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Dancing on International Women’s Day in Pochalla, South Sudan

I. Brief Context Update:

(While many activities are currently on hold due to COVID 19 restrictions, some took place early in the first quarter. These activities will be the focus of this report.)

“In the developed world, a husband and wife sit at the table with their children. They all eat together,” the former Commissioner told the people gathered for International Women’s Day in March. In Pochalla, South Sudan, women generally do not eat with their husbands. In hopes of increasing the value placed on women, the Commissioner proposed a change.

“We need one wife per husband,” a local women’s leader stated in her speech, obviously not pleased with the cultural acceptance of polygamy.

“This is not the generation for there to be one wife for one husband,” responded the local army commander while holding the microphone.



Tragically, many men in the community died in violent conflicts. Consequently, women outnumber men. “We cannot just leave women like that,” he explained, concerned that women would not be able to have children if they did not marry a man with another wife. The commander pointed to the children clad in new school uniforms. “This is the generation that will marry just one wife,” he predicted.

Several local leaders promote women’s equality during the gathering

Hopes are high for the children attending the Presbyterian primary school, yet the obstacles they face also stand tall; especially for the girls. There have been seasons when the local Presbyterian School lacked a single female

teacher, but at present two women offer role models for girls who hope to join the noble profession. Akony Oboya is one.

“I want to help the children become better in the future,” Akony responded when asked for the reason she teaches. After reaching grade 10 in neighboring Ethiopia, Akony came to Pochalla and was happy to find the standard at the Presbyterian School higher than most schools in the community. “They are playing, reading, and speaking English,” she described. Akony hopes to continue teaching for many years, and shared, “I’ve wanted to be a teacher since primary school.”



Students in Akony’s class sit on cement blocks

Ajullo Othow (*photo below*) is in Primary class 7, and she wants to be a teacher. She is one of 30 girls at her school whose fees are covered by the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Program. These scholarships aim at retaining girls in school, equipping them with skills to develop their community. Yet these students recognize the gaps in resources at their school, “We don’t have chairs to sit on,” and “there is a lack of books,” they expressed. They also hope scholarships will be provided for them to complete secondary school, a rare accomplishment for a girl in their county.

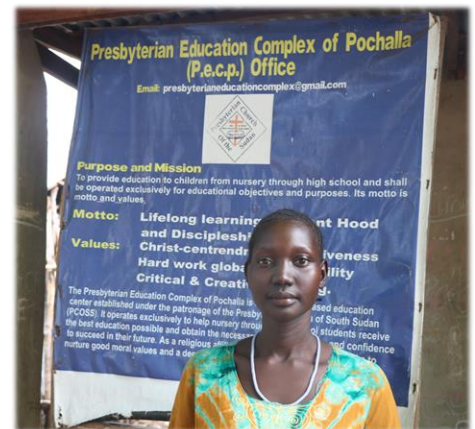


Ajullo wants to be a teacher

The local leaders who spoke at the International Women’s Day gathering, proposed positive cultural changes, including promoting formal education. The fact that the former Commissioner also volunteers to teach a class at the Presbyterian School shows a commitment to work towards the future they described. Equipping the next generation with skills to provide quality education, medical care, theological formation and other services in their community, however, will require many hands and hearts working together. It will not be easy.

Teacher Akony wants to teach for 10 years. Sadly, other teachers who hoped for such longevity were forced to find other employment when the school could not pay them adequately. Girls like Ajullo know that without scholarships to cover a secondary boarding school, their dreams will most likely be out of reach. Such challenges are not unique to the school in Pochalla, they limit Presbyterian schools and government schools in many rural areas in South Sudan.

Yet, there remains a significant number of pastors, elders, church members, community leaders, parents, teachers and students working hard to make sure the current generation does not miss the opportunity for quality, formal education. Even to these visionaries, though, the progress often feels like three steps forward, two steps back. The PC(USA) is grateful to be able to join their efforts, which may not be moving forward quickly, yet continue to courageously persist in the right direction.



