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Celebrating the Service of Leisa Wagstaff, retired MCW



For 36 years, Leisa Wagstaff served as a PC(USA) Mission Co-Worker, most recently working alongside the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan as they rebuild after decades of conflict. Thank you Leisa.

I. Brief Context Update:

“The people of South Sudan have been in and out of war for decades,” Mission Co-Worker and RECONCILE Peace Institute Principal, Rev. Shelvis Smith-Mather, often explains to US churches. “War breaks down the infrastructure of a nation; it limits educational and healthcare opportunities; it reverses development. The reasons for the conflict have been described as both resource-based and ethnically fueled.

“Imagine that throughout those years, the destruction caused by violent conflict is ripping a hole in the earth, down, down and further down. When peace comes, the hole does not immediately disappear. It took decades to get so deep.

“Filling up the hole will require a multi-faceted, collaborative effort that includes the government, the church, and many other institutions and organizations. And, it will take decades simply to return to its previous state.” Pretending to have a shovel in hand, Shelvis places layer after layer of soil in an imaginary chasm; layers for rebuilding roads, schools, and hospitals destroyed by war, layers to catch up on years of formal education and institutional development missed, layers to address the psycho-social wounds of traumatized citizens, and so on.

Looking at the US context, we could describe the oppression of African-Americans with similar imagery. Instead of decades, however, the damage of injustice digging downward spans centuries. The hole is deep.

In the PC(USA)’s effort to be a Matthew 25 church -- to build congregational vitality, dismantle structural racism, and eradicate systemic poverty – we join the collaborative effort striving to fill in that hole. Over the past year, the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) focused intently on the hard, complicated work of addressing structural racism both inside and outside our walls. Motivated by the concerns of people of color within the PMA who pointed out internal inequities, the PMA engaged an outside organization to assist us in a “racial equity audit.”

Like the work being done by our partners in South Sudan, addressing the audit’s findings is not quick, nor is it easy. Yet, bit by bit, we are playing a part in filling in the deep hole. We covet your prayers as we continue on this journey.

As South Sudanese churches live out their continuous, long-term commitment to filling in a proverbial war-caused crater with constructive efforts of education, peacebuilding and development, they face formidable challenges. As they seek to address the root causes of the conflict, inequitable resource distribution and ethnic bias, they know they are on rocky and potentially dangerous ground. Understandably so, at times they grow tired. For any institution, working with a consistent backdrop of relentless, unnerving trials can cause internal tension.

When the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan's (PCOSS) General Assembly took place in November 2020, such tensions were present. Their national office staff worked hard to coordinate the event, hoping the gathering would bring healing and stability to the wider church community. Regrettably, the delegates left the meeting divided. The assembly set a new leadership in place, yet some felt unsettled about the process and stated their intention to form an alternative leadership.

As a neutral, trusted friend of the PCOSS leadership, Mission Co-Worker Sharon Kandel and a few other trusted friends were given the opportunity to speak with leaders from both sides. She prayed God would give her ears to hear and the right words to help guide the leaders towards unity. While the events of the gathering were recounted from various points of view, she listened patiently. Then, she encouraged both sides to reconcile. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, both sides eventually agreed to meet, hoping to find a way forward together.

When the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Program (SSEPP) took shape in 2014, it could not have been envisioned that the collaborating partners would work together for the unity of the Presbyterian church in 2021. Yet, as God would have it, both sides of the PCOSS leadership's disagreement wanted Rev. Peter Tibi, the Executive Director of RECONCILE International, to mediate their discussion.

As is his custom, Rev. Tibi began the process by meeting with the leaders separately from each other; listening attentively to all of the grievances and perspectives. In addition to meeting with the pastors involved, Tibi met with the country's First Vice President Riek Machar as well as the Chief Justice of South Sudan, both of whom took part in the General Assembly proceedings in November. The reconciliation process is still underway, and Rev Tibi says: "It needs humility. It needs prayer."

Please back these efforts with your prayers.

Addressing tension in the church, decades of war, ethnic bias, structural racism, and centuries of oppression, need divine intervention.

For some grace-filled reason, God often chooses to work through people to facilitate such miracles. God allows us to work together and to learn from each other, to lift us to a place of God's peace, love, and justice on earth as it is in heaven.

May God grant each of us the humility, the vision, and the radical perseverance required to do our part, layer by layer.



PCOSS General Assembly Office Staff in 2017

II. PCOSS Update:

- The PCOSS General Assembly began at the end of November and was extended beyond the initial dates due to controversies that arose. The Chief Justice of South Sudan was called upon to participate and oversaw the nomination of a new leadership. The results of the event, however, are still uncertain as the leadership and their presbyteries are divided on the outcome. At present, a reconciliation process is underway, mediated by RECONCILE International.
- Mission Co-Worker and PCOSS Education Facilitator, Leisa Wagstaff, visited South Sudan in January 2021, and shared the following update: *“To minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus, schools in South Sudan were closed last year. However, classes later resumed for students scheduled to write end-of-level national examinations. Primary 8 (final year of primary school) scholars will begin their exams in early February while the upper secondary school (high school) learners will do so at the beginning of March. Schooling for all learners is expected to fully reopen in March. This is welcome news to the South Sudanese young people who understand that ‘education is life.’*

An effort to fight coronavirus and provide a basic human need is the provision of water. One PCOSS school community recently received a borehole, thanks to the ‘South Sudanese diaspora and the Sudan/South Sudan Mission Support Group at Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church (Presbytery of the Peaks) and the work of PC(USA) mission co-worker Jim McGill. Jim is promoting a WASH for PCOSS school program in conjunction with Presbyterian Hunger Program and Presbytery of the Peaks so that there is an ‘improved water supply, safe water for students to drink and improved latrines and handwashing. An additional focus on menstrual hygiene health latrines will provide girl learners privacy, a water source, and solid waste disposal.’



The start of a borehole that will give water to a PCOSS School

III. Across Update

- Across continues to implement a variety of programs, including COVID 19 programs, yet was limited in what they could do through the SSEPP in Pochalla and Pibor as schools remain closed. With the flooding and insecurity in Pibor, Across uses a motorboat to support programs in the community, including providing emergency food aid. Unfortunately, UNICEF phased out their program in Pochalla which previously helped with the payment of teachers. Please pray for the health of Across’ staff and their families.

IV. RECONCILE Update

- After a year of not being with their families, the Senior staff of RECONCILE were able to cross borders and be reunited with their families (living in Uganda and Kenya) for Christmas, praise the Lord!



- Through their implementing partner, YWAM, RECONCILE has remained connected to the program participants in the camps even while unable to travel. RECONCILE hopes to travel to the camps in the first quarter of 2021 to assess their next steps towards follow-up and multiplication of their efforts.

While restricted by the pandemic, RECONCILE continues to implement programs in Yei and other communities near the training center

V. Testimonies of Impact

- The Facebook page of the First Vice President posted the following: “The First Vice President, Dr. Riek Machar Teny, applauded the efforts being exerted by the Reconcile International to mediate between two groups of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, in order to bring them together and work as a united Church in the service of the Lord.”
- “Our trained caregivers have been so busy helping their communities in counselling and conflict resolution among the refugees and between refugees and host community.” – Geri Moses, RECONCILE Program Manager

VI. Challenges/Opportunities

- “Unfortunately, South Sudan alongside countries worldwide will have to deal with the results of our youth’s disengagement during this prolonged pandemic period. A significant number of children will not return to school “post-pandemic”: girls (as young as eleven and twelve) because of abuse, pregnancy and marriage, boys who have succumbed to gang-related activities or the need to provide the family’s income, and many due to loss of interest, motivation and momentum. Many of the PCOSS schools I worked with have sought to provide mentoring during this time.” – Leisa Wagstaff, MCW
- With the decision to change from 32 states back to the original 10 states, there was a need to assign leadership again to those States. While governors have been appointed, commissioners and other ministers have not, making it difficult for certain activities to go forward. For example, RECONCILE’s conversation about purchasing land for an office in Juba must now pause until a new leadership is in place.
- In 2011, the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) valued 3 pounds to 1 dollar. At present, the SSP rate is 550 to 1 dollar. The inflation makes it very difficult to purchase things in the market.
- Previously, the World Food Program provided 15 kilos of flour per person per month to South Sudanese living in the refugee camp, along with oil, beans and corn. Due to a decrease in funding, the WFP cut the amount to 7 kilos of flour per person per month, and corn is no longer provided. With such a small amount, families are forced to decide between food and security. If they return to South Sudan, they may be able to farm and produce enough food for their families, yet if they stay in Uganda, they feel safe.
- Schools in the refugee camps in Uganda are closed to prevent the spread of COVID 19.

VII. Financial Update

2020 will be remembered for many things, a lot of them difficult or tragic. In the midst of incredible challenges, however, it is amazing to see the ways neighbors rise to help neighbors (locally and globally). Understandably, many could not support SSEPP financially this year due to the circumstances, yet others had the ability to give, and did so generously.

In 2020, churches and individuals contributed \$68,085 towards the SSEPP. With Westminster Presbyterian's 38% match, that brings a total impact of \$93,958. Thank you for your prayers, your advocacy, your encouragement and your financial gifts which work together to impact both our lives and the lives of our South Sudanese sisters and brothers.



A PCOSS teacher enjoys watching Leisa Wagstaff hold her young daughter

VIII. Mission Co-Worker Update:

Sharon and Lynn Kandel: Last quarter, Lynn and Sharon shared about Lynn's retirement. Sharon and Lynn were able to travel to Juba together in January to pack up their apartment, and struggle through the emotional process of saying "good-byes" (for Lynn) and "see you later" (for Sharon). Sharon will continue her work as Regional Liaison traveling back and forth from the US for the next period of time. She remains connected with the SSEPP through her relationship with PCOSS, Across and RECONCILE as Regional Liaison, and also through her supervision of the South Sudan mission co-worker team.



Sharon and Lynn Kandel engaged in a conversation with Leisa Wagstaff and PCOSS teachers in Juba

Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather:



The older Smith-Mather kids love baby Alice

Our family welcomed our newest member, Alice Austin Smith-Mather, during the fourth quarter of 2020. While on parental leave from work, we adjusted to new routines and enjoyed helping our older children learn to care for their baby sister. Before her birth, we learned Alice's heart has a structural anomaly, yet we are grateful that she has not had any negative effects in the first months of her life. We hope she will be able to have a corrective surgery when she is a year old. We give God thanks for her life, her smile, and the joy she brings into our home. Thank you for your prayers and continued care for our family.



Leisa Wagstaff encouraging teachers in Juba

Celebrating the Service of Leisa Wagstaff

Leisa Wagstaff’s tenure as a PC(USA) Mission Co-Worker spanned 36 years, during which she shared and received God’s love in several countries: Lesotho, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, and South Sudan. Her years of service will continue to have a ripple effect, not merely because she is a woman with strong faith, perseverance and commitment, but because she calls upon a powerful God who listens and responds.

Leisa decided to retire from service as a PC(USA) Mission Co-Worker while in the United States after her recent itineration assignment. She traveled back to Juba in January 2021 to pack

up her apartment and say “goodbye” to a community she loves and who cared for her while she lived there. During her visit, she wrote these words:

“I continue to be thankful for the opportunity to have served God’s people here in South Sudan and the ways in which they have embraced me. I will miss everything about the country, especially the people whom I can only refer to as family and friends. Thank you for your years of journeying with me as I sought to do God’s will.”

When reflecting on Leisa’s years of service, PC(USA) colleagues shared the following words:



A cultural celebration with friends

“The people weren’t just [Leisa’s] ‘assignment,’ they were her true friends. It enabled her to understand culture at a deeper level and really be one with the people. That’s the goal of every mission co-worker, and Leisa did that so very well”- Rev. Debbie Braaksma, Former Africa Area Coordinator

“I’ll never forget the day when you came home from a teacher workshop [with] the same people you had been working with for years. You were so excited, because they said what you were teaching them, about how to teach, was having an impact in the classroom. They could see their students learning.” – Sharon Kandel, Regional Liaison

“[In Cameroon] I saw how you connected with the students, also with the teachers, the church and the church leaders ... the garden that you would keep, and the work you would do with gymnastics; all the various ways you invested yourself 100% toward being a part of the community. That has really remained with me and is something that I really aspire to as well. I thank you for the example that you have given us and also for the excellence that you have dedicated yourself to...” – Jeff-Boyd, Interim Africa Area Coordinator

Leisa has been a true friend, a deep inspiration, a good neighbor, a caring community member, an excellent educator, a gifted professional, and a loving follower of Jesus in each place she has served. By allowing God to give her strength, to calm her heart, and to be her guide, she shares the peace of Christ in ways that multiply. Thank you Leisa, for allowing God to use you.

