

A letter from Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather serving in South Sudan

YEARLY REPORT TO MISSION ENGAGED CHURCHES YEAR: 2015

MISSION PERSONAL: Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather

COUNTRY: South Sudan

MISSION PARTNER: RECONCILE International, PCOSS, Across, YTTC

OVERALL GOAL: To increase access to a basic, effective Christian education for the children of South Sudan and to promote reconciliation in South Sudan

1. Tell us about your mission partner and how they believe your mission work has impacted their ministry and the lives of the people they served this past year.

reminded us that God still works, even in the midst of a fresh civil war. You may have heard of the great courage and faith of the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan who guarded the gate.

“When the crisis happened,” Moderator Peter Gai Lual recounts, “the two warring parties exchanged the town (of Malakal) more than four times... People fled from their homes, and they came to the church compound in great numbers: 4,700 in one compound and 2,300 in another compound... Daytime, I was always at the gate. I was at the gate because in my compound those who came in are not in one tribe. People outside (the gate) said, “You have enemies in the compound.” But I said, “In this compound there are no enemies. They are good people, and I am their brother. I am responsible for them...” He refused to let anyone enter with a gun, and that is how the Moderator saved lives.



Students at Akatgol Presbyterian School in Juba, South Sudan

In November Nancy sat with the Moderator at the PCOSS headquarters, which after being displaced from Malakal relocated to Juba. She asked him why education is so important to the PCOSS. He responded: “The answer is simple, because there was a good example. The missionaries, wherever they go, first they build for themselves somewhere they can sleep. Second, they build the church. Third, they build the school and the hospital. The school and the hospital are for the local community to benefit from.”

He continued: “The church schools (in South Sudan) are the most successful schools, because they are led by spiritual people who value the life and the well-being of the people.”

In his response Nancy heard an echo of the sentiment: because “I am their brother.”

The Moderator also reflected on the five-year South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project (SSEPP), which Nancy has the privilege of coordinating. The Project brings together the strengths of several RCA and PC(USA) global partners in South Sudan and strives to: train teachers, equip communities to manage their schools, encourage girls to join school, and construct school buildings in collaboration communities. The Moderator had the following to say about the project: “When we started, we started in a way that would give us

hope. For example, not only are we hoping to build schools, but also we want to build those who will carry the work of the school.”

He went on to praise the Project for building the capacity of the PCOSS Education Director, Rev. Nyang, by sending him for a course in Kenya. “Rev. Nyang, now, because of what he got from (Kenya), is able to call together the teachers to be trained, and those teachers will become qualified to do the teaching.” In addition he greatly appreciated the provision of scholarships for PCOSS teachers to attend the Yei Teacher Training College, “We want to really educate those who will teach in our schools.”

The Moderator concluded: “We expect that five years will do something good for us, it will give us a way to plan in the correct way, so we will have more manpower to do it again, which will help a lot.”

2. Describe how an engaged congregation’s involvement and prayers enhances this ministry and what are some of the other ways a church can be effective and supportive.

One congregation in Pennsylvania sent a summary of their Peace and Justice Ministry activities for the year. They engaged in their local community in so many ways, including: training their members in political advocacy, learning and sharing with others about the problems of mass and youth incarceration in the U.S., writing letters for Bread for the World to address issues of hunger, working against racism in their community, preventing gun violence and bullying in schools, and creating awareness about human trafficking. The congregation is also very active in international matters of peace and justice, and our family is honored to be one of the many ways this church is connecting with the global body of Christ to build peace.

When Nancy read their update she felt strengthened. Knowing that a congregation in Pennsylvania is working tirelessly for peace in their community and in the world uplifted her heart and reminded her that we are part of a larger team. As we labor in the same ministry in different places, we can learn from each other and understand one another in new, life-giving ways.

We are deeply grateful for the partnership of congregations across the U.S. We are encouraged by the witness of American Christians who strive to carry out Christ’s call to the difficult ministry of reconciliation both in their home communities and internationally. While churches engage in local neighborhoods on matters of peace and justice, they send a strong message to churches around the world that says, “We are with you in this struggle.”

We also recently received an email requesting that a South Sudanese sister travel to the U.S. to share about issues of peacebuilding. Awesome. May God continue to bring to mind new ways for us to learn from each other and to spur one another in faith, love, hope and peace.

Share a story about a life directly impacted and/or transformed by your ministry with our partner.

As part of the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project four teachers from a rural county in South Sudan, called Pochalla, were trained at the Yei Teacher Training College (YTTC) this year. One student teacher, Daniel Omot Nyigwo, shared his journey to attain a high school education:

Daniel recounted: “I was born in 1983 and the war between SPLA [the Sudan People’s Liberation Army] and the Khartoum government broke out in 1983, before I was born. So I was born in the war, and I started my education in the war.”



Omot Ochalla, Alimo Cham, George Okach, Daniel Nyigwo, PC(USA) scholarship recipients at Yei Teacher Training College in South Sudan.

In Daniel’s early years there were no trained teachers in Pochalla. The children learned from relatives who volunteered to teach them. These “brothers” attended schools in neighboring Ethiopia and taught when home for holidays. “Instead of leaving us like that [without school],” Daniel said, “They said, let us take the little knowledge we have and share with this brother to us. Even though we know [only] ‘A,’ let us share ‘A’ with them. If it is ‘B,’ let us share ‘B’ with them.”

Daniel next decided to seek a better learning environment in a school that was much farther from home. “We used to wake up at 4 am. Then

we traveled [for three hours by foot], and in the morning we reached that village,” explained Daniel. “Then we attended the classes. Primary class used to end at 12, midday. When the classes ended, we starting footing from there—three hours again. I was about 11 or 12 years old, so it was a very terrible life. We footed from there with hunger, thirsty, no water on the way, nothing to eat. Our parents actually said, ‘Why don’t you leave school, you are now tired, and you have grown thinner and thinner?’ ”

None of the four teachers from Pochalla completed secondary school (the equivalent of 12th grade) in their home county; it was not offered. So, as children, they started chasing the dream of education. They took different paths, walked for days, jumped on trucks, crossed dangerous rivers, and entered unfamiliar countries. At young ages, they left their homes and their parents, struggling to obtain an education.

After walking three hours each way to school, Daniel received permission from his parents to move to the refugee camp in Ethiopia to attend school. In 2003, however, he escaped from Ethiopia, surviving a genocide that broke out, targeting his ethnic group. From Ethiopia, Daniel fled to Kenya and completed primary school in Kakuma refugee camp. He then finished secondary school in Uganda, which qualified him to apply for a scholarship through the South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project to attend the Yei Teacher Training College.

Daniel explained the decision to apply in this way: “For us, as members of the church and of the community, some of our brothers and friends tried to advise us [by saying], ‘instead of stopping at this level (of education), try to apply for (the scholarships), and then you will be the people to help the community later on.’ ”

Daniel continued: “So I got the courage to go back to school. I applied, I attended the interview, and I managed to pass. So from there, I thank God. I am now so proud to be a teacher and act as a role model, and I promise I will do something better... to change the coming generation... Without education, there will be no way to fight against this hunger that is affecting South Sudanese. Through education our people [will] get good water for drinking and good health facilities.”

While many children have left their homes in Pochalla in search of school, these four soon-to-be-certified teachers are doing their best to bring education back home.

3. How are new leaders being prepared and nurtured in hopes of empowering our mission partner to grow and become more self-sufficient?

In regard to Nancy’s work, the SSEPP is designed to build up leaders within the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan school system and in local communities. Through the project, PCOSS Education Director, Rev. Stephen

Nyang, is taking a two-year, distance-learning Diploma in Education Management at CORAT Africa in Nairobi, Kenya. PCOSS teachers are gaining skills through YTTC and mobile teaching training. Communities are being empowered to manage their local schools, including the training of school management boards.

In his ministry with the RECONCILE Peace Institute, Shelvis continues to involve more and more alumni in the running of the institute. In 2015 Shelvis created the position of Assistant Principal and recruited male and female alumni to serve in pairs during the Peace Institute. Alumni also served as Teaching Assistants during the RPI courses. In 2016, through RCA funding, two alumni will serve as interns during the RPI session as well. These new positions strengthen the leadership and management skills of the participants and also give RECONCILE local leaders who are equipped to support and run the programs.

4. Share how you are directly involved in preparing a leader who might succeed you in the future?

As Shelvis provides more opportunities for RPI alumni to be involved in the institute, he is also building a pool of possible candidates to fill the position of Principal as well as those who can support the Principal's work in the future.

5. Help us to understand how we can continue to be in prayer for you, your family, our mission partner and the people of God.

The partners with whom we work are incredible in their perseverance and ability to work in the midst of uncertain and difficult situations. Please pray that God will continue to give them fresh and new ways of addressing the challenges their country is facing. Please pray they will continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit and given the courage, strength and grace they need to love and build up their neighbors, communities and nation.



Family 2015 Christmas Photo in Yei, South Sudan

The past year has been challenging for our family. We are currently living with less electricity than any other time in our years here in Yei. We often have very limited/weak Internet, and the shortage of fuel in the country causes us to limit travel out of the training center. At times it feels overwhelming to watch the items on the "to do" list grow while the feeling of not being able to accomplish tasks also grows. These factors, and add in two very active young children, cause us to feel more isolated than usual.

While stress has been high, we do not feel that God has abandoned us or changed our call. We are grateful to be in South Sudan. Please pray we will have wisdom to know how to thrive in this calling.

Please pray for creative ways for us to engage with our neighbors, to develop healthy friendships for our children, to educate our children, and to live out our belief that, with God, all things are possible.