Akony Oboya’s dream of teaching came true

II. PCOSS EDUCATION Update:

- A meeting with the PCOSS General Secretary, Education Director, Finance Director, PC(USA) Regional Liaison (Sharon Kandel) and the SSEPP Manager (Nancy Smith-Mather) took place in Juba the first week of March. At the request of the General Secretary, a summary of the SSEPP Review, which evaluated the first 4 years of the project, was presented. The PC(USA) affirmed its commitment to continue supporting the program beyond its initial five-year timeframe. With the positive steps towards peace in the nation, including the formation of the transitional government of national unity in February, the PCOSS affirmed its hope that the original target of Upper Nile could be a focus of implementation going forward. Upper Nile is home to many Presbyterians yet has been difficult to reach due to insecurity. We thank God that the situation is improving in the area.
- Education Department activities in the first quarter were limited due to the illness of the Director, yet most PCOSS schools opened after the Christmas holiday. Classes continued until all private and public schools closed on the 20th of March to prevent spread of the coronavirus.
- Many PC(USA) congregations embraced the unique opportunity to learn more about PCOSS' education activities, by hosting Mission Co-Worker, Leisa Wagstaff, during her interpretation assignment. Listening to first-hand stories of progress and challenges for South Sudanese churches engaged in education development, is a great way to create awareness and build support for the partnership between these sister denominations.
- Please pray for the PCOSS family, as they discern creative ways to do ministry in a social distancing context and also struggle in the midst of the economic challenges exacerbated by COVID-19.



Leisa Wagstaff shares at the Church of the Covenant in Arlington, Virginia.

III. Across Education Update

- Inter-ethnic fighting in and around Likuangle in February, caused many citizens to flee into the bush or to nearby Pibor. Fear that the fighting would reach Pibor, caused organizations to evacuate their staff, including Across. The fighting did not reach to Pibor, and the staff were able to return. The fighting, however, delayed the opening of schools in Pibor, and once Across staff returned, the government mandated schools close to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- While SSEPP activities have been very limited this quarter, Across was able to provide emergency relief in Pibor, helping the community recover after the massive flooding last quarter. While COVID-19 restrictions are in place, Across plans to continue with essential activities, such as emergency relief, healthcare and nutrition.
- Across' Executive Director, Elisama Wani Daniel, shared these words in a recent newsletter, "While there are many challenges to working in the corona context, we also see a global trend toward caring and compassion. People are challenged to think about their neighbor and how everyone's actions impacts others. While we are learning the art of social distancing, we are simultaneously more connected than ever."

IV. PEACEBUILDING Update



Mentoring small business groups, Bidibidi camp

27 male) attended the training and each group took RECONCILE staff to visit their business location. There are 14 different ethnic groups among the groups' members.

- In Rhino camp (Eden Zone), 3 groups (37 participants, 19 female 18 male) attended the gathering and each group took RECONCILE staff to visit their business location. These groups have agreed that if any member leaves for South Sudan or elsewhere, his or her membership can be transferred to a close family member.
- The groups in both camps would benefit from more mentoring but can continue without adding funds.
- The participants recommend extending the training to their neighborhood, as they still experience negative behavior from other zones in the camps, such as idle youth creating problems.
- The IGA groups have reported increase in their capital investments.
- Goats in the Bidibidi IGA group have increase from 35 to 63.
- In Eden zone, Rhino comp, goats have increased from 31 to 56.
- The two refugee groups in Eden have bought a goat for each member totaling to 36 goats.
- The host communities in Eden have given the refugees grazing land to rear their goats. This has created strong social cohesion between the refugee and the host communities.

