



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Mr. Obang Metho speaks to the students and faculty of Bethel University, Minnesota

November 19, 2007

Scripture from Philippians 1:9-11.

And this is my prayer; that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Thank you for inviting me to speak before you today on this beautiful campus. It is an honor and privilege to speak to the students and faculty of Bethel University. I live in Saskatoon, Canada, but I have some strong connections to Bethel—one of which is the fact that my brother and sister-in-law are now studying here at the seminary. They are very devout Christians.

But four years ago, when someone asked me whether I was a Christian, I said, “I’m a Sunday Christian.” In other words, I went to church, but it was only skin deep. But then, something happened and God reached out to me, and my life has changed forever. It all began with the most tragic event I have ever experienced—the genocide of my people which began on December 13, 2003. However, before I start there, I want to tell you about myself and how I became a defender of human rights. The groundwork began many years ago.

When I was very young, I remember the day my friend and I were playing when he was bitten by a snake and died. I wished all snakes would be killed. I remember a young girl who had babysat for me who had gone to the river where she was taken by a crocodile. I asked why there were crocodiles and wished they would all be killed. One of my younger twin brothers died in one day from the fever of malaria. I wished for medicine for him.

My cousin died because the water he drank gave him a waterborne disease. I wished for clean water. I remember the young neighbor girl from my village who had a difficult birth. Both she and her baby died. I wished for a hospital. I asked my grandmother why people had to die, wishing that they would be like rocks and live forever. I asked her why we were here on this earth. She gave me an answer I have never forgotten. She told me that God has brought all of us to this world and has many purposes for why we are here. Above all, our purpose is protection---loving yourself, loving your family, loving others, your village, your community, your country and above all, protecting human being

My name is Obang Metho. Obang means third born son to the Anuak in my ethnic group. There are a lot of us named Obang. If I had been a girl, my parents would have named me, Abang, with an A. First borns are named Omot if a boy and Ariet if a girl. Second borns are named Ojullu if a boy and Ajullu if a girl. After three children, you can do what you want! If you are twin boys, your names are Opiew and Ochan or if girls, Apiew and Achan.

After twins, your name will be Okello or Akello. If you are the only boy amongst older sisters, your name will be Oman. If you are the only girl, your name will be Awelli. Your children then take their father's first name as their last and their grandfather's name as their middle name. Someone could essentially be called Obang Obang Obang. Besides that, we have many nicknames. I can be called any of these.

I grew up with my parents, my four brothers, my grandmother and many of my relatives in a village outside of Gambella, Ethiopia which is on the southwestern border of the country bordering Sudan. Many Anuak live in Sudan as well and that is actually where my mother was born.

The Anuak people are called people of the river as they are of Nilotic background and have lived in the area of the Upper Nile for many years. The Gambella area is unlike most other areas of Ethiopia and is very tropical. We have more than enough water and according to a Russian study done in the 80'ties, nearly 2/3rds of the water flowing into the Nile comes from this area. Former Minister of Federal Affairs, called the Gambella region the potential breadbasket of Ethiopia, if not of the whole Horn of Africa and extending into the Middle East.

Ethiopia is an ancient country in the Horn of Africa and there are many references to it in the Bible. In terms of population, Ethiopia is second to the largest country in Africa with over 75 million people. We have about 80 different ethnic groups of which my ethnic group is among the smallest. We are only about .01% of the population.

The current government called the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has been in power since 1991 when the current Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, overthrew the government of the previous communist dictator Haile Mengistu. Ethiopia is a partner to the US in the War on Terror, but most Ethiopians will tell you he is a terrorist to his own people and an untrustworthy ally of the US.

When I was growing up in Ethiopia, we Anuak were sometimes not considered true Ethiopians due to our different skin color, culture, language and background and even because of the differences between the dry high regions of the country and the hot, tropical lowlands of the Upper Nile where we lived along with many mosquitoes and crocodiles.

For years, the Anuak have been neglected by the larger mainstream Ethiopians; that is unless we were needed to fight in a war at which time soldiers would come to our schools and take the tallest, oldest boys by force. We lacked just about everything--clean water, health care, education beyond 8th grade and many opportunities, but we had a rich culture and our name, Anuak, meant people who share and laugh together.

Yet, many of us wanted to go to the west to get an education. That was my dream and I was given the opportunity to do so when I was 17 years old when I applied at the Canadian Embassy and was accepted for immigration to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in Canada. It was quite a shock going from such a hot, tropical climate to the cold north, but it didn't bother me and I immediately started 11th grade.

