

Report Outline:

- I. *Brief South Sudan Context Update*
- II. *Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS) EDUCATION Update*
 1. *Capacity Building with PCOSS Education Department*
 2. *Teacher Training at Yei Teacher Training College (YTTC)*
 3. *Mobile Teacher Training*
 4. *Community Mobilization*
- III. *PEACEBUILDING Update*
 5. *RECONCILE Peace Institute*
- IV. *Testimonies of Impact*
- V. *Challenges*
- VI. *Financial Update*
- VII. *Mission Co-Workers' Update*



Team-Building Activity at RECONCILE Peace Institute

I. Brief South Sudan Context Update:

Writing that the situation in South Sudan feels uncertain, seems a strange statement to make since uncertainty became the norm a long time ago. Many South Sudanese do not know which way things will go: “If the opposition leader returns to the capital and the government of national unity is formed, then things will calm down,” some say. At the same time, rumors pass over hot tea of young men going to the bush to join the “opposition” and both sides amassing weapons to return to war.

Paralyzed by the uncertainty, unable to move, would be a natural response to life in such extreme tension, yet our eyes see something quite different. A stubborn determination to work for change drives many church and community leaders to press forward. In these unpredictable days, the hands of believers cling to their faith, unwilling to let go. Release of their main survival skill would certainly be the end.

For such a time as this, peace-builders have been trained. For such a time as this, they learned that the road of non-violence is not for the weak. For such a time as this, RECONCILE Peace Institute (RPI) instructor, Dr. Lewis Tait, Jr, told South Sudanese women that they too are made in the image of God. Their male counterparts need them in the peacebuilding process. “It won’t happen without you,” he urged his few timid female students. For such a time as this...

PC(USA) Africa Area Coordinator, Rev. Debbie Braaksma, remembers the first time PCOSS Evangelist, Othow Okoti, came to RECONCILE International for training. “He seemed very traumatized,” she recalls. Over time, however, she witnessed his healing, and she could see his incredible gifts for facilitating reconciliation.

In March this year, life-taking violence broke out in Othow’s hometown, Pochalla, an area targeted by the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project (SSEPP) for training teachers, mobilizing the community, and school construction. Othow risked his life to mediate a ceasefire. “Currently I have talked to both sides,” came an email update from Othow

during the fighting. "I have talked to them about the suffering of children and women in the army barrack, and they accepted my requested..." Othow helped stop the attacks and his advocacy allowed a group of displaced women and children to return to their homes.

With heavy hearts, the YTTC and RPI students from Pochalla gathered at the Smith-Mather's home for prayers. "Politics is not the cause of the fighting in our area," one young student-teacher passionately argued. "The cause is illiteracy," he stated, the link between education and peace tangible in his mind. In his hometown, he explained, those who are illiterate are easily swayed by a few leaders with big titles and divisive ideas.

Peacebuilders, trauma counselors, and primary school teachers have been trained this quarter through the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project. They are deeply needed, for such a time as this.

II. EDUCATION Update:

1. Capacity Building with PCOSS Education Department:

- **PCOSS Board of Education:** The board, which last met in 2012, is reactivated and new members appointed.
- **School Data Collected:** 14 PCOSS Primary Schools and 1 Secondary School are operating. A list of head teachers, student populations, and contact information was compiled.
- **Strengthening Existing Schools:** 10 pedagogic and administrative visits made to 7 schools. 2 proposals submitted to faith-based organizations for basic resources (i.e. textbooks and chalkboards). The *PCOSS Education News* first quarter 2016 is ready for print. Numerous communications yielded appointments with 3 NGOs to discuss their support of PCOSS schools.
- **Education Director's Training:** Rev. Nyang is winding up studies in CORAT's Diploma in School Management. At present, the Education Director has a greater overview of his work and is eager to build his capacity as a leader.

2. Teacher Training through Yei Teacher Training College (YTTC):

- **Recruiting:** The heads of the PCOSS Departments distributed applications and assisted in proper completion and return of the forms. Over 50 forms brought in 30 applicants. Ten were accepted to YTTC and we hope 7, including 3 women, will start YTTC's in-service program in May. The candidates met several times with PCOSS staff to orientate and prepare them for the program. Each signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing they are expected to commit to the program, represent PCOSS' principles during their matriculation, and return to their home schools at the end of their studies.
- **Current Students in Action:** The 8 student-teachers at YTTC continue to be excited about what they are learning and to share their experiences in their home schools, all are slated to graduate in December. During their Christmas holiday, students were involved in their home congregations leading Bible studies, preaching, mentoring children, encouraging education especially of girls, and implementing sports activities to bring reconciliation in the community.
- **Practice Teaching:** YTTC students completed their first teaching practice. *"Their faces lit up when talking about student-teaching. They loved it! The Primary School students they taught were sad to*



