history and theology of Samaritan's Purse. For a long time I suspected their motives. (It would take too long to detail my suspicions.) I say simply that my suspicions were largely wiped away as I stood witness to those two dedications. Upon returning home, I took some time to visit the Samaritan's Purse website. During my Lenten wilderness journey my arrogant theological views were challenged as I witnessed our Anglican brothers and sisters receive the gift of a place to worship given to them by Samaritan's Purse out of the ashes. Yet after two joyful worship experiences in which we celebrated new life out of the ashes, we had two humbling worship



Father Daniel Gunn imposes ashes on the forehead of Samuel Pianile Alibe during Ash Wednesday service at Romogi Pro-Cathedral.



On Shrove Tuesday, members of the dioceses of Kajo-Keji and Bethlehem had dinner at the Poggo College. Afterwards, palm crosses from the two dioceses were burned together to make ashes.



Bishop Anthony Poggo and the Rev. Samuel Pianile Alibe at the dedication of St. Peter's Tipere church. Over the next six months, Kajo Keji will dedicate 18 additional churches built by Samaritan's Purse, a total of 39.



Bishop Anthony accepts the church keys from Adam, a representative of Samaritan's Purse.

continued the next day at the college.

Enveloped by darkness, we gathered in a large circle, mixing palms from both dioceses. As the fire turned the palms to ash the students sang a hymn. We then feasted on a freshly slaughtered goat.

On Ash Wednesday, we took another short walk to the Pro-Cathedral. Joined by about 100 Archdeacons, college students, and parishioners, we sang, read scripture, prayed, and finally mingled ashes from Bethlehem and Kajo Keji to be imposed on the faithful. For most, this was the first time ever to participate in this liturgy. For me, it was the high point of the week as well as the most humbling. I was honored and privileged to touch the heads of my sisters and brothers, to celebrate with them this ancient Christian liturgy. It was in many ways as spiritually overwhelming as joining in the dedication of a church. I was humbled as I lived into the reality that I was ministering as a priest among a people who were rising out of the ashes. They were willing to reverently and penitently submit to being called dust.

I walked in silence that morning from the Pro-Cathedral to the college.



Parish youth, singing and dancing, lead the procession around the church.

I looked back at the three columns that stood as a memorial to the church that was destroyed by war. I glanced across the cemetery behind the church ruins toward the saints who had died before, during and even after the war. I realized that on this day I walked among a faithful Christian people that had gone from ashes to ashes, and in some small way within the course of a day I had traveled with them.

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Standing room only outside the newly dedicated church at Lubulu