I had to set my own alarm and ride my bike to buy groceries that I cooked myself. I even attended my own parent/teacher school conferences. I was the only person of African descent at the school and would only see another in the community, once every month or two. However, I did something no Anuak probably had ever done before—I started playing hockey.

After graduating in Political Science from the University of Saskatchewan, I decided to return to Gambella. I was struck by the fact that it was unchanged and that the people were still suffering from neglect and poverty. I decided to start a development agency to called Gambella Development Agency <http://www.gambelladevelopmentagency.ca/> help bring clean water, health services and other development to the area. The area had great potential due to abundant natural resources—water, gold, minerals, fertile land and oil.

Unfortunately, it was a fever for this oil that incited a series of events that have led me to stand here before you today. However, when I look deeper, I know that God had something much greater in mind to overcome the evil I am about to tell you about. That oil was only the catalyst. Yet because of my development work, I was poised, but not ready for what was about to happen.

On December 13, 2003, Ethiopian Defense troops and some highlander militia groups went from one Anuak home to another and in less than three days, slaughtered 424 Anuak in a well-calculated plan utilizing a prepared list of the names of educated Anuak men and leaders. Those killed included some of my family members, my classmates and many of my colleagues I had been working with in the development work. These were very dark days for me.

One of the first on the list to be targeted was a devout middle-aged pastor, Okwier Oletho, the father of my sister-in-law who now attends Bethel and who had visited Calvary Church of Roseville only months before. His wife was returning from visiting a sick relative when soldiers and highlander militia came to his home during a prayer meeting. After they set his hut on fire, he jumped out a window. As he ran he was hacked and mutilated with the highlander's machetes before being shot in the back by Ethiopian soldiers in uniform. His wife witnessed his death along with the death of other male relatives and attendees of the prayer meeting. Choir members at the church were also killed that day.

Women and young girls were raped, at times in front of their husbands and fathers before they were killed, while the perpetrators taunted them with the slogan, 'Today is the day for killing Anuak,' and telling the victims of rape, 'Now you won't have Anuak babies.' They then set their homes and crops on fire, leaving countless widows, children and elders with almost no means of support.

Almost simultaneously with the beginning of the human rights abuses, an oil company from China began its work to drill for oil. Information uncovered by human rights investigators indicate that these crimes were part of an Ethiopian government-instigated plan with an actual name, Operation Sunny Mountain, with the objective of eliminating any resistance to federal government control over the oil.

When the Anuak were killed, there was nearly total silence in Ethiopia and in the international community. But, students at Bethel were not silent. Some started a letter writing campaign to your Senators and Congressional Representatives, working with other Anuak. You supported the Anuak at this time. Many of you are too new here to remember. I thank you and what you stand for in doing this.

I became involved immediately, but connected to Minnesota through the Anuak Church that met at Calvary Church of Roseville. They contacted me and brought me together with others here working to stop the continued killing and other human rights crimes going on. We worked with Herb Klem at Bethel seminary in setting up a trip to Africa to interview victim survivors and witnesses of the killing.

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Another Anuak man and I were accompanied by a human rights investigator resulting in a comprehensive report. Because no one spoke for them, the Anuak had to advocate for themselves. As a result, the Anuak Justice Council, also called the AJC, was set up to protect the rights of the Anuak, wherever they were found. I have traveled to many cities in Canada, the US and in Europe to speak to government officials and groups, the UN and human rights organizations.

The AJC is working with two law firms doing pro bono work for us, resulting in the case of the Anuak being accepted by the African Union. Since this time, we have expanded our vision to include other Ethiopians and I have spoken to Ethiopian groups in over 30 cities.

Since that time, the AJC has broadened its vision to include other Ethiopians, believing that justice will never come to the Anuak unless justice comes to all Ethiopians. We are encouraging a transformation of thinking calling Ethiopians to fear God and to respect each other as equals, created in God's image. We are calling for unity between very divided sections of society.

It is not always easy, but it is amazing the new relationships that are being created because of it. But there will be resistance and we ask for prayer to break through such resistance. Yet, God has given me the opportunity to speak to groups who will not speak to each other. This past weekend, we were able to bring groups together who have never come together before. It was amazing, but yet this is difficult and we need God's grace and help.