V. Testimonies of Impact

- “Forming this group has really promoted unity, love and peace among us. In problem solving, you also come together [with your group], and in the midst of [discussing] your group problems, you can also bring your individual problem and solve it there” – Justin, Chairperson of an IGA group in Bidibidi camp
- “We have a target. In our community, this is the first group to keep [several] goats in one place. We want to be a demonstration site for people to learn from. In the community, people are saying, ‘we are poor,’ but this [demonstration] should act as a foot mark [an example], so those who are not in the group can adopt the [practice] and move ahead... [Our group makes personal financial] contributions, so the group feels like they own [the business]. The group has a



Hamid wants his group to be an example

constitution and a registration certificate [from the local government].” – Hamid, Chairperson IGA group in Bidibidi

- “We constructed a shop and had the idea of making tea, coffee and food. We did it for 2 months and did an accountability. We had 10,000 UGsh [about \$3] in profit, so we changed our mind to make another business. We sat for the meeting and decided to go and buy cassava flour [to sell in the market in the refugee camp]. We bought 3 bags and paid for transport. In 2 days, the flour was finished [sold]. So, we used the second disbursement of funds [from SSEPP] and bought 50 bags, after selling the bags we [should] get 250,000 [\$70] profit... We are now looking for casual work so we can add on to the money the group has.” - IGA group leader Bidibidi camp



Chairperson Rosemary encourages groups who fail to try again

- “We started making bricks, [but with the cost of firewood to burn the bricks and transport], the bricks were not very profitable, so we shifted from bricks to a savings and loan business. There was disagreement [in the group] during the brick time... people wanted to divide the money [among themselves], which means [the group] would be finished... but now there is love and we have the commitment of the members. We follow the footsteps of Jesus. He fell 3 times carrying the cross, [that gave us strength] to do the second business.” – Rosemary, Chairperson IGA group (Women’s leader)



He took a loan from the IGA group and got back on his feet again

- IGA group member David Taban has been in business since he was a child in 1978. He had a little money when he settled in the refugee camp, so he used it to cross the border into Congo, buy palm oil and then selling it in the camp. On one trip, he fell into the hands of robbers, and they took everything. A church in Congo helped him to make it back to the camp in Uganda. Then he borrowed money from the savings and loan IGA group and made 3 trips to Congo. He borrowed 200,000 UGsh (about \$55), and after paying back the loan, kept a profit of 100,000 UGSh. The 100,000 UGsh became the capital for him to continue his business.

- “The youth see that RECONCILE gave us something to do, so we are not idle. With the training you are giving us, we will change, and it will help our lives.” – IGA group member, youth leader Bidibidi camp
- “We have benefited from this program. I want to thank RECONCILE. I came to realize so many things in this process. Group management (of the business) brought us a social network. We have learned something (about) how to get along. It has helped us to work together with the host community... If we want to change South Sudan, let RECONCILE come and give us more knowledge, let’s have more groups.” - IGA group member Bidibidi camp



- The Office of the Prime Minister [OPM], which controls access of organizations to the camps, commends the work of RECONCILE and YWAM. OPM requests replication of the same activities and strategy in Imvepi and Morobi camps.
- RECONCILE’s program manager, Geri Moses, reflected on 2 members of the same IGA group, “One is a Nuer and one is a Dinka, and they are doing business together. Unity is more important than the profit, and their unity seems to be good.”

IGA member who successfully manages a small business with a member of a rival of ethnic group

VI. Challenges/Opportunities

- “We have a lack of [education]. Most of us were keeping cattle before [in South Sudan], so [running a business] is difficult. Some of us cannot calculate.” - IGA group member Bidibidi camp
- With the COVID-19 pandemic, all of RECONCILE’s activities in Uganda are on hold, as well as PCOSS’ and Across’ education activities in South Sudan. Schools in South Sudan closed on March 20th, and it is uncertain when they will reopen. On April 9th, South Sudan’s Education Minister, Awut Deng, said preparations are underway for a distance learning program, using radio and television to teach students the core subjects.
- The Office of the Prime Minister [OPM] in Uganda decided not to allow RECONCILE and YWAM to bring together the two communities [in Omugo and Tika zones] who were preparing for a reconciliation forum. Plans to meet with these two communities and OPM again to discuss the decision further were set for the end of March yet were canceled due to the pandemic.

