



Photo by Will Enns

Stories and Reflections from Sudan
September 2009
by D onita Wiebe-N eufeld

These stories and reflections are based on my notes and memories from a Mennonite Central Committee learning tour to Kenya and Sudan from August 29-September 8, 2009. As such, they represent my experience and views. The photos are mine, except where others are credited. The tour was organized to raise awareness and funds for MCC's "Coming Home; Sudan" campaign. Feel free to use these stories, however, if you wish to print them somewhere, please contact me at donitatim@gmail.com or at pastor@edmonton1st.mennonitechurch.ab.ca I appreciate being credited when you use my work.

Donita Wiebe-Neufeld

Coming Home Sudan is a project of the Mennonite Central Committee, focused on education, assisting farmers, and supporting grassroots peace initiatives. MCC has been in Sudan for more than 35 years, partnering with the local churches in their efforts to provide relief and encourage healthy development in the name of Christ. After more than 22 years of civil war, refugees are flooding home and the needs are desperate. MCC aims to raise \$2 million per year for 10 years to support the Sudan projects.

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Forgiveness slowly leads to peace in Southern Sudan

MCC learning tour provides insight into ministry as this war-ravaged region tries to pick up the pieces

BY DONITA WIEBE-NEUFELD

Alberta Correspondent

He left the hospital murderously angry. Revenge on his mind, the young man bought a sharp knife and set out through the village towards his enemy's home. It was Sunday. He stopped at a mud-sided church as the pastor's voice rang out with Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The angry man was shocked that Jesus would forgive his killers. "Now I have to forgive," he thought. Returning to the market, he bought a bag of candy and went to face his enemy. Holding it out, he said, "Be calm. I'm not going to fight you. Let us sit and eat. I forgive you."

Stories like this made this fall's Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) learning tour to Sudan a powerful experience for five Canadians and two Americans.

"One of the primary purposes [of the trip] was for folks closely associated with MCC to see what its role is in the reconstruction

that's happening in Southern Sudan now that the most recent time of war is over," said trip leader Ken Sensenig. "We wanted folks to . . . see the church at work through our partners in South Sudan."

A region in crisis

A 22-year civil war decimated Southern Sudan, killing two million people and displacing twice that many. Since a 2005 peace agreement between the North and South, refugees are returning to enormous obstacles. Food shortages and land disputes are endemic, and there are no electricity, water or sanitation services. Jobs are exceedingly scarce, schools are inadequate, and the hospital lacks proper staff and supplies. The banking system has collapsed and the government is broke. Unpaid soldiers wander the streets. Farming skills and infrastructure are lost, and fields are unsafe because of landmines and tribal conflicts.

PHOTO BY DANIEL DRIEDGER



Light streams through a cross in the newly built wall of the Episcopal church in Juba, the regional capital of Southern Sudan.

On top of these issues, the entire population also suffers from trauma and various levels of depression. The peace itself is fragile, riding on the uncertain promises of democratic elections in 2010.

Church efforts a beacon of hope

Throughout the struggles of both war and uncertain peace, the tenacity and effectiveness of the church is evident in Sudan, caring for people, educating and offering hope. Where human institutions failed, it has persevered.

Reverend Peter Tibi, outgoing general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, told us, "The church was salt and light to the people, and a voice . . . The church had a prophetic call during the war; it speaks to government, too. Both government and [the Sudan People's Liberation Army] respect the voice of the church."

Learning tour member Wayne Bremner, MCC British Columbia's executive director, said he was struck by "the degree to which the church is so instrumental in relief, development and peace efforts on the ground throughout the South. Also, how it has standing credibility with the government and international players."

Will Enns, a businessman and lay pastor

PHOTO BY WILHELM ENNS



Reverend Peter Tibi, outgoing general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, made a special trip from Khartoum to meet with the MCC learning tour group. Like every other Sudanese, his personal story contains many traumatic experiences.

from Aylmer, Ont., concurred. "The church is the moral authority there," he said. "The fact that the government would even send their employees down to the churches to receive their [peace and conflict resolution] workshop training, that really blew me away."

Isaac, a local church leader, received a scholarship from MCC to study at the African Peace-Building Institute. In his village, Isaac now introduces conflict resolution skills into a culture of revenge. "It is very sweet for them to hear about peace," he told the learning tour members. "When people hear about peace, they get the idea of going to reconcile."

A long history in Sudan

MCC has been in Sudan for more than 35 years, providing relief, encouraging community development and supporting grassroots peace initiatives by aiding local partners. Its current "Coming Home: Sudan" project is focused on education, assisting farmers and peace work, aiming to raise \$2 million per year for 10 years for these projects.

PHOTO BY DONITA WIEBE-NEUFELD



John is a successful farmer who is working with an MCC partner in Rumbek, Sudan, to train others in farming techniques. Men of the Dinka tribe traditionally are herders and would leave any farming to the women. But John and his extended family work together in the gardens, making them cultural trail-blazers as well as farmers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN DRIEDGER

The learning tour group poses in front of a sand dam in Kenya. From left to right, they are: Aaron Penner, Manitoba; Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, Alberta; Stephen Steiner, Ohio; Wayne Bremner, British Columbia; Daniel Driedger, Ontario; Ken Sensenig, Pennsylvania; and Wilhelm Enns (Ontario). In the future, the technology may be applicable to dry areas in Sudan.

