



John & Poppy Spens March 2007



Dear Friends,

Greetings from a very hot Southern Sudan. For the last few weeks, the temperatures in the house have hovered around 33 degrees, reaching 39 degrees on one occasion and softening a candle to the point where it bent! It's also quite dusty and the dust seems to get everywhere. Because we arrived here in the rainy season, we have probably adjusted to the increase of temperature, rather like frogs brought to the boil slowly! Last night, though, it rained extremely heavily and, because there is no glass in our windows, the accompanying strong wind managed to blow the rain into the house at least six feet wetting various bits and bobs. But it has cooled everything down and the temperature is now most pleasant.

Poppy's work has been particularly busy and challenging over the past few weeks. The staff situation is much improved so that Poppy does not need to do all the clinic patient consultations. She has selected 20 Sudanese students to begin nurse training either in S.Sudan or in Kampala and this has taken lots of organisation. Meanwhile, a new clinic building started in early March and this required some input from Poppy and this input will continue over coming months. Also, Poppy has tried to get some health promotion off the ground and she has been given some 30 minute sessions on the local radio station. This has involved writing the programmes and translating them into Arabic and Bari plus writing and composing and recording a health promotion jingle to the tune of London Bridge is falling down! And finally, Poppy is about to start a community survey to try to find out more about the health in one of the communities, with which she can start a community health education programme. And of course some other things on top like recruiting security guards and buying bow and arrows; sorting out the fascia boards of the clinic; and much more!

As we may have told some of you in emails, the health situation causes much grief. Recently, the young child of two our staff (instructor and cook) died right here on the compound on a Friday afternoon, probably from measles. Nobody had said the child was ill. This lovely couple have had so many problems and of their eight children, four have died. Almost every day it seems, we hear of another child that has died, often a nephew or niece of one of our staff members. Recently we heard of one woman who lost three of her children on the same day. Few children have been immunised and so the government has initiated a mass immunisation against measles, which is happening right now. Some of the deaths might have been avoided if the parents had taken earlier action and taken the child to a hospital or clinic. But this can be hard for them to do, if they live a few miles out of town. They may only have a bicycle for transport and often not even that. So Poppy sees a major part of her future work here as health education, helping Mums to recognise when her child is ill and in need of medical attention. But also simple advice about the need to give the child lots to drink and the need to make sure the water is clean. Some families have access to a borehole but many still rely on a stream. In both cases, the water should be boiled and filtered before being drunk but no-one does that.

We've also had problems with bush fires. Poppy's clinic cleaner - Margaret - is about 65 but due to the war most people have completely lost track of time and have no idea how old they are. She is the most delightful Christian lady with a huge love for God and a lovely sense of humour. Poppy cannot really communicate much but they sing together! A fortnight ago, while she was at clinic, her house completely burnt down - it was made of sticks mud and grass. She and her family lost everything they had. Poppy was amazed to find her at clinic the next morning singing as she swept, wearing a friend's clothes.

Poppy helped her with some sheets and towels and an envelope containing some money and Margaret was totally overcome. She has said she is praying her house in Heaven will be next door to Poppy's and she knows it won't burn down.

Compared to all of this, John's job looks easy. He is still without a deputy but is running a recruitment process right now. We had 40 students from another town doing an 8 week course with us for the first 8 weeks of the year. This passed off successfully and 7 of their students went away having passed their driving tests. The College is now recruiting its students for the next academic year and this involves both interviews and tests. All staff had a pay increase on 1st February of 16% average due to the raging inflation of around 50% per year. The budget assumes another fairly hefty increase in August. The business side is quite steady and most days, John is selling a desk, a bed, a table or a chair. Most of these are made by our carpentry students and then displayed in our "showroom"! The major income is from the manufacture of two person or three person school desks and we have just been given a big order to make around 250 of these items for delivery to Juba, some 100 miles to our East. Once timber purchase, salaries and overheads are met, the remainder is profit which is useful income for the College.

Billy and Jenny Smyth finally left Yei on 24th February after three and a half years establishing this College and the two women's projects that go with it. We had various farewell events for them and then they left. They were well loved and they leave a big gap. Their bungalow was much bigger than ours so we asked the Bishop if we could move into it. He was happy to agree so, having done some decoration, we moved house last weekend. We now have much more space including a spare bedroom with twin beds so friends and family can come and stay! Plus another bedroom that will be used by Poppy as an office. A photo of our new accommodation is now on the website, thanks to Lynne.

Our email is now working quite reliably so please feel free to send us emails. The address is on the website. The postal service is not at all reliable so it's probably best not to try. However, it was nice to receive a few Christmas cards in early February along with 3 letters from the Inland Revenue!

God willing, three weeks today on 1st April we should land at Heathrow for a three week break and, for Christchurch folk, we hope to see you in church that day. We don't want to overdo it by travelling all over the country but obviously we would love to see family and friends. Our next visit after that should be in mid June. Then we return to Sudan in July and remain till Christmas.

Thank you to everyone for keeping in touch so well and for your ongoing prayer support. We've enjoyed great health, plus safety and security so please keep praying. The work can be demanding, frustrating and tiring (not so different from the UK then!) so please pray for wisdom and strength. John is often required to give short talks at daily devotions and staff fellowship and is on the Cathedral preaching rota. Please pray for these great opportunities to teach the word of God in a relevant way. Finally, we will be leaving our jobs for three weeks in April so please pray for the interim arrangements we make to be successful.

With our love to you all.

John and Poppy

*If you wish to receive this letter via email - contact communication@cmsireland.org
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