Yet, until there is a transformation of thinking, peace, justice, freedom, democracy and equality is not possible. This takes time to bring people together in reconciliation, but Jesus has provided an example for us in reconciling us to God through his death in our place; thereby giving us forgiveness to enter into peace with God. As followers of Jesus, may God help us in our work, and all of you in whatever you are doing and will do—business, medicine, music, social work, science, education and so forth, to integrate that into everything you do.

Recently an Ethiopian told me, “There is not a single organization in Ethiopia which has shaken the ground in Ethiopian justice like the AJC, not only for the minorities but for all of us. Other Ethiopians have asked, “You come from the marginalized groups. You have been treated horribly. On top of that, your people were killed in a horrific killing while the rest of the people sat by doing nothing and then you come out and embrace the people. What happened? You should be the last ones to do it and instead you are the first to do so. Why?”

As I told you, before the massacre of the Anuak, I was a Sunday Christian, but I became influenced by people around me who were Christians and by how God provided for us in this work through very difficult times when nothing seemed possible. I began to read the Bible and looked at what God had to say about the meaning of life, about justice and my own purpose in life. I started to understand how much God cares about people and how He had put me in a position to help them with His help. I started understanding that because God created us in His own image, that each of us is precious and that we showed our humanity through our emotions.

I started to understand that if I looked at the Anuak children as better than others, that God would judge me and say this is not right. He will say, this is not what I want from you. As we in the AJC started our work, we were empowered by God's law and made this our foundation. The Bible is full of wisdom regarding human rights because without God, there is no authority for human rights.

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Neither is there the same motivation to forgive. God empowered me to not hold a grudge against those who killed the Anuak. If I don't forgive and still hold a grudge, it is like wishing them death as well. It is through forgiving them that I am enabled by God to arise out of this and allow God to bring about a bigger purpose so that these loved ones did not die in vain. Instead, God can use this tragedy to tell others never to do the same. If I hold a desire for revenge—wanting to let someone die for it, I am going to be enslaved by it. Instead, I want to try to teach others, including those who did it, to not to kill another human being.

God has freed me to say what is in my heart without fear and with the language of love. Those who are full of revenge or fear, will sit by while they watch their fellow human beings die or be the cause of future deaths. These people need to be educated, enlightened beyond this to understand that one's job is not only to sustain one's own daily life, but also the lives of others.

God gives us His message so that we can be messengers of love and peace. If the AJC had not been founded on Christian principles, we would have never had reached out to larger oppressed community of Ethiopians. If God had not showed His faithfulness to me, I would be afraid, but now I am only afraid of not living fully for Him. That is my daily, not just Sunday, purpose.

Yet, in Ethiopia, hate, fear and dehumanization of the people is a means to better control the people. When the people are divided, they are weakened and opposition to the government is minimized. For instance, the government promotes such policies of creating ethnic division. In very calculated moves to break down any possibilities of cooperation between diverse groups, the government officials will disarm one group of people and provide arms to a rival group. As the victims seek help from the government to stop the other groups, they seldom get it, it simply builds up more anger. They both then get caught in cycles of revenge, forgetting their humanity and the humanity of others outside their groups.

For instance, when the Anuak of Gambella were killed by Ethiopian Defense troops, the government had provided machetes to the neighbors of the Anuak who came from different ethnic groups. Pro-government supporters purposely incited them to join with the Ethiopian military in committing the violence. This happened in Rwanda between the Hutus and the Tutsis as well.

The Ethiopian government is not only behind many of these ethnic conflicts, they are also directly committing human rights abuses over the country. However no one has talked very openly about it for at least three reasons. First, if anyone protested, they could be severely punished. These protestors might lose their jobs, privileges, freedom or lives if you failed to support the government in every way. People living in this culture of oppression, have become controlled by fear.

Secondly, the current government pretends to be a good democratic government and actively represses information that is negative to their public image. They became very adept at speaking the language of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and of people's rights; however, in practice, they were repressive and dictatorial.

Their last national election was rigged according to many independent observers and justice is no where to be found since court decisions follow no really protocol and are totally controlled as a way to punish. Billions of dollars of aid from countries like the US, Canada and the European Union ends up in the pockets of the elite, never reaching the poor. Poverty is worse than ever in Ethiopia. For instance, in a recent international index of trade and development, Ethiopia is near to the bottom despite huge amounts of aid.