The global economic crisis and a lack of sufficient donations, however, have recently caused painful cuts.

Leroy and Joan Willems, MCC country reps in Sudan, told of women farmers raising a spinach-like vegetable on a small island in the Nile. MCC had hoped to help with marketing plans and support for a school and day care, but funding cuts made it impossible. "I never fail to get emotional when I see that," Joan said. "I know how hard these women work. We eat greens everyday [to remember them]."

Part of the issue of insufficient funds might be due to lack of media attention to the situation in Southern Sudan.

"I would say that what is happening in Darfur has caught the attention of the international community, and rightly so, but many times there is a huge untold story that is even worse," Bremner said. "That is Southern Sudan. They are the forgotten people," although a United Nations special

representative to Sudan said that, in recent months, the death rate in Southern Sudan from violent conflict has been higher than in Darfur.

Asked why the North American church should support this project in such a dangerous place, Jacob Mathre, office manager for MCC in Juba, replied, "Sudan is one of the most deeply wounded places on earth and, as believers, we are called to enter into woundedness just as Christ entered into the woundedness of humanity. We are called to rush into the dark places of this world with whatever we have to offer: our time, our resources, our being." ■

Donita Wiebe-Neufeld was one of seven North Americans to take part in this fall's MCC learning tour to Southern Sudan.

Just Fix It!

It was a simple request. "We need a little shop so there is a place to sell our soap and our beads. People don't buy much from individuals wandering around. We need a shop in the market." The 45 or so Dinka and Nuer women seated in a circle under the shade of a thatched grass roof nodded in agreement. The stories they told had us amazed at their courageous determination to help themselves. Against enormous odds, they speak into a



Dinka women, part of a women's group in Rumbeck dance and share their stories.

culture where women are voiceless. They reconcile historic tribal enmities. Many told of better family relationships because of the peace training they do as a group. They learn marketable skills like sewing, beading, and soap making. It felt like these spirited women could do anything. All that was missing for a complete success story was a few cinderblocks, some tin, and a bit of lumber for a simple market stall. We left there with our pockets full of beads and our heads full of hope of a simple fix. It was a perfect little mission project. A one time donation toward visible bricks and mortar is an easy sell to donors back home. It is a clear way to make a measurable difference and garner constituency support for the Coming Home Sudan project. A no-brainer, feel-good

photo opportunity for the Mennonite Central Committee!

That evening, at our group debriefing discussion, the shop idea immediately floated to the surface. "Ah, yes." Leroy Willems, an MCC worker in Sudan, responded with a sigh. "A couple of us talked to their leader, sister Mary Mu Mu, wondering about that possibility." In the following minutes, we heard some of the behind-scenes story. Sister Mary said the issue is not as simple as it sounds. The women had a shop in the past, and it failed. It failed for a complex mix of reasons. The economics in Southern Sudan are so fractured that product demand was not sufficient. Production was sporadic because of weather and the availability of women who had home responsibilities and husbands who may not allow them to work. The lack of dependable transportation meant other markets were unreachable. A combination of illiteracy and internal squabbling made the shop unmanageable. For these women, most of whom were never able to attend school, keeping shop records, setting appropriate prices, and determining the distribution of working hours and profits proved an insurmountable challenge.



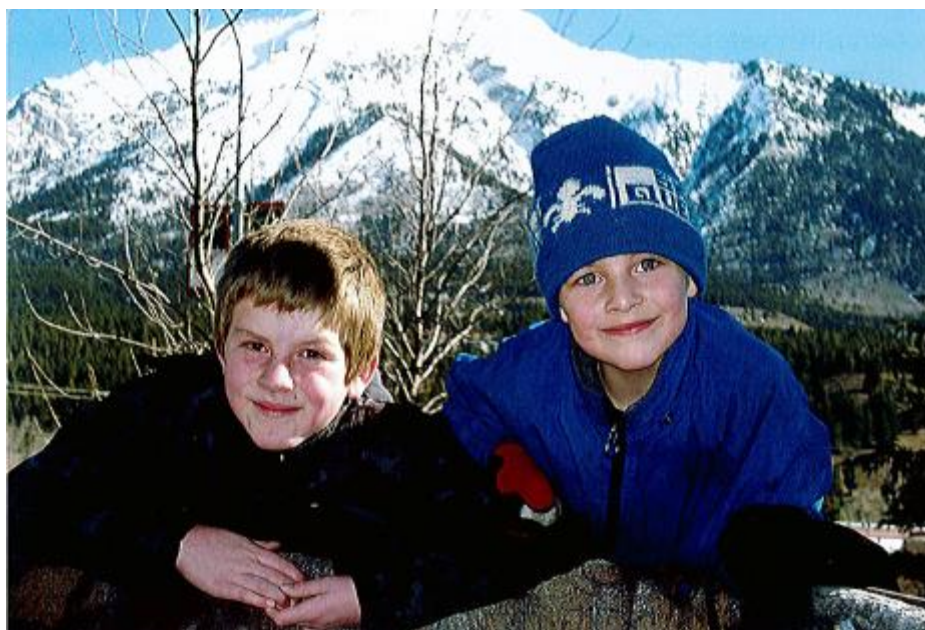
We could not "fix" this with a few dollars for bricks. What is needed is an unglamorous, steady trickle of money for education, solid support for the long work of peace building, and foresight to develop teachers

