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Location: Uganda



What I do: Theological college tutor, helping to promote spiritual development and a faithful understanding of the gospel in college life.

Dear Friends,

I am a stranger and they welcome me.

The shiny black Range Rover pulled up outside the mosque and Mohammed* opened the tailgate. We transferred freshly cooked curry and chapatis into our car and headed back out of the city. Since the vicar's wife was escorted out by security (respect!) the church is no longer allowed inside the hotel housing the refugees. So we parked in a blustery and noisy layby on a busy road. It was the perilous epitome of what some call "an edge context". The refugees, who had been patiently awaiting our arrival, set to work immediately. They put a pot of curry, a chapati and a bottle of water in a bag for each person. There were smiles. The welcome was warm. I asked no questions and talked football as my go-to safe subject. Is the word "refugees" beginning to jar with you as it does with me? These are lovely young people, smiling in spite of their situation, cooperating well together so everyone gets a fair share. And they are gracious in their acceptance of me when experience might urge caution. I am a stranger and they welcome me.



The new library is complete.

In April the UK government announced a policy for welcoming Ukrainian refugees. More than 100,000 people and organisations signed up within the first day. At the same time there has been widespread national and international criticism of the UK's policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda. One young man from Sudan has not slept since the Home Secretary announced what some have called a "state sponsored people-trafficking scheme". We ship our waste plastic around the globe and now we intend to treat people like so much garbage. Of course, it makes it easier if sections of the popular media dehumanise them and call them criminals. I don't want to fall into a similar trap myself when using the semantically loaded R word.

For many years I have been supporting a theological college in Zimbabwe. Until recently I thought my role was to help the remarkable institution survive in ever more testing circumstances. As the structures of democracy erode in the UK, I now wonder if actually that inspirational experience is more about me learning how to respond. (Has anyone actually tried boiling a frog or is that just an urban myth?) The direction of travel is alarming: moves to criminalise protest, to remove citizenship without notice even if you were born here. The Electoral Commission has lost its independence and will now be overseen by government ministers rendering it completely pointless (like a fox running a hen house). The privatisation of the NHS is accelerating. The criminal justice system is also in "condition critical". Individual freedom used to come with built-in obligations. The local Acoli idiom for "Good morning" literally means "Are you awake?"

That layby is my enduring memory of Easter 2022, which I spent in the UK. A chance encounter in the

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With each other
To the edges**



village led the church to discover there were refugees in the parish who were hungry and were falling sick simply through nutritional deficiency. An everyday African-English story. The church began by cooking meals but numbers prevented that being sustained. Hence they approached a philanthropic restaurateur who was only too willing to provide food during Ramadan. The hotel used the income from the government to refurbish the premises. Now that is complete, they are kicking out the refugees, displacing

once more the children settled in local schools. The firm that got the catering contract supplied only meagre rations. "But surely" someone says, "that kind of corruption only happens in Africa doesn't it?"

Well, it happens in Africa too. One refugee camp back here in Uganda built to accommodate 800 people now has 12,000 refugees from the DRC with more arriving daily. There are about one and half million South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. In 2014 each refugee was allowed 12kg of sorghum a month. In 2017, refugees were given cash instead, 31,000 shillings a month, to buy their own food. In 2021 it was reduced to 19,000 shillings per person per month. That is about \$5. (The UN grants \$100 per month for each refugee.) It is thus quite impossible to buy sufficient food, cooking oil, sugar, salt, soap and other necessities. They are hungry and they fall sick. Children are wearing rags. Suicide is increasing. Whistle-blowers are threatened. Visitors who monitor the running of refugee camps are prevented from seeing the true picture.

There is a free health service in the camps, but when refugees ask for medication they are told it is out of stock and they have to go to the private counter in the same pharmacy and pay. One refugee told me "They are always arrogant to the patients." There has been high mortality among pregnant women. They have no job opportunities and should they wish to cultivate rental land it is offered to them at an extortionate rate.

A charity donated some cows. But there is limited land for grazing. Soon it was alleged the cows were grazing on cultivated land and prohibitive ransom demands were made for return of the errant cattle. In this way local people appropriated the cows. Usually there were no crops in the places where the animals roamed in the first place.

As the Acoli say, are we awake?

Blessings,
Malcolm

We thank God

- ▶ for the completion of the new library.
- ▶ for diploma and certificate students studying on campus again.
- ▶ for rain in Gulu.

We pray for

- ▶ the completion of the appointment of a new Principal.
- ▶ for many families struggling with the increased cost of living.
- ▶ for Church leaders serving the refugees in exile.



Photos from top to bottom: Lay Reader students in training; Here in Gulu we have had lots of rain; But northern Uganda is very dry; I love my classroom under the mango tree.

*The name has been changed.



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