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Thirdly, if the human rights abuses it did not happen to you or your ethnic group, it did not seem to matter to others. For example, when the Anuak were killed, it was not even mentioned in most of the Ethiopian media, even that media which was not controlled by the government. Neither did it appear in our media as the same reluctance to advertise the ugly truth about such human rights crimes can occur when the perpetrator is considered to be a partner with us in the War on Terror.

Sometimes we believe it is in our national or economic interest to not bring these human rights crimes to the attention of the international community because we might lose our ally; however, in doing so, we risk losing the people of the country who are angry or disillusioned with us for our failure to do so once the government is replaced. These issues may be complex, but as Christians, we may have to take a stand against evil wherever it is found, especially if it means standing up for the oppressed and vulnerable.

Consider this passage from Isaiah 58:6 when God says he “hates” religious practice that pretends to be religious, but does not **“loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke...”** or when He speaks through David in Psalm 10:18, saying, **“I will protect them... defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.”**

Despite the silence, in Ethiopia and in much of Africa, people are killing the most vulnerable in their societies like animals. Worse than that, there have been no legal consequences. Many of those who end up suffering the most are the children. These crimes are frequently committed by various arms of the governments ruled by corrupt dictators.

Why? Because they forget their humanity and that God has a purpose for their lives. If you don't know your purpose or know why you are here and if you don't have a spiritual relationship with God, you will not see how you and other human beings are created in His image. Once you realize it, you will never devalue others by killing, raping or torturing other human beings. People who do are like mechanical beings with empty souls and hearts. They are disconnected from their souls.

What is the solution? Here is one for those who have been victims of others or perpetrators. In Gambella this past summer, the church held a reconciliation meeting where Anuak showed love by reaching out to those who were from those highlander ethnic groups who had participated in the December 2003 massacre of the Anuak, some were next-door neighbors to their victim's families.

People were overjoyed with the results of this new beginning. Undeserved love is what is most powerful when given freely. This is what needs to happen and people who have been forgiven for their sins through the sacrifice of Jesus, are freed to extend forgiveness to others as well. Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Reconciliation like this that could be duplicated, could produce tremendous healing and transformation to a country.

Right now, horrific human rights abuses are going on in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia and in Somalia, which is directly across the Ethiopian border in the southeastern part of Ethiopia. Have you heard of this? Many of you may not have. It is a silent Darfur in seriousness and in numbers. The same Ethiopian troops who committed the human rights atrocities in Gambella to the Anuak have now moved their troops to the Ogaden and Somalia. Countless civilians have been killed, women have been raped, homes burned and cattle shot in order to destroy their livelihood. Estimates are that 170,000 people have become refugees and that they are starving with assistance covering only 60,000 of them. Reports are that Ethiopian troops are indiscriminately shooting civilians and calling them terrorists.

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A recent example is the burning the village of Caado in the Ogaden that was home to thousands of Ogadenis. The people were told to leave and when they did not, the government's troops burned down the village, reportedly they searched for terrorists. However, most Ogadenis realize that it was simply a ploy to control the area that just happened to be very close to where the same oil company that was previously in Gambella was now going to drill their next bore hole for oil and natural gas there.

Right now, the people of the Ogaden and other Muslims in the country become easy targets in the post 9-11 War on Terror culture by simply telling outsiders that they are terrorists. Listen to the paraphrased words of this Ogadeni man who just gave testimony this weekend before other Ethiopians to the human rights crimes going on in his region of Ethiopia. "I am here as an Ogadeni, a Muslim, a Somalian and an Ethiopian, but what people think I am a radical terrorist. I am not either. I am not a radical and I am not a terrorist. Look where I am standing! I am giving this testimony in a church of Jesus Christ. I know Jesus Christ values humans. I know both Jesus and Muhammad believed humans are equal in God's eyes. I ask you, "Do you know who I am? Do you care? To me, you don't know who I am and don't care...Now, Ethiopians are killing us.

They have blocked the Red Cross from helping. They are using rape as a weapon and when they come to kill us, they are wearing Ethiopian uniforms. We must look at America and follow their example. Muslims and Christians can both peacefully worship in churches and in mosques. Look at how Americans act when others in the country are victims of a tornado or other disaster—they show concern. This is not the case in Ethiopia. Instead, we need a change of thinking that will bring us together. No one will reject being loved and accepted—they will love it."

This man talked about American being a model for caring for others, but we know that we have difficulties too. Here too we need to go back to God. For those who are born again and have fallen in love with Jesus, we need to be those who speak out regardless of where someone comes from or if they have different beliefs from ours. If Jesus came here today, what do you think he would do? He was someone who spoke out for those in need because of His love for every person. He died for humanity not just for certain categories of humanity.