Mary Mu Mu, the Catholic Sister who enables the women's group, talks about the issues faced by women in this part of Sudan.

among these women as they build capacity to help themselves. What is needed is a listening ear to pay attention to local workers who know the back stories. What is needed is a humble, enabling hand to steady the uncertain limbs of an indigenous newborn hope. It is difficult to take pictures of these things to promote MCC's work. It's harder to build excitement for "growing capabilities" than it is to raise money for a little shop, yet this is where real change happens. The women of Rumbek are beginning to claim a voice and speak freedom into their oppressive culture. At home in North America, we must find words to proclaim the value of commitment to a culture blinded by wishes for instant results and short term gain.

Are They In School?

Our truck was stopped twice to wait for mine removal alongside the road from Juba to Yei in Southern Sudan. The second time, the wait was long, and our learning tour group got out to stretch. Instantly, a dozen young boys gathered, curious and friendly. We began to talk and I showed them a picture of my children, Darian and Jacob. The picture showed us in Canmore, Alberta, after a cross country ski trip. I thought Sudanese kids might wonder about the cold, our parkas, or the rugged snowy mountains. They stared intently at the photo. Quietly, they passed it around so all could see. Then the biggest boy, about 11 years old, spoke for the group to ask the question most important to Sudanese children. He asked; "are they in school?"



Darian and Jacob Wiebe-Neufeld

Skirting the Issues. Personal Reflection

I hate skirts. In Sudan women wear them and so, with some griping, (okay, a lot) I did too. I dislike the way skirts wrap around my legs as I walk. I don't enjoy being careful about how I get into a truck or sit on the ground. The feel of sweaty legs rubbing together is unpleasant. My preferred footwear looks totally wrong with a skirt. It's not, however, the skirt I detest, it's the role I feel stuffed into when I wear it.

For me, a skirt is a symbol of limitations. As a child, it meant I shouldn't climb, or do sports, or roughhouse with the dog. It identified me as "girly" even when my interests were not. Skirts came with deadly boring instructions to be "lady-like". Ladies, apparently, take small steps that look better than my natural stride. As a teen, I wondered how I'd push a car out of the snow dressed like a lady. Dresses sometimes meant compliments on looks instead of ideas or accomplishments. All that was bad enough, but worst was how a skirt made me feel easier to dismiss. I equated pants with the freedom to follow my interests and dresses with being stuck with what was chosen for me.



Florence (on the right) is a leader at the Korrok Episcopal Church in Juba, teaching sewing skills to women. On Donita's left is one of her students.

shade. "Yes, it certainly would. Why don't you mention it to them? Jacob and I would enjoy the entertainment!" We all laughed, knowing the situation was far from funny. In this culture, women are second class. Most can not go to school or choose a career. Traditionally, they do the lion's share of physical work, farming, gathering wood, building and tending the houses, and raising children.

I try to keep an open mind in a culture not my own. I manage to control my actions, but I struggle with attitude. I feel my guts twist and when I hear about a marriage market that

In Sudan, we saw women stuffed into roles they did not choose. One morning, while waiting for a truck, Leroy, Jacob, and I watched a young mother chop at a huge log with a rather small axe. She straddled the log with bare feet. With her skirt stretched in taut lines over the curved surface, she hacked away in the hot sun. Another woman gathered the chips and kept toddlers at a safe distance. Leroy said; "She will work until that whole thing is in pieces for the fire." I wondered aloud; "Wouldn't it be easier for a man to do the chopping?" Leroy pointed out a Mango tree across the yard. Three men lounged in chairs in its

trades cows for 13 year old girls and measures a man's status by the number of his wives. I know polygamy is an ancient practice with some rationale. It is common in the Old Testament. I have to allow that it might sometimes be happy. In many ways, technologically and culturally, Southern Sudan feels like walking through scripture with the patriarchs. Still, I would not want to be Sarah, watching Abraham with Hagar and fearing for my son's inheritance. I would not want to be Leah, knowing I am my husband's second choice. Polygamy is part of the Old Testament, but so are its problems of jealousy and inequality. I want to march over to the lounging men and tell them it is wrong to force subservient roles on women, and I want to do it wearing pants.

This is not my culture. I will wear a skirt here. It is not my prerogative to tell the men under the tree how they should act. So how can a foreigner, like me, speak respectfully to issues? One answer is found in the Sudanese church. We heard their pastors advocate for women. They value women and encourage cooperation between spouses. MCC's partners, like the Diocese of Rumbek and the Sudan Council of Churches, have programs to promote peace and women's rights. There are indigenous people working hard to address inequalities and to shape their society as they choose. I feel good about putting my support behind these voices as they speak into their own culture. In this way, I am able to respectfully address the issues, and my attitudes, without skirting them.

Note of Interest:

The August 8, 2009 edition of "The Economist" has an article about women and pants in Sudan. Journalist Lubna Hussein wore pants in the capital, Khartoum, this summer, and was arrested for wearing; "indecent clothing in public". The law did not specify what was indecent about her apparel. If convicted, she faces 40 lashes and an unlimited fine. Hussein is brilliant in her resistance, sending invitations to the international press to attend the flogging. Effectively, she is putting the law on trial. Her trial date has been postponed, most likely in attempts to reduce the visibility of Hussein's fight.