YTTC Student, Daniel Omot, loved practice teaching!

see them leave at the end of the practicum.” – Rev. Nancy Smith-Mather

3. Mobile Teacher Training:

- **Collaborating and Preparing:** PCOSS Education Department met with ACROSS 3 times to plan the training of 25 teachers and 15 administrators in Pochalla. Leisa Wagstaff created guides for two additional subjects for ACROSS training manual and prepared learner-centered materials.
- **Delayed by Conflict:** An Across staff member traveled to Pochalla to finalize the selection of the Education Officer and to carry out an assessment. Violent conflict erupted during his visit. He was evacuated after a few days of fighting. Due to insecurity, the teacher training is currently postponed in both Pochalla and Pibor.
- **Assessment Findings in Pochalla:**
 - 140 teachers (including 2 Women) serve in 18 Primary schools. About 60% are untrained volunteers.
 - Most of the schools are from Primary 1-4 and classes are conducted under trees.
 - Lack of a functioning Secondary school causes students to search for further education in Ethiopia or other parts of South Sudan.
- **New Training Plans:** 35 PCOSS teachers in Juba, including several women, are unable to attend training at YTTC for various reasons. A training is now being prepared for them; the budget, timetable, recruitment of facilitators, and content selection are complete.



Pochalla community working together to build a school

4. Community Mobilization:

- **Construction in Pochalla:** Construction materials traveled from Juba to Pochalla, arriving on March 10, after an 8-day journey (500 miles) and the driver and passengers being robbed at gunpoint for their money and cell phones. After a church-led ground breaking ceremony, construction began. Walls were nearly complete when fighting erupted on March 21. Construction will need to resume at a later date. While the new building is being built, classes began in a community donated, incomplete building, divided into classrooms by grass partitions.



Construction progress in Pochalla

- **Pochalla Community Mobilization:** The Presbyterian Education Complex of Pochalla (PECP) was officially introduced to the local government and churches. The 4 YTTC student-teachers helped recruit and register the inaugural class and taught elementary and secondary classes during their holiday, providing valuable insight and leadership. PECP registered 89 students, 42 boys and 47 girls, for Primary 1-8 and the first year of Secondary.
- **Empowering Local School Leadership:** Budgets, timetables, invitation letters, recruitment of facilitators, and content selection are complete for large group workshops for PTAs and School Management Committees (SMC). 2 PTAs and SMCs received initial training.



A volunteer gathering water for school children

- **Community Commitment:** The Akatgol PCOSS Primary School community raised funds to complete the finishing touches on their new classrooms. The Yei PCOSS School Construction Committee built a bamboo fence to protect the children, keep pupils on campus during school hours, and secure the property.
- **New Schools Starting:** In 2016, 4 new schools opened. Teachers volunteer or receive incentives from the community, classroom space is provided without cost by the church or community, and teaching materials such as chalkboards and chalk are provided by the community.
- **Clean Water for Students:** An appointed School Water Management Committee (SWMC) at a new school initiative in a Juba POC (Protection of Civilians) Camp received training on their responsibilities, water access, justice issues, conflict reduction, and record keeping. The Ed. Dept. advocated to PC(USA) mission co-worker Jim McGill,



The water supply prior to the well

and he and his locally trained co-workers volunteered their time and expertise to start drilling a well with the assistance of the community. McGill was in the country working on water and sanitation projects partially funded through the PC(USA) Presbyterian Women’s Birthday Offering.

III. PEACEBUILDING Update

5. The RECONCILE Peace Institute (RPI):

- An increase of applicants for 2016 brought more highly qualified leaders and a more diverse and experienced group of participants. For a second year in a row, RPI is hosting leaders representing the 10 original states of South Sudan, the Nuba Mountains of Sudan and the refugee camps of Uganda.
- *“There is a sweet spirit among this group,”* said RPI Principal and mission co-worker, Rev. Shelvis Smith-Mather, referring to the bonding taking place among the participants.
- The 2016 class orientation and 4 of 6 modules were completed this quarter.
- A team of more than fifteen (15) alumni are assisting in coordinating the institute.