Think about the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10: 25-37. When an expert in the law was told by Jesus, '**Love your neighbor as yourself,**' in order to justify himself, he then asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbor?' Jesus tells him the parable most of you know where a man was robbed and left for dead at the side of the road. Two religious leaders in the community saw him, but then passed by on the other side of the road, looking the other way. The good neighbor ended up to be the one who showed mercy to the injured man. Without asking the man at the side of the road his ethnicity, his religion or his political party, the "**Good Samaritan**" took pity on him and demonstrated what it means to 'love your neighbor as yourself.' He bandaged the man's wounds, took him to an inn to care for him and paid his expenses.

It is you young people who have the future in your hands- yours and to some extent, the future of others as well. You have a God-given purpose for your life. You can destroy it by carelessness. You can ignore the pain of others by looking the other way or you can help bring someone back on the right path by showing them they are valuable. You can be a Good Samaritan to those all around you, reminding them through your smile, your words or your kind actions that God loves them and created them in His image.

When you know the love of Jesus, we must be different. We cannot ignore the pain of another, regardless if they are like us or not. In this global world, our neighbors are closer than ever through the media and the Internet. However, very close to us are the 18,000 Ogadenians and some 40,000 Somalis who live in the Twin Cities.

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These are people among us whose families, classmates, community members and people who are being slaughtered while others in their country and in our world don't even know and many don't even care. It seems like they are our neighbors more than every before. How can we come by their side and show them our love? How can we show love as Jesus did? Can we be the Good Samaritans by stopping by the side of the road and paying attention?

Right now, the US Congress unanimously passed a law H.R. 2003 (also known as "Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007") that would help promote democracy, freedom, human rights and accountability in Ethiopia. Please visit the following link <http://www.hr2003.org> for more information. It is now going to the Senate. The US is in a powerful position to address these horrific human rights abuses going on in all of Ethiopia, but especially in the Ogaden and in Somalia. The Ethiopian prime minister justifies his actions by saying he is going after terrorists, but some suspect he has used it as a ploy to advance his own interests. For example, according to confidential reports we received from eyewitnesses during the Muslim-Christian violence that occurred in Ethiopia last year, eye-witnesses reported that pro-government groups posed as Islamic radical extremists, but were identified by locals as government plants—some not even Muslim, but of Christian background—backed up by the ENDF.

This is critical information pertinent in the War on Terror so that real terrorists are stopped while at the same time, the current prime minister does not stir up violence against the innocent to his own advantage. Ethiopia has been a place of peace between Muslims, Christians and Jews ever since Muhammad's followers were received with warm hospitality after being instructed by him to go to Ethiopia for refuge.

Ethiopian Muslims and Christians could be models for demonstrating how to live in peace and respect with each other despite differing faiths, yet most westerners do not know about this and assume the opposite. This is very well documented in Ethiopian culture. Ethiopians may have had countless ethnically-based conflicts, but nearly no history of religious conflicts. Ogadenis do not want terrorists in their country and yet are being terrorized themselves by the Ethiopian government. No one seems to care or notice this silent Darfur, yet if Christians stood up for these Muslims, suffering at the hands of their own government, it would make a tremendous impact and create bridges of friendship beyond what we could imagine.

What would such actions mean to you if 170,000 people in the Twin Cities suddenly were driven from their homes and our food supply was cut off—our medical care was totally unavailable, our young men were shot for simply looking suspicious—and our women were raped by men in uniform? What if our means of survival were suddenly taken from us? It would mean a lot for others from some other place to stand up for us, but these people are among us, so are more Ethiopian Oromo—about 20,000 in the Twin Cities and more Anuak than any other place in the world outside of Africa.

Yet, it is not only about these people- even in the US and even here at Bethel, we are not divided by ethnic groups, but we humans do have a way of setting up artificial obstacles to that divide and alienate each other. Yet, as the Scripture tells us in Revelations 8: 9, **in heaven there will be a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.** Let us be the light of Jesus shining in the darkness

We don't need any more Sunday Christians. Let us show them who we are and may we discover who they are, both of us created in the image of our God Almighty! Let us be outraged at such evil as He is outraged. Let us be His hands, tools and hearts for these people that HE loves just as He loves us.

May God lead us to be the fragrance of Jesus, living lives filled with integrity, love and purpose.
Thank you.

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