Word Matters

The linguist did a double-take, looked at me intently and asked; "Tell me again, what are you calling yourselves?"

"We are a learning tour group representing the Mennonite Central Committee." I answered.

"That name tells me a lot. You're not a mission group here to do a quick project." The mosquito net draped bed creaked as she shifted to study her computer. Jemimah, a graduate student from the UK, was in Juba to study Non Government Organizations. She was not impressed. "What I've seen are groups more concerned with perpetuating themselves than helping local people. Language is important. Your name tells me that you want to listen. You're not assuming you have the answer. That's different."



Mosquito nets are necessary to prevent malaria in Sudan.

Words matter. We need them to communicate, to explain ourselves and to understand each other. But words are slippery fish, hard to grasp and harder still to hand gracefully to someone else. Definitions and understandings depend on context. Many of the Sudanese we met spoke English, but it was evident it wasn't quite our language. History, culture, and experiences shape their definitions. As foreigners, we had to listen carefully to understand.

Isaac and Emmanuel are young church leaders who received scholarships from MCC to the African Peace-Building Institute. After his studies, Isaac said; "I got back to Sudan and my mind was heavy..." To us, heaviness might indicate depression or a feeling of being overwhelmed, but Isaac's tone radiated excitement. "It is carrying something I have to share so it will be lighter!" Isaac was bursting with a desire to share the good news of peace. In fact, he and Emmanuel were so inspired that they travelled 10 hours by motor-bike and foot to meet with our learning tour. Their heavy load was not a burden. It was a gift so rich they could not enjoy it alone!

Philip Thorn is a 'peace field worker' at ACROSS where he trains farmers in agriculture and business. The idea is to build a 'peace economy' where the meeting of basic needs, meaningful work, and hope will replace the desperate leftovers of war. Philip was a Government of Southern Sudan employee when the government supported him to go to ACROSS. "The training has changed my life." He said. "Before, I was just moving forward." Government support makes it sound like Philip was paid, but the government has no money. "Supported or encouraged?" I asked. Philip caught on immediately and with a smile he emphasized; "encouraged!" "And when you say you were moving forward, do you mean you were just coping?" Again, Philip grinned. "Yes, just coping. Now I have a direction. I am not just walking anymore."

"Leave nothing here, take these things home with you." These instructions didn't come from hosts worried about lost socks under the beds. They didn't come from someone who wanted foreigners out of Sudan. They were words of instruction and commissioning from a Sudanese church leader. He wanted us to take the stories, information, and fellowship we were given in his country to our own. My first thoughts, when I heard the word 'things', were about what I had to cram into my suitcase. The way he used the word "things" showed that his priorities were relationships and ideas, not material possessions. These were what I was to be sure to pack home.

On our last Sunday in Juba, we worshipped with the Korrok Episcopal church. It supports an initiative to train women in marketable sewing skills. When the pastor spoke of empowering women for the good of the church and society his words prickled. He said; "this is so itching in my blood." How do you scratch when the itch is so deep? A vividness of language was everywhere in Sudan. For a people who struggle to get schooling, have few books, and speak to us in a second language, their eloquence was astounding. Home in Edmonton, I notice increasing amounts of "text speak", the digital snippets standing in for real conversation. Cell phones, text messaging, and busyness spawn a reductionist language that values quickness over depth. We in North America are highly educated and drowning in information and entertainment choices. It is ironic that we regress in articulateness while a "have-not" culture like Southern Sudan has such a beautiful economy of words.

Words matter. Jemimah took the MCC Sudan number, and went to see Joan Willems at the office. They spoke and Jemimah said MCC's approach to aid was "very humble." Her words tell me she found MCC willing to live within the questions of Sudan and support its people. I can listen to that. Hear that. It matters.

A Local Perspective on MCC's work.

Sister Florence, a leader in the Korrok Episcopal church in Juba, said the following (paraphrased) about MCC in front of the congregation on September 6: "You are the heart of God in the heart of Africa. Some other non-government organizations come in and ask about what we've got on the ground so they can drop funds in or maybe tell us what to do. You come in and ask about our vision and how you can help us to make it happen!"

Stories from RECONCILE

Reconcile Peace Institute, Yei, Southern Sudan

The Reconcile Peace Institute was established in 2003 by the New Sudan Council of Churches. MCC provides scholarships and funds for teacher travel. RPI trains community leaders, called "key mobilizers", in trauma healing and conflict transformation. Trainees return to their communities to help begin the healing process there. Many RPI students are past victims of Lord's Resistance Army violence and abductions, inter-tribal conflict, and the ongoing devastation of the recent civil war. They have a deep understanding of what their people need. On September 2, 2009, our Mennonite Central Committee learning tour group visited RPI to hear what students are saying about their work.

Kenneth John

Kenneth John studies conflict resolution at RPI. He said; "The training has been so good, we learned a lot by getting access to books here at the library. Right now we are applying the skills to our communities." He explained how key mobilizers go to village chiefs and ask them about bringing change to their communities. "Eventually they listen to us." He said. John is thankful for the support that MCC gives to enable students to help their communities.