IV. Testimonies of Impact

- **Education:** The Pochalla student teachers expressed their excitement about the construction while meeting with mission co-worker, Sharon Kandel. They hope to teach in the new building in December. *“These students have faced numerous challenges recently but are steadfast in their faith that God is in control and will work things out with time”* —mission co-worker, Lynn Kandel
- After visiting a school next to an airstrip/runway, Leisa Wagstaff wondered how the children could learn and the volunteer teachers could teach with so much loud noise. *“I could only think that our teachers are really trying and our children really want to learn.”* — mission co-worker, Leisa Wagstaff
- PCOSS Education Director, Rev. Stephen Nyang, conveyed a similar sentiment in his letter to schools this quarter: *“Despite your lack of chalk, textbooks and so on, we are impressed by your efforts witnessed during our school visits. Thank you.”*

- **Peace:** Rev. Michael Machar, of the Dinka ethnic group, and Rev. Jacob Kunyuat Jany of the Nuer ethnic group, were among the first to arrive for orientation at the RECONCILE Peace Institute. Five participants arrived that first day and together decided to start an evening prayer service for students. As the number of students multiplied, so did the size of the prayer group. They continue to meet nightly, their songs of worship filling the campus in the dark of night. Rev. Michael and Rev. Jacob represent rival ethnic groups, yet their friendship is strong, and they are grateful for the skills they are learning in trauma counseling:



RPI students, Rev. Jacob and Rev. Michael, are counselors to soldiers and IDPs

Rev. Michael and Rev. Jacob represent rival ethnic groups, yet their friendship is strong, and they are grateful for the skills they are learning in trauma counseling:

“As I came to RPI, I have got what I have been looking (for). And this way I am going to help more people in my community and beyond my community. Because, being a pastor, means you will be a cross-cultural missionary, as our Principal (Rev. Shelvis) is doing here in South Sudan...And people are waiting for me, endlessly, outside (of RECONCILE) to deliver what I have gotten here. Up to this time, my phone is not stopping (ringing), day and night, asking about what I am doing. I have been getting some piece of knowledge during the day, and in the evening I deliver (it) to my people through phone call. This is what I usually do, each and every day. So, I am really happy, may God bless you.”

- Rev. Michael Machar, SPLA Army Chaplain

“In RPI, I have really learned a very excellent skill that I have to go and use in the community... I have learned that I should not be driving the counselee toward a goal or towards a (certain) success. I have to move with him or her, taking the same journey, without me moving ahead.”

- Rev. Jacob Kunyuat Jany, Volunteer Counselor in a camp with 39,000 displaced people

- In addition to his coursework on trauma counseling, Rev. Jacob is reading books from RECONCILE’s library on peacebuilding in his free time.

“I learned about peace, mostly from two people, one in America, Martin Luther King. I have learned a lot about how people should be treated equally in the same society or in the same community or in the same country or in the same continent. South Sudan is a multi-tribe country, we have many people who speak different languages, and they have different cultural backgrounds, like what was happening in those days (in America). I have also learned a lot about non-violence from Mahatma Gandhi, who is named the father of India. He was able to touch a high class group who were separate, yet they claimed to be the same people. (Then) they were able to come together.” – Rev. Jacob Kunyuat Jany

V. Challenges

- Political and social instability in parts of the country means that work scheduled in that area has to be postponed or redirected to another area. When a lot of planning and preparation for the implementation of the activity has been done, momentum is lost.
- Flexibility in time, energy, and patience are just as important as technical knowhow and adequate financing in meeting set goals and agendas. Encouraging people to embrace different concepts, ways of doing things and new points of reference takes time. It is a journey that is often stagnant, has setbacks and sometimes reverts to the beginning steps.
- A visit to the South Sudan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) was made to discuss the printing of the new curriculum for primary schools. The MoEST states that it has no money to print the new South Sudan primary school curriculum. Resources such as chalkboards, exercise books, etc. are not available through the government. The MoEST is totally dependent upon outside aid for all tasks, including the printing of the school calendar.
- There are a number of reasons for the initial delay in starting construction in Pochalla, a remote village in eastern South Sudan. Pochalla is accessible only by airplane or helicopter for 9 months of the year due to rains and lack of infrastructure. Building materials are only available during the dry season and must be transported from either Ethiopia or Juba, South Sudan over treacherous roads that barely exist during the rainy season. This combined with security uncertainties and the everyday challenging economic conditions of a country struggling to maintain peace represent a very challenging environment for development of any kind.
- Insecurity in Pochalla restricts farmers from cultivating larger areas that would help them support the education of their children. Fear of volatile situations keeps many parents from practicing income generating activities.



RPI and YTTC Students from Pochalla join Across Staff at the Smith-Mather's home for prayer

VI. Financial Update

We give God thanks for the churches and individuals who support this project, and we celebrate the impact witnessed through implemented activities. At this time, we also feel the need to prioritize the remaining activities based on the current funds available and pledged in coming years. **Of the \$3.8 million goal, \$1,136,000** has been raised/pledged to date. During the upcoming quarter we will seek guidance from partners on prioritizing activities within the project plans to fit the funding available/pledged at this time. We will provide an update on these adjustments in the next report.

VII. Mission Co-Workers Updates

The Mission Co-Workers were asked: *“How do you handle living in such an uncertain context?”*



Leisa Wagstaff: “As long as one is able to breathe, life goes on. The political conflict, ethnic grouping conflicts and communal clashes seem to be part of “life” here in South Sudan. In spite of all of the instability and uncertainty the South Sudanese try to pick themselves up and go on; they somehow manage. When I am in the homes of my friends, whether it is a tent in an IDP camp, a bamboo lean-to in a resettlement host community, or a home located in a “better” area, I am motivated by their willingness to share what they have and the offer of a prayer. The welcomed laughter and shared dishes of traditional food make me feel at home and safe not only in their dwelling places but also within the country.

When I hear and see their life stories in real time, I know that I need not be overwhelmed by the issues in my life and the country’s political and social issues. Whether I stay or have to make an emergency exit, I am settled here as if I belong.”



Sharon Kandel: “I feel compelled to be all “religious” and “super missionary” with my answer, but that would not reflect my reality. Yes, I do find myself leaning on God, when I remember that is where my strength comes from. I do pray a lot and ask for a lot of prayer, and I depend on the prayers of others. That is all well and good but in the day to day how do I deal with wondering what may happen? Well, I try to look at the bigger picture; that I am in God’s hands, and I would not want to be anyplace else. I try to find the smiles and laughter in each day, the beauty that is all around me even in the dust and heat. And yes, there are days I stay at home, because I am a little afraid to go out. I look at my South Sudanese friends and co-workers and I see them planning for the future,

educating their children for a better tomorrow, getting married and moving forward with their lives. It is hard for me to comprehend what it is like to grow up in war, but if they can look to the future and try to thrive in uncertainty, then I need to do the same. Is it easy? For me, no! But with God, YES! Living in uncertainty is teaching me to slow down, find joy where I can, be thankful for what I have, and to listen when told to stay home because it might not be safe outside. It has also taught me to lean heavily on Romans 8:26 “...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”

Lynn Kandel: “When there is no rule of law, and justice does not prevail, life becomes very uncertain. Even if there is not a lot of reason to be concerned about your own safety, there are many other considerations. Westerners tend to be goal-oriented and frustrations abound when those goals are in jeopardy. We know our constituents in the U.S. who are

supporting us financially and through prayer have expectations of our work, but we also have self-expectations that may be real or imagined. We like to plan our activities which is next to impossible when the “rules” are in a constant state of flux. The only certain thing we’ve had since arriving in South Sudan is that there will be many changes and much uncertainty. So how do we deal with the anxiety, stress, and uncertainty of this situation we find ourselves in? One way of course would be to remove ourselves from the situation that causes this stress, “go home”. Not an ideal answer to say the least. I’ve found I deal with the uncertainty best by practicing several things. I have to remind myself that worry, anxiety etc., are in the simplest form just a state of mind. Many of the things we worry about actually never come to fruition, and my worrying about something isn’t going to change the outcome. Christ taught us as stated in Matthew 6, vs. 34 “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own”. I know these verses are much easier to recite than to put into practice, but they are so very true at the same time. We can also take lessons from our South Sudanese colleagues who seem to be able to compartmentalize their thoughts and reactions to the negative things that are going on better than we do. Lastly keep your eyes on the spiritual

“development” that may be happening right in front of you instead of the negative things that are going on.



Nancy Smith-Mather: In recent months, I found my mind plagued by the thought that “life in the US would be easier.” “If I were home I could... (fill in the blank).” In that list would be something about a break from constant hyper-vigilance, (i.e. I would not have a “grab bag” by my bed, in case fighting breaks out in our town, and we need to run).

After listening to a wise friend, I shifted my thoughts towards cultivating a spirit of thankfulness. This discipline will help me in every place I live. Next, I may live in a US city where more gunshots ring out at night than in Yei. Focusing on thankfulness reminds me that God has not left me alone. The Creator of the universe finds small ways to make

me smile everyday – what a humbling thought.

Shelvis Smith-Mather: “I go back and forth between feeling overwhelmed, overjoyed, and then overwhelmed again. I love serving here, but it is hard. Please continue to pray for us.”

Thank you for your interest in this ministry which uplifts and equips people in South Sudan, for the glory of God! Please keep this project in your prayers and also share it with others! Thank you!