VII. Financial Update

We give God thanks that \$11,606 was added to SSEPP funds this year. With Westminster’s match, that comes to \$16,016. Because of the generosity of such gifts, \$6,956 reached partners this quarter to support girls scholarships in Pochalla and Pibor. Thank you so much for your contributions to this team effort. Every amount given is appreciated.

A global pandemic presents challenges for fundraising, while at the same time increasing our desire to remain connected with global partners. Please continue to lift up our South Sudanese sisters and brothers in prayer, an important and powerful way to stay linked in the



Girls on scholarship through SSEPP in Pochalla, South Sudan

midst of social distancing. May God guide each of us as we discern the creative ways to steward our individual and collective time, energy and funds in this time of great suffering and great opportunity.

VIII. Mission Co-Workers Update:

Sharon and Lynn Kandel:

“We continue to learn from our brothers and sisters in South Sudan. Trust in the Lord! That is all we can do during this difficult time and the South Sudanese are very good at trusting in the Lord.

We feel very far from them being here in the USA but communications are good so we do keep informed. We were hoping to visit many churches in the States this summer, but we will have to wait and see if that will be possible. If not, we are hoping to visit with you by phone or skype.”



Sharon and Lynn continue to communicate with partners in South Sudan while sheltering-in-place in the US

Leisa Wagstaff:

“I enjoyed meeting each of you during this IA and was so disappointed that these sharing visits were cut short in order to not spread COVID-19. Hopefully things will get back to "normal" real soon. Let us continue to support one another through prayer and other acts of kindness.



Leisa with Presbyterian Church of Los Gatos members including the Mission Committee Chair and Stated Clerk of San Jose Presbytery

Like you, I am wearing the mask and trying to assist my community in providing for the most vulnerable. This includes cooking large meals for elderly family members and delivering breakfast and lunch meals to out-of-school students who may not have access to food while their parents are at work. Tutoring my grandson a few hours each weekday has helped me to even more appreciate the teaching profession.

Although South Sudan has only five registered cases of COVID-19, we must continue to support our brothers and sisters there. If there is a pandemic there it would literally wipe out a people who has already suffered so much.

As always, I love, respect and appreciate all of you.”

Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather:

“Two of the local women’s leaders who were supposed to speak did not come, so will you please say something,” the young MC whispered to me in the midst of the first speech of the International Women’s Day celebration. I agreed to share, hoping I would have a few minutes to prepare my thoughts. “Ok,” he responded, “you will go next.”

I thought several speeches would probably challenge current cultural practices, so I wanted to say something encouraging. “In every part of the world, people are striving for women to meet their full potential. So, we can learn from each other. In South Sudan, you now have a woman Vice President. In the US, we have never had a woman Vice President. So, I can go back to the US, and say, “in South Sudan there is a woman serving as vice president, can we also achieve that here?” The idea received an appreciative applause.

The COVID 19 global pandemic is a great opportunity to learn from one another. The US is especially looking at the ways other countries responded effectively to the virus, in hopes of learning both about the virus and the best response. As our family shelters-in-place in the United States, we remain connected with friends and colleagues in East Africa. We talk about the common challenges, like trying to homeschool children, and uncommon ones, like an economy closing when a large portion of citizens already live below the poverty line. We do our best to encourage each other.



While in isolation in the US, Shelvis takes a break from his research to help Nicole ride a bike



Nancy enjoyed getting to know students in Pochalla in March

Being socially isolated has allowed feelings of deep gratitude for meaningful relationships to surface anew. We are so grateful for the people who pray for us, who support our family and the ministries to which we feel called, including the SSEPP. Thank you for being a part of the amazing team that gives us strength. May God allow you to feel uplifted, comforted, and cared for during this unique season of our collective journeys.