Kenji Eliasha and Taban Francis

Kenji Eliasha spoke about issues in his community. "There are disputes among the refugees who are coming back and claiming land. People who stayed here and those who come back have problems with each other. When you try to solve the problems, there is a lot of explaining, it is a process." Taban Francis added; "Most of the people in our community are addicted to alcohol..." He explained that when the 'owner of the family' (meaning the father), has a drinking problem, gender violence increases. The roots of alcoholism and violence in Southern Sudan are myriad. Francis listed famine, poverty, lack of education, and frustration. Even boredom is a cause. "When the mind isn't occupied then you can start thinking evil things." For many traumatized people, alcohol provides temporary escape from horrific memories. Francis said; "We (the mobilizers) have to be careful with the level of intervention because you can become a victim too." Both Eliasha and Francis are realistic about the enormity of the task of healing a broken community that still experiences violence. In May of this year, the Lord's Resistance Army attacked and abducted children near their community, resulting in fear and the unwillingness of people to remain in the farms and villages. "This needs government intervention, not only small tasks like ours. We need to work as a team with other groups too." Francis said.

Bukata

"It is the rainy season, so it is difficult to walk, especially for me. I can't swim. I am short and if the water is deep, I have to go a long way around to find a spot to cross it!" Bukata's self-deprecating jokes had everyone laughing as he launched into an account of his latest adventure as a key mobilizer for the Reconcile Peace Institute. That he laughs at all is a miracle.

Bukata works to educate people in remote villages about the upcoming elections and the realities of HIV/AIDS. The needs are urgent. In 2010, (according to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement), the people of Sudan will vote to determine whether the mostly Muslim North and mostly Christian South will unite or separate. After years of civil war, the issues are immense, with the North holding most of the power. Many Southerners have no education and do not understand elections. Isolation makes census taking almost impossible, fueling disputes. Complicating matters even further, the reality of HIV/AIDS is expected to hit hard as refugees flood home, bringing the silent plague with them. Armed only with information, Bukata travels through conflicted areas to remote villages. Often there are no passable roads and he walks. On his latest trip, the rainy season forced Bukata and his partner into a canoe. "Unfortunately we got lost." He said. For 25 hours they struggled through crocodile and mosquito infested swamps. They encountered human corpses, victims of tribal conflicts over cattle, and saw many skulls, grisly reminders of Sudan's pervasive violence. Then, while slogging through knee-deep water, they heard other people in the bush. Exhausted and frightened, they didn't know whether to hide or to call for help. Are these enemies who will add their bodies to the piles of dead or are they friends looking for them? This time they were friends.

A week after his ordeal, Bukata chuckles and speaks what must be a ridiculous understatement; "I am still recovering from that." He speaks passionately of his intentions to continue his work. It is a miracle he can laugh. His conviction and persistence are miraculous. Bukata may be short and unable to swim, but his spirit soars as it brings hope into forgotten places.



Bukata at the end of his ordeal. He and others like him brave hardship in order to bring education and hope to remote areas.
Photo courtesy of Bukata

Rock City

There is a beautiful mountain near the city of Juba. It is artfully placed, as if a master horticulturalist had a grand plan for city dwellers to escape from flatness and heat. Cool green shrubbery shrouds its base and wanders up to paint the black and grey stone with life. To see the mountain is to feel relief. Some wealthy folk, government officials or NGOs, are building upscale homes on the road to the mountain. This hopeful atmosphere of construction changes abruptly at the foot of the mountain. The homes here are shacks. Narrow paths become visible on the sides of the mountain, eroded by the calloused feet of people bringing boulders down to the fires to crack them into smaller chunks. Cairns of brick sized stones and piles of gravel are sentinels at the roadside, watching and hoping for buyers. Tattered sheets create patches of shade where families break rocks on anvils. They sort the shards and add them to piles. This is Juba's gravel pit. The people are gravel crushers, spending long days at the dangerous work, often not knowing if their rock will sell. At the road's end, past the piles and sheets and shacks, the atmosphere shifts again. A resort, beautifully set into the mountain, beckons moneyed travelers with warm colours and entertainment. Stages for musicians, food and beverage bars, and umbrella shaded tables await. The impoverished rock breakers are sandwiched between rich homes and the resort. Do wealthy people see the children breaking rocks as they drive to the resort for an evening of pleasure? Can rock crushers dream of jobs at the resort someday? Is Juba being rebuilt on the backs of rock breakers or is the strange combination of foreign money and local labour a formula that will lift them out of the pits? The only things coming easily to us North American visitors are confusion and questions as we sit down to hear the stories of some Rock City residents.

Stories from Under a Rock City Umbrella

Charles was a military officer before he and his family became rock crushers. During the civil war, he was forced to fight for the North against the Southern Sudan Liberation Army. Charles said; "There are many problems living in Sudan. During the war, we were not allowed to go out and were all packed in one place. The Sudanese were fighting amongst themselves. If they saw you outside of town without a permit they would kill you." The war fractured families. Because he fought for the North, Charles' extended family, all part of the SPLA, did not know what to think of him. When the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, Charles said they; "Were worried that my mind had gone to the side of the North, but that's not a problem. It took 4 years before my family and friends trusted me." In a country with no social safety net, family is crucial but war tears them apart. Charles knows his parents died, but has no idea what happened to them. War weary, the people of Sudan yearn for peace, however, 4 years after the peace agreement, they are justifiably discouraged. "I prayed that when peace came there would be changes, things like schools and medications. I have 8 children. Out of these, only 2 are in school. If our rock sells,



Back row: Teresa, Dominique
Front Row: Sarah, Charles
Photo by Dan Driedger

these 2 will go to school and the others will be cared for. Since peace came, we have not seen all we dreamed of."

