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I. Brief Context Update:

There is a long road ahead. Let us not grow tired.

**Some students are returning to school now,
most will have to wait until 2021**

The pandemic's effects on South Sudan are tragic and multifaceted. The General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS), Rev. John Yor Nyiker, reports that the lockdown and border closings negatively impacted the country's already struggling economy. "Prices in the market are very high, and the poor people cannot afford to buy food, water or preventive items like sanitizers and facemasks," shares Rev. Yor.

As families slip deeper into poverty, one corresponding consequence is a rise in child marriages. According to UNICEF, South Sudan has the seventh highest rate of early marriage globally, and a recent report from Save the Children states: "An estimated 500,000 more girls risk being forced into child marriage [worldwide] and as many as one million more are expected to become pregnant in 2020 as a result of the economic impacts of the COVID 19." There is a long road ahead.



**This Head Teacher found temporary work at a local
NGO. Hopefully he will return to teaching.**

In regard to education in South Sudan, the students who are scheduled to take their placement exams (i.e. Primary 8 and Senior 4, similar to 8th grade and 12th grade in the US) returned to classes at the start of October. Other students hope to return next year, yet the many months missed widen an already vast educational gap. Rev. Yor offers more context for this situation, "some countries with good internet like Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia continued to learn online and on TVs, which is very difficult in South Sudan and in the refugee camps where internet and electricity is very difficult. [In] Juba, the [internet] network is very poor, and many have no access to learn... and [there is] no power in the town." In addition, many teachers have not been paid throughout the pandemic, causing them to leave the profession. There is a long road ahead.

It is not only the pandemic causing widespread distress. “Nearly half of South Sudan is under water,” stated the World Food Program after massive flooding brought further displacement, destruction, and hunger. Lack of the full implementation of the 2018 peace agreement, a continued refugee crisis, and ethnic conflicts also contribute. Some challenges are unique to South Sudanese returning from the refugee camps. Rev. Peter Tibi, Executive Director of RECONCILE International, explains their situation further: “with the reduction of food supply in the camp, people are suffering, so they feel it is better for them to come back home where they can be able to cultivate enough land.”

Sharing about a recent trip to Kejo-Kejo, South Sudan, Rev. Tibi added: “... in a day you will find 10-15 motorbike [taxi] bringing a woman with a child at the back, and some few clothing, and a child in front. Mostly women and children are coming back, I think maybe they are testing the waters to give room for their husbands to be able to come [if the security is good] ...

Now, when they come back, and they find their houses are occupied, we fear there could be another conflict, between returnees and the IDPs [internally displaced persons] ... Others will find their houses are completely demolished... They do not have houses, they do not have hospitals, they do not have schools, they do not have churches..., so if those people come, it is going to be a big disaster in terms of trauma issues that they will face.” Rev. Tibi went on to say that in places where schools have become piles of ashes, the school age children will most likely remain in the camps until schools and teachers are in place in their South Sudanese hometowns.

There is a long road ahead... and yet, our partners are eager to walk that road. They also invite us to journey with them. It is a road undone by a deteriorating economy, educational inadequacies, vast flooding, persistent insecurity, cyclical inter-ethnic violence, and deep trauma.

RECONCILE wants to work on peaceful reintegration programs, targeting refugees both before and after they return to their former homes, which may be occupied by strangers or no longer standing. Their staff want to facilitate trauma healing by training counselors to help the many whose losses are too overwhelming to manage alone. The Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS) is requesting PC(USA) to help them repair schools, train teachers, and fund programs that help girls stay in school.



Rev. Debbie Braaksma retired this quarter after walking countless steps alongside PC(USA)’s partners in Africa. Here she reunites with a PCOSS teacher she met many years prior. Thank you, Debbie, for your tireless efforts, advocacy and leadership.

Both the PCOSS and RECONCILE focused the past few months on creating awareness about and providing items to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Now, our SSEPP partners are starting to shift back to their longer-term visions. Borders and schools partially reopened in early October, a needed step for our collaborative education and peace-building efforts to pick up momentum.

Let us not grow weary, but instead, put one foot in front of the other on the long road ahead, the one that God allows us to walk together.

II. PCOSS Update:

- The PCOSS focused their efforts this quarter on coronavirus programs: “We are doing awareness and distribution of food and non-food items to vulnerable people, displaced congregations, and those who were affected by the lockdown,” reports the General Secretary. These efforts were supported by partners like, PC(USA) through PDA, The Outreach Foundation, Mission 21, and Basel.
- Although SSEPP activities through the PCOSS Education Department were limited, building the capacity of school communities means efforts at the local level can continue forward. For example, due to the hard work of the Akatgol Presbyterian Church Nursery and Primary School staff, pupils, parents and church members (located in Juba), the institution received funding from the Greater Pibor Administrative Area to help with the construction of a security fence enclosing the church and school compound. Mobilizing a school community to access funds and services from different sources has been an important component of the SSEPP, so this is great news!
- Next quarter, PCOSS hopes to implement a few SSEPP activities, yet they also hope to hold a General Assembly, requiring significant preparation. At this time, preparation committees have been formed, and the General Assembly is set for the 23rd of November in Juba.



