

Training teachers in a refugee situation

Once again, I learned that God hears and answers our prayers, and that miracles occur – he is able to multiply the modest gifts we have to bless others

Refugee teachers

‘OK, OK! Salaam aleikum! Ca va?’ comes the greeting from children’s voices as we first arrive from the UK at a refugee camp in Chad for people displaced from the Darfur region of neighbouring Sudan. Chad is home to more than 200,000 refugees – many are children.

David Geary and I were in Chad as members of the Senior Volunteer Network (SVN), seconded to CORD (Christian Outreach, Relief & Development) to provide training to over 300 students in three camps who were, or aspired to be, school teachers. For five weeks we worked with various groups of students, usually for eight days at a time. Some groups were so large we had to split them in two and work double shifts.

We lived in ‘tukuls’ (African round huts); we travelled in land cruisers over rough roads and



John and Azhari presenting certificates at Treguine



John and Azhari preparing certificates at Gaga

through swollen wadis, occasionally getting stuck in the middle; and we ate the same meagre food as our students.

Teaching and learning

But where do you start on a project like this? There were no relevant training manuals, we spoke English whilst our students spoke Arabic, and this is one of the poorest parts of Africa! We began by asking ourselves: ‘What basic knowledge and skills do teachers need when they first walk into the classroom?’

Although we had been provided by Sara Lim, Director of Educational Development for Bredjing and Treguine camps, with a list of topics that ought to be covered, we had to prioritise what could be covered in the limited time available. In the end, we decided to focus on explaining the most important things in the simplest terms.

The challenge was to explain things at the right level, using the appropriate educational terms otherwise we would be talking even more of a ‘foreign language’! Thankfully, our interpreter, Azhari (a learned man with three major science degrees who had taught in Sudan, Kenya and India), was able to make sense of most of what we were saying.

Our choice of topics included: how children learn; how to get children to become active learners by

participating in lessons; how to plan and resource lessons; teaching language; and teaching maths.

Lectures, discussions, group activities and practical work enabled students to see different teaching styles in action. Actually, we ended up running the course very much like teachers in a classroom. We hoped our students would benefit from experiencing different learning styles themselves.

David Geary and I were left to ponder: 'How can you teach effectively in a situation like this? And how can you train students to teach in such a situation?'

Sowing seeds

In one camp we had access to a classroom. It had brick walls, a tin roof, open windows, no door and a dirt floor. 40–50 adults faced the tiny blackboard at the front, eagerly waiting to hear what we had to say. Each of our students had their own exercise book and pen. The students were of various ages. All had had some primary education, some had even taught. But most came from different walks of Sudanese life. Farmers, builders and bakers who had lost everything sat there, ready to become teachers. Even young teenagers crept in to get some training, no doubt hoping to leap from being pupil to teacher in 8 days!

As I taught I couldn't help but wonder how much of the training these students would remember. Once I was long gone, would these teachers have the knowledge, resources, organisational management skills and confidence to try out some of the new ideas presented to them?

Throughout the weeks we became increasingly aware of the fact that we were like 'the sower who



A group of students in lectures

went forth to sow'. Undoubtedly, some 'seeds' fell in more fertile 'soil' than others.

The students received our training with enthusiasm and, for the most part, paid due attention. But, in that heat and humidity, and on an empty stomach, it is quite understandable that occasionally somebody 'nodded off'!

Better than the UN

At the end of each course, students invariably remarked that what they had received from us was better than the training delivered by the UN! Every participant (teenagers included) received a certificate stating that they had attended a course on 'the philosophy, principles and practice in education'.

Of course, now it is up to these teachers to try to use what they have learned during the course to make an impact on the next generation and raise the standards of education.

On reflection, this was the toughest project that SVN has undertaken in its nine-year history. Most projects undertaken are not this difficult. Living in a refugee camp for five weeks was a struggle sometimes, but – so I keep reminding myself – I always knew I would be returning to a home in England with a comfortable bed and a fridge full of food. Our refugee friends, on the other hand, may still be relying on UN handouts for years to come. Once again, I learned that God hears and answer our prayers, and that miracles occur – he is able to multiply the modest gifts we have to bless others.

■ John Crump

Information

If you would like to hear more about this project, please invite John to talk to your ACT Local Group.

The Senior Volunteer Network desperately needs more volunteers to complete projects in 2006. If you are a retired or semi-retired teacher and feel God is calling you to offer your time and talents to support educational initiatives in the UK or overseas please contact John Crump, Executive Director of SVN, at:

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The tukul provided for accommodation