Sarah, Charles' wife, struggles to care for their children. Reflecting on the past years, she said; "A lot took place, like trauma. I don't know how to say it, even those within were traumatized. During the war there was suffering and during peace there is still suffering." In wartime, the family had a bit of money, from army wages, but there was no food or medicine or school. Sarah stayed in a very poor refugee shelter with the children. When it rained, it rained on them. She said; "We were praying for God to bring peace so people could live happily together. Since the peace, it is worse...during the war the



These piles of rocks were all crushed by hand.
Photo by Dan Driedger

soldiers were paid better than the pay for breaking rocks...there was money but no food. Now there is no money and little food." Sarah sees no signs of hope for her family or Sudan. "The only hope is for those who have money to send kids to East Africa to study." She is not in that category. Sorrow and hopelessness are the bitter flavours of her life.

Teresa was a child when her family fled to a Congolese refugee camp. She doesn't say much about it, except to tell us that the life of an exile is very hard. She remembers her parents "digging in the ground", gardening, but never having enough food. Their poverty was compounded by laws against employing foreigners. United Nations supplements barely enabled basic survival, so in 1998 her family returned to Southern Sudan. At home, they were discriminated against by those who had stayed during the war. In spite of having some education, they could not get jobs. Recently, Teresa was accepted to the Juba University in communications studies. She says; "I want to become a journalist to tell the truth and bring change. I will make sure to work hard to see change in Sudan." As an educated young woman, Teresa sees some signs of hope for her country. She said; "There's a bit of improvement here since our exile. Before, there was no construction and there is a road here now."

Dominique's family spent the war time travelling between refugee camps. His parents were educated. His father, a teacher, was chairman of an HIV organization. His mother was a vocalist. When they first fled their home, Dominique saw his father crying as he imagined having to cut trees and rebuild a home from nothing. In the Congo, they lived below the poverty line. Dominique said that refugee camp life was very bad. "The only advantage was food, maize, given to us by the United Nations." Desperate to earn a bit of money, his mother, like many others, resorted to brewing alcohol. It was a hard choice, only supplying a meager income while obviously exacerbating societal dysfunction among a traumatized people. The refugee camp was so awful, the family decided to return to Sudan. Dominique remembers 1999 as the worst year of his life. "I was 14 years old when I was conscripted as a child soldier. When the United Nations said that children could not fight, I went back to my mother. The soldiers made my family go back to the

refugee camp in the Congo.” In the camp, there was no work and the family had to gather and sell wood. In 2004, they again returned to Southern Sudan, but were accused of having a “Congolese mind” and bringing a different culture into their country. It was difficult to reintegrate into society and find jobs. Eventually, his father resumed teaching. Dominique recalls that he was able to go to school, but sometimes had to go at odd times to avoid being taken by soldiers. Currently, he studies community and rural development at Juba University. He wanted to study law, but said; “unfortunately, the board chooses for you. They gave me what I didn’t want.” His family struggles to pay University fees, which the government had originally promised to cover. The fee for a student whose family left during the war is higher than for those who stayed, creating great difficulty for returnees. In spite of the challenges, Dominique sees hope for Sudan if young people are educated and work for change. He expressed faith in the church’s message of hope. “When the bishop talks, it sounds like the voice divine.” He said. “The Bishop said that God will make you laugh again. I am waiting for that.”

Angelina

Her eyes blazed. As we listened to students in a classroom in Rumbeck, the woman with the “Angelina” name tag stared at me. Her spiky hair and perfect posture radiated confidence, but the intensity of her gaze had a disturbing hardness. I wondered what had happened to her.

During a break, Angelina waved me over to an empty chair and began to speak. “When I dream,” she said, “it is about my mother grabbing my hand and running into the bush for a day with no food and water. I still feel like I did then. Sometimes mothers had to leave their children alone with the wild animals. It still happens.”

Vividly, I think of my own children. Of their terror and the ripping grief and fear I would have as a parent, trying to keep them safe as soldiers destroy my village. It is beyond my imagination, too painful to comprehend.

Currently, Angelina works for the government of Southern Sudan, in agriculture. She takes courses, like this one with MCC partners in the Diocese of Rumbeck, to help herself and her people deal with trauma and build a peaceful future. She is intelligent and capable, but her past is painfully present as she tries to move forward. MCC walks alongside people like Angelina, supporting their efforts to heal.



The Diocese is Here

A Reflection on Leadership and Romans 12:6-8

The young man cultivated an air of authority, despite his red track pants and T-shirt. "You will have to move your truck." He declared. "It cannot stay here." The 11 passenger plane that would take us to Juba from Rumbek was late. The waiting area was a wire enclosed, grass roofed shelter, outfitted with a pop machine and wooden benches. It was one of the few places we could protect our thin white skins from the full power of the Sudanese sun.

