



## October: Month of Mission

**Emer Kerrigan, Operations Manager, Irish Jesuits International describes her time in South Sudan and the work of the IJI ([www.iji.ie](http://www.iji.ie)).**

Irish men and women going abroad on mission has led to the birth of a healthy, lasting relationship with our brothers and sisters in the Global South. Mary McAleese during her presidency described Irish missionaries as the first ambassadors of Ireland. The face of Irish missioanries has changed over the years, with many Irish lay women and men getting involved in lay missionary work and the international development sector. This solidarity with the poor and excluded continues from our Irish shores.

Irish Jesuits International (IJI), popularly known as Irish Jesuit Missions, is the outreach of the Irish Province for the Global South. Hundreds of Irish Jesuits have served in Africa and the East over the years. Twelve now remain. Our most recent missionary from Cork, Tony O’Riordan SJ, will take up a new mission in Syria this year.

My own lay mission, eighteen years ago, still influences how I live today. IJI facilitated my two years with Jesuit Refugee Service in Lobone, South Sudan. At the time, the south was



fighting the north for independence. To live in a country that at that time had no name (people were considering New Sudan, South Sudan or Southern Sudan), no flag and no official government appointees was an experience to remember. The education-related needs of teachers and displaced children were immense. Our work was welcomed wholeheartedly. Surrounded by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), infamous for its child soldiers, the camp was a red zone that the UN would not enter. Hunger for information of the world outside was tremendous. The camp would receive three copies of the national

Bunj, South Sudan: A teacher distributes chalkboard tablets to students in a primary school, sponsored by JRS. (Paul Jeffrey/Misean Cara)



newspaper, which would be posted up on the local market notice-board so those that could read could share news on the fight for independence or the latest ambush. With no landlines, no mobile phone reception, no postal service and no internet, the camp of 33,000 relied primarily on radio. To think that so many people are still living this way is heartbreaking.

The loss over the last year of some of our colleagues who were on mission, lay and Jesuit, to COVID-19 has deeply affected me. Our oldest missionary, Fr Michel J Kelly RIP, who was featured on an Irish stamp, died of COVID-19 in Zambia this year. At a

time when we celebrate receiving our vaccinations in Ireland, so many in the Global South have no access to vaccinations. Many countries are simply not able to afford a national roll out. When I ask our colleagues in the field how they are coping, it is the threat of hunger, famine, drought, floods and Ebola that weigh most heavily upon them, with COVID-19 having to get in line. The challenges that have always faced our partners are not only still there but are exacerbated by this pandemic.

The effects of climate change are clearly being felt most in the countries where we work. We support the work of the Jesuits in Malawi in their ecology project. Floods, droughts and increasingly unstable temperatures are affecting crops and livelihoods. This is leading to an increase in conflicts as food and water become scarce.

Our partners span across fourteen countries. Our support includes emergency provision of food and healthcare, such as our recent Ethiopia Appeal. Other programmes are more long-term – educating refugee children in Lebanon, training teachers in South Sudan and training refugee women in tailoring in Uganda. Last year we reached over 140,680 vulnerable people. It is truly humbling to see what our support and presence can facilitate for our partners. We continue our commitment to serve and walk with the excluded and care for our common home. This is what sharing the Good News of the Gospel is about. This is what 'Missions Month' 2021 means to us. ❤️