Akatgol Presbyterian Church in Juba stepped out on faith and started a school. SSEPP funded the construction of two classrooms. The school community recently advocated for and received government funds for a much-needed security fence. Praise God for the good collaboration!

III. Across Update

- On August 14th, Across invited partners to a day of prayer for the safety of Across’ staff. In early August, a convoy of Across vehicles was ambushed, resulting in the theft of property. While bullet holes punctured their cars, we give thanks staff members suffered only minor physical injuries. *(Please pray for both their physical and emotional healing)*. In addition, the flooding and resulting muddy roads and damaged bridges cause logistical challenges to implementing programs. Even with so many challenges, Executive Director, Elisama Wani Daniel, witnesses that his staff remain “serious about getting the job done,” even if they have to travel through the mud and water on foot.

IV. RECONCILE Update

- “When the first [COVID 19] case was found in South Sudan, things went to a standstill. We were locked up in Yei... Within Yei, it was difficult, because we did not have a lot of projects to implement inside Yei. We were wondering, if corona continues for a long time, what will happen?”

We thank God, it did not last for long. We asked our partners, [if] we could use funds to respond to COVID 19... From May up to August, we have been raising awareness in the community on prevention of COVID and providing buckets to marketplaces, to the police barracks and the army. The soap we were giving to the most vulnerable... We were able to give to about 5,000 households,” reported Geri Moses, Program Manager for RECONCILE. As travel restrictions have lifted within South Sudan, RECONCILE has started facilitating peacebuilding trainings in various places within the country.

- Travel to the refugee camps in Uganda to implement SSEPP activities is still difficult, yet the border partially opened at the beginning of October. South Sudanese can travel to Uganda, if they first go to Juba and acquire a COVID-free certificate. “For South Sudanese to travel from Uganda to South Sudan, they have to surrender their documents that show they are a refugee,” explains Geri Moses. There is hope the borders will open completely very soon.
- Even when unable to travel to Uganda, RECONCILE staff remains in communication with program participants in the camps and with YWAM, their implementing partner based in Arua, Uganda.
- With the increase in violence in the camps, RECONCILE’s work is much needed, and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) [representing the Ugandan government] is eager for RECONCILE to return and implement activities. RECONCILE hopes to do so in January 2021.

V. Testimonies of Impact

- “We realize that RECONCILE’s approach is one of the unique approaches that many NGOs do not use. You train them on peacebuilding and give them the business skills. I think [the OPM has] been monitoring all these groups of ours, and they saw the impact. And, we did not target only refugees, we have included the host community. [OPM] really took interest to see, and they were wondering if other NGOs can do the same... The strategy we used has been appreciated, and they were asking, if we have more resources, if we can extend to other parts of the camp... [Already] many of the camps have benefitted indirectly in terms of how those trained [peace] mobilizers or those trained peer counselors are able to help situations. That is when [OPM] realized that these people are really important.” – Geri Moses , RECONCILE Program Manager.
- RECONCILE’s implementing partner in Uganda, YWAM, has been monitoring the progress of the peer counselors trained in Eden and Bidibidi refugee camps. “In this time of Covid-19, their capabilities have been tested and proved as many conflicts emerged and domestic violence increased greatly,” wrote

Lotet Julius of YWAM. Some of the counselors’ achievements include:

- “Rebuilding broken marriages and families through mediation, reconciliation and counselling ministry.
- Advocating for peace in both refugee and host communities of Eden and Bidi-Bidi.
- Promoting the rights of vulnerable groups and people with disabilities and specific needs (PSN) in the community.
- In Eden Village One, six counseling cases were registered with the counselors, four cases are already handled and two in process; in Eden Village Two, seven cases were registered, five cases were handled, three families were reconciled and two cases are still undergoing the counseling process; in Eden Village 4, five cases



South Sudanese refugees in Uganda receiving training to become peer counselors.

were registered and all the five cases have been handled in counseling and follow up is going on. In Eden Village Six, seven cases were registered. Four of the cases have been handled and completed while the three are in process with counseling going on; among the nationals, five cases were registered, four of the cases are handled and one in progress with counseling.

- Similar cases of domestic violence were registered and handled in Bidi-Bidi.

VI. Challenges/Opportunities

- “The issue of setting up a local structure for a counseling space [in the camps] is a general complaint [from the refugees] and makes sense. The counseling center would be good for handling individual confidential matters and serve as a referral point for cases that need counseling.” – Lotet Julius, YWAM Uganda.
- Both RECONCILE and Across mentioned challenges with insecurity on the roads within South Sudan. “It is challenging because of the group that did not sign the peace agreement, and others who don’t belong to any group. They are doing things that are not pleasing and really threatening the peace that has been signed. People are wondering how long it will take to implement the peace agreement. The



While waiting for the new government to form, the former Commissioner in Pochalla volunteer taught in a local PCOSS school.

January 2020, many have gone without seeing their immediate family living in Uganda and Kenya for 9 months.

- The situation has improved in Yei. The market is now open. Rev Tibi believes that there would be more people returning to Yei if not for the restrictions at the border with Uganda.

VII. Financial Update

While 2020 has proven to be a difficult time to raise funds, you have generously contributed \$25,713 so far this year to support this program of educational development and peacebuilding. We give thanks to God for the generosity of God’s people, and for a matching challenge gift from Westminster Presbyterian Church – Minneapolis. With funds pledged by Westminster, support this year totals \$35,484. To God be the glory for the generosity this provision represents. Thank you for continuing to support the ministries of peace and education in South Sudan with your prayers and your financial gifts.

government is still not completely formed, they have appointed 9 of the 10 governors, it is complicated when the real peace will reign.” – Geri Moses, RECONCILE Program Manager.

- It is better than before because there are “no more hostilities between government and opposition forces. What is going on now is tribal conflicts... Most civilians were armed, that is why there is a lot of fighting in many parts of the country...” stated Rev. Yor, General Secretary of the PCOSS. And, the unified national army has yet to be fully formed, which has “brought fear and lack of trust for sustainable peace in the hearts of people.”

- Since RECONCILE’s staff have been unable to travel outside the country since

VIII. Mission Co-Workers Update:

Sharon and Lynn Kandel:

“2020 has brought lots of changes around the world and in our little personal corner. Lynn decided to take the Voluntary Separation Package that PC(USA) was offering, so that means that as of September 17, 2020 he has retired. Sharon will continue in the role of Regional Liaison on her own. This also means that Sharon's role with the SSEPP will be considerably less since doing the regional role alone will take up most of her time.

We will be living in the USA, and Sharon will be making 2-3 trips back to South Sudan each year. This was not an easy decision for us to make, but we do feel it was the right one for us at this time. Sharon looks forward to those trips back. Around the world, we are having to find new ways to communicate and continue with the work, so we will use those methods between trips. Please continue to hold us in your prayers as we adjust to this new reality. Pray also for the people of South Sudan, especially the children who are missing out on schooling which could give them a brighter future.” – Sharon and Lynn Kandel



Lynn Kandel retired from his role as a PC(USA) Mission co-worker this quarter. We give God thanks for the ways he worked with the PCOSS, sharing his experience in the area of school construction, and accompanied other partners in South Sudan and Sudan as Regional Liaison. Thank you Lynn!

Leisa Wagstaff:

“I am still stateside with little idea when or if I will be able to return to be with the people I have been in community with since 2013. As we deal with the coronavirus and other ills of our society, the South Sudanese continue to pray for us. Hardly a day passes that I do not receive an email or a phone call (usually at 2 or 3 in the morning due to the seven-hour time difference!) to remind me that they are seeking God's mighty grace upon us and to enquire of my return date. Despite all the challenges in their lives, the South Sudanese have never forgotten that they are part of God's larger community. One headteacher writes, "I would like to pass our greetings to our brothers and sisters in the US, and we wish them health and safety as the world goes through the hard time whereby every country fights against the COVID-19 pandemic." Let us never forget to undergird one another in prayer and seek to be our brother and sister's keeper.

Special prayer requests for Rev. Stephen Nyang, director of the PCOSS education department as he undergoes eye surgery next month. Please also pray for the South Sudanese learners returning to school. Due to the coronavirus, only the classes "sitting-for" (writing) end of course exams will be returning.” – Leisa Wagstaff

Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather:

“Connecting with our SSEPP partners often changes my perspective on my personal situation and increases my faith. Shelvis and I have recently enjoyed some good conversations with colleagues in South Sudan. We have been humbled by their willingness to pray for us over the phone, even while facing many challenges themselves.

It has also been deeply encouraging to see our partners in South Sudan finding new ways to engage in ministry during this pandemic. We hope and pray that some of their testimonies recorded in this report will be uplifting for US churches.

Our family moved homes again this quarter, and we are very grateful to be hosted by James Island Presbyterian Church in their Mission House. We are grateful our children have been able to start an in-person school experience at Charleston Bilingual Academy. We are grateful that we are nearing our due date for baby of October 28. We are grateful for the small ways we have been able to engage in efforts towards racial reconciliation both in the UK and in the US over the past few months.

Since returning to the US, Shelvis started researching the similarities and differences between the ways International Peacemakers (such as the United Nations High Commission on Refugees or UNHCR) and local peacemakers (such as RECONCILE) engage with conflicts among South Sudanese. One case study specifically examines facets of RECONCILE's work, through SSEPP, with peacebuilding in the refugee camps. The study explores dynamics which legitimize and/or delegitimize efforts when consensus is not present during peacemaking. Ultimately, the project will explore the implication of such division on the South Sudanese communities impacted most by the violence and in need of its resolve.

In addition to this reconciliation research through Oxford, Shelvis has also been invited to participate in the Anti-Racism and Equity Working Group for Oxford's School of Anthropology. The group's intent is to help identify strategies to grapple with deficiencies in curriculum, policy and practices which do not fully engage and include people of color equitably.

Thank you for your continued prayers for our family and your support of this life-giving program.”

– Nancy and Shelvis



Being part of a connectional church body blesses our family again and again. James Island Presbyterian Church warmly welcomed us to stay in their mission house. Thank you!