The truck in question, piled with luggage, was parked in the shade of a nearby tree. It seemed odd to move it now, one and a half hours into our wait, but we did not question red pants. We moved quickly to unload suitcases and scan the area for our driver, the Reverend Peter of the Diocese of Rumbek. We weren't sure, straight away, where he was and that caused a slight anxiety for us task oriented North Americans. Who would tell him the truck had to move? Was this a problem? "Should we go find the driver?" I asked Leroy, a Mennonite Central Committee worker from Juba. "Nah." He replied lazily, glancing to where several airport employees, including red pants, were talking. "They're on it."



While Leroy went back to visiting, I stared at the workers. It didn't appear to me like they were on it. "It" looked like socializing. No one was scurrying anywhere, and I still couldn't see Peter. "Oh well, not my problem". I thought as I kept my eyes on my dusty suitcase. Eventually, Peter appeared and casually joined the group of chatty officials. They smiled and talked and soon red pants disappeared. "Put in his place." Leroy commented. The truck never moved.

Photo by Will Enns

As our plane neared the airport, Peter rejoined us. We asked what had happened with the truck. He smiled and calmly said; "A mistake. They didn't know the Diocese was here." That's funny. The words "Diocese of Rumbek" are emblazoned in large block letters on the side of the truck. How could they not know?

Later, Leroy explained that here we should not take charge the way North Americans tend to do, we should trust our leaders. It would have been disrespectful not to let Peter lead in his own way. Relationships are more important indicators of authority here than uniforms or signs. The Diocese is not the truck with the big letters. The Diocese is Peter and the other church leaders who are known and respected.

We saw other Sudanese examples of leaders in action. A choir director's hand on the

edge of a drum gently reined in a young percussionist's fervour without embarrassing him. The sound the choir produced was balanced and worshipful. A pastor quietly joined a long-winded worship leader at the pulpit and, without any words, brought the announcements to a timely conclusion. Our Sudanese MCC worker, Simon, handled all our passports and tickets while we stood aside at the Juba airport. His presence "greased the wheels" that sped us through customs. Leadership here is based on relationship and respect, not on uniforms or signs, and people look to their leaders for direction.

Seeing these people at work inspires new thoughts about leading and following. Now when I read the New International Version of Romans 12:6-8, the word "let" jumps out. It says: "We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve, if it is in teaching, let him teach, if it is encouraging, let him encourage, if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently, if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

In North American culture, we talk about "taking leadership" and "grabbing the bull by the horns" as if leadership is an award for which individuals compete, instead of a trust that is earned. Our evaluation of leaders, even in the church, is often primarily driven by desire for measurable results instead of respect for each other and relationships. We readily focus on individual opinions and the loudest voice instead of allowing a situation to evolve slowly, trusting our leaders to act in their own time. Our African brothers and sisters have much to teach about leadership and community, about how good relationships create trust in authority. What might happen in North America if we let our leaders lead in their own way, if we let them gently rein in our fervour, stand beside us as we learn to speak, and help us to travel forward smoothly as a group?



Cattle are very important to the culture of many tribes, especially the Dinka people. The curved horns make this a prized animal.
Photo by Dan Driedger

Good Food

By Donita Wiebe-Neufeld

When you hear the phrase “good food” what comes to mind? I imagine the smell of a turkey roasting at Christmas, or the summertime aroma of barbecues loaded with Alberta beef. I think of soft bread so fresh the butter melts. I hear the crunch of fresh vegetables and see strawberries sliding down mounds of ice cream. I plan to exercise so I can enjoy that food without expanding my personal territory! In our land of plenty, we tend to think of good food in terms of taste and variety.

I hadn't thought much about the phrase “good food” before meeting people in Africa. One day, we toured Kenyan sand dams. These structures span dry river beds and trap water during the rainy season. This water is held under the sand where it does not evaporate or breed mosquitoes. The dams raise the water table and support agriculture. Women can now get water within 0.5 km of home instead of carrying it for up to 5 km. Areas once classified as desert, where water was a source of tribal conflict, are now productive places where communities work together to grow food, protect the environment, and educate their children.



A sand dam doesn't happen quickly, it takes a huge amount of negotiation, planning, and physical work. The surrounding communities have to co-operate, sometimes overcoming tribal prejudices. Hillsides need to be carefully terraced. All the work, the digging, carrying, and building, is done by hand and everyone is needed, from the young to the old. Labor is plentiful, and working together creates community and fosters ownership in the project. When we stopped to see some terracing, the people, covered in red Kenyan dust, climbed out of the trenches to sing and speak to us. The local chairperson of the project said; “we are happy when we work two groups together. This brings us the unity that we have.” One woman said; “now I have friends in the other tribe.”

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These comments stick with me, but what changed my thinking most was an enthusiastic comment by a young man who knew we represented MCC. "Thank you for the food for work program." He said. "The food gives us strength to work."

Now, for me, the phrase "good food" isn't so much about taste or smell or color. Now "good food" conjures a memory of a warehouse full of sacks of grain and beans. This is strength for those trench diggers and dam builders as they work for their future and build peaceful relationships. Good food is energy, hope, and change. Good food is what we all need.



