

# 'In South Sudan and Yei, the Church is their only hope'

Bishop Levi Marandulu, new bishop of Connor's partner Diocese of Yei, South Sudan, and his wife Mama Agnes spent some time in Connor in August.

The Bishop was consecrated and installed as the third Bishop of Yei on June 20 last year, in succession to Bishop Hilary Luete Abeda, and was in Ireland along with more than 30 world leaders from Africa, Asia and South America for the CMS Ireland/SAMS Ireland Kingdom Voices programme.

After their arrival from Canterbury, where they had been part of the Lambeth Conference, the guests spent time at the Tobar Mhuire Retreat and Conference Centre in Co Down, attended CMSI and SAM's Kingdom Voices events.

During the week, the Bishop met with Bishop George Davison, and was hosted in Agherton Parish, which has a well-established link with Yei, having helped raise substantial funds for the building of a new school in Mongo village, South Sudan.

In Agherton, Bishop Levi experienced his first visit to the sea with the rector of Agherton, the Rev Malcolm Ferry, and parishioner Dr Frank Dobbs, who has visited Yei on many occasions. As the sun was shining, Bishop Levi was unable to resist Malcolm's invite to have a go at body boarding which he thoroughly enjoyed!

Malcolm said the link between Yei and Agherton remained strong, with plans for bringing someone from Yei to Agherton to workshadow for three months, before sending them back to Yei with new skills and three years' worth of salary.

The Bishop also spent time at Lisburn Cathedral, where he met members of cathedral teams who have travelled to both Yei and Uganda in the past.

At a special breakfast with parishioners in the cathedral, Bishop Levi spoke about his path to becoming bishop, and about life in Yei, which he said is 'getting back

to normal' following another period of civil war.

"There are still cases of insecurity as a group of rebels did not sign the peace agreement," he said. "Some people remained behind, like us, and some have come back, but many are still in the camps."



Bishop Levi and Mama Agnes have four daughters and two sons, aged from four to 24. He recalled how he was confirmed aged 16, and called to go for theological training in 2000. That year, he met Archdeacon Paul Dundas, rector of Christ Church, Lisburn, when Paul was delivering training at the Bishop Alison Theological

College in Arua, Uganda.

"In 2005 I was ordained as a deacon and in 2006 as a priest. When I completed my studies in Bishop Alison Theological College, the principal asked me to stay on as assistant tutor. In 2009, Bishop Hilary of Yei asked me to come back to South Sudan, and I was posted to Goli, a parish 20 miles west of Yei town, where I remained until last year," the Bishop said.

He received a call in November 2020, telling him he had been chosen as one of six candidates potentially to succeed Bishop Hilary when he retired.

"I was consecrated as Bishop in Yei Cathedral on June 20 last year. It was a joyful service. The cathedral was not big enough and many people had to stay outside. There were 6,000 worshippers! It was great," he said.

Looking to the future of Yei Diocese, Bishop Levi said ministry and evangelism were a priority. "In South Sudan, we have a population of more than 11 million and four million of these are members of the Anglican Church, but an element of teaching is missing and we need to train people.

"Our biggest problem is education. The majority of our people never had the chance to go to school between 1955 and our independence in 2011. Only 26 per cent can read and write. We need to improve this. My predecessors laid good foundations, many schools were established, but we have 110 teachers and out of these, only 13 are trained. If we can get more teachers trained, they can offer a quality education in our schools and these teachers will change the future."

The Bishop said his third focus was projects. "As a Church, in South Sudan we are dependent, and much of the support for projects comes from the western world, organisations like CMS. What we are missing is support for clergy. Clergy are not paid, they volunteer in faith. We have 96 priests, and they find it difficult to pay school fees for their children, even to feed themselves.

"Our prayer is to establish a coffee growing project which in 5-10 years will produce enough coffee for us to sell and make money for our clergy. We are encouraging clergy to grow coffee and we will sell it and give the money to them."

## Cloughfern marks 70th anniversary



Cutting the anniversary cake are children of founder members of the Church of the Ascension, Cloughfern Parish: Tom Fulton, Maebeth (Waite) Wilson, Christine Hunter, and Eleanor (Fulton) Robinson.

Bishop Levi and Mama Agnes with some of those members of Lisburn Cathedral who attended a breakfast on August 13. Opposite page, the Bishop speaking at the breakfast.

Cloughfern Parish celebrated its 70th anniversary over the weekend of June 4-5.

Members of the newly-formed parish began meeting in 1951 in a converted barn in Fernagh Estate, and the new Church of the Ascension, Cloughfern, was built around 18 months later. It was formally dedicated by Bishop Charles Irwin, on Ascension Day, May 24 1952.

In 1953, work began on a parochial hall, built mainly by volunteer labour. After a complete redecoration, and the installation of a stained-glass east window, the church was formally consecrated on May 21 1955.

Since then, Cloughfern Parish has had five incumbents and eight curates.

The celebrations began on June 4, with a Platinum Jubilee lunch. There was a special display of biscuits decorated for the church's jubilee by the Sunday School. A slideshow of photos ran throughout the afternoon, and the event ended with a quiz.

On June 5 there was a special service in celebration of the Jubilee, when parishioners gave thanks for the service and dedication of the Queen and those in the parish who have given of their time and energies over the last 70 years.



The Bishop of Yei enjoying his first experience of swimming in the sea at Portstewart!

Bishop Levi also wants to improve the church-run Martha Clinic which had good support from a UK partner, but that is likely to end in the wake of Covid-19. "This is a concern as we may not raise enough to pay the staff to maintain the clinic. We also want to raise the standard of the clinic and build a medical ward," he said.

Returning to education, Bishop Levi said that the number of girls attending school dropped in their secondary school years, due to pregnancy and early marriage. "In some communities, the culture does not allow girls to go to school," he explained. "The Church and Government are encouraging girl child education, but if a parent has two children, a boy and a girl, and they cannot pay for both to go to school, they will send the boy. These are the challenges we are facing."

He said people were returning to their homes in Yei, as the world economic crisis meant life in the refugee camps had

become more difficult. "But when they come back, they find life in Yei is also difficult," he said. "They find their tukul has been burned down and they have to begin from zero, or those who had built a house find there is someone else living in it. How to feed themselves is a big question."

The Bishop has recently been visiting churches in refugee camps in Uganda and Congo. "The reception they gave me left me in tears. You sit and talk to them and hear their troubles. In South Sudan and Yei, the Church is their only hope," he said. "In all their suffering, you can see joy in their faces when they dance and worship God."

Bishop Levi described the Mothers' Union as a strong ministry. "In the Church, we find that the number of women is greater than the number of men. The MU offers fellowship, counselling, they visit hospitals and families. They advise the Young Christian Families Association on how they should take care of their home, children and visitors," he explained.

Yei Vocational Training Centre (VTC) is doing well. "This year we have 158 students, many of the drivers and builders in the area have been to the VTC. For young ones leaving school for one reason or another, Yei VTC becomes an answer," the Bishop said. "Also for parents unable to pay for their children to go to university. They all get the skills to help themselves."

And the Bishop said he had been encouraged by his time at the Lambeth Conference. "Lambeth was my first time outside Africa. I met people from all over the world, and I felt like I was not alone. I also felt a great spirit of unity among Anglican churches. That makes me so happy and I feel that I am in the right place."



The Rev Jacob Mercer was introduced as Priest-in-Charge of St Brigid's, Mallusk, at a special service on May 31. The Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison, is pictured with Jacob, third from left, and clergy at the service. Photo: Victor McCabe.