Ron Ratzlaff (MCC Kenya) and Dan Driedger pose with bags for the food for work program. Photo courtesy of Dan Driedger

Novocaine Nation

Just now, October 14, 2009, I heard a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation news report that 1/6 of humanity is undernourished. The report came from a United Nations source in Nairobi, Kenya. Immediately on its heels was a little article about Coca-Cola's launch of a new 100 calorie can of pop meant to help North Americans manage their weight problems! The juxtaposition is too striking to be coincidence. Somewhere out there a news editor wants us to think about the craziness of a world of too much existing alongside a world of starvation.

As of September 2009, 20% of Southern Sudanese people do not have enough to eat. (17% is considered crisis levels by the World Food Program.) Many of the people we saw sitting under trees were likely too weak from hunger or disease to work, even if there were jobs for them. Our MCC workers live the horror of seeing starving people every day, and knowing they cannot help them all. They also know the horror of North American ignorance and self indulgence. One of those workers said; "Our culture is like a big shot of Novocaine." It's easy for us, people who have more than enough of everything, to pretend the world is okay. We often willfully ignore the struggles of others, walking past the beggar, turning off the news channel, and hoarding our money for bigger houses and more clothes. Entertainment, personal pleasure, and busyness can inoculate us against hearing hard realities. We convince ourselves that our little efforts won't make a difference, so we feel okay about not trying. What must happen for our culture to wake up and reach for each other instead of for a little can of Coke?



Children's Feature

"A Sticker on my Heart"

Props: Three bottles of pop with paper labels. Enough MCC stickers for every child. Jones Soda works well because of the bright colours. Remove the label from one bottle. Use sandpaper, water, and dirt to scuff up the other two bottles to make it look like they came by truck from Juba to Yei on a pitted, dusty road. Keep the bottles hidden in a bag until you want the kids to see them.

"I'm thirsty, but I'm not sure if I can drink this." (Hold up the bottle that has no label. I used blue pop.) "It's the same colour as the stuff that we use in the car to clean bugs off the windshield. It also kind of reminds me of the floor cleaner I used to clean the bathroom yesterday. MMMM, yummy! Do you think I should drink it if I don't know what it is? What would help me know what is inside the bottle?" (Some child will say it needs a label.) "Right. Labels are very important. They tell us who made the stuff, what it is, and what it should be used for. I have a story to tell you about labels."

"Last week I was in Africa, in a country called Sudan. It's a hot and dusty place and the country has had a lot of war. My group wanted to drive from the capital city, Juba, to a town called Yei. The only road was very different from our roads! When we asked the driver what side of the road people usually drive on in Sudan, he laughed and said;

"whatever side doesn't have the giant pothole!" Some of the holes were bigger than cars! We were swerving and sweating and bouncing up and down in the truck and dust was sticking to us. Sometimes our heads banged on the roof. On the way we saw a lot of trucks with flat tires, broken parts, and even one on its side in the ditch! Twice we had to stop and wait while old land mines were removed from beside the road. Finally, we got to Yei. We were thirsty and someone at the village brought us some pop to drink." (Pull out the battered bottles.)

"Here, does this look good?"
"These bottles all came in on

trucks on the same road we just travelled, so guess what happened to them?" (Hold a bottle in each hand and shake as if you're travelling over that bumpy road.) Kind of scary isn't it? The bottles get dirty and sometimes lose their stickers so you're not quite sure what is in the bottle or if it's going to explode when it gets opened!

The people in Sudan are kind of like these bottles of pop. Life has been a hard road for them. They've had wars, there's not enough food, there's no jobs, no money, and some-



Aerial photo of rural Southern Sudan near the village of Yei.
Photo by Dan Driedger

times no home. In some ways, the people are all shook up and just like bottles with no labels, you can't really tell what's on the inside. You don't know what has happened to them, what they believe, or if they are ready to explode.

Simon is a Sudanese man that we got to know. Like these bottles, he has been through a rough time. Simon could have become an angry and violent man, but he has a special label on his life that won't come off no matter what happens to him. Simon is a Christian. He believes in Jesus' way of peace, he studies the Bible and teaches other people about God's love. No matter how shook up Simon gets, he knows what is inside of him and he knows he belongs to God. This is what Simon said to us:

"God has put a sticker on my heart that won't rub off. It won't come off because God likes it there...MCC has brought a significant impact here, like a sticker that you can't rub away."

Simon works for the Mennonite Central Committee in Juba. He believes strongly in Jesus' message of peace. I will tell more of Simon's story in the sermon today, so you can listen for that and think about how God helps Simon to be a man of peace in a rough place. (Give each of the children an MCC sticker as they head back to their seats.)



An overturned truck on the way to Yei. Drivers had to watch for branches on the road which indicated an obstruction ahead. There were many broken down vehicles on the road.
Photo by Dan Driedger

Lamentations For Sudan

Based on selected passages from the book of Lamentations and the experiences of the MCC Learning and Resource Generation tour of Aug. 27-Sept. 8, 2009.

There are times when the painful things we see and hear are incomprehensible. When the world is beyond cruel and God seems absent. The book of Lamentations was written for such a time. A time when the people of God saw their country and temple destroyed and they faced famine, war, and exile. A time when their leaders were killed, their children taken, and their buildings destroyed. Lamentations is made up of five chapters, 5 songs of grief, confession, fragile hope, judgement, and crying out to God.

Hear the words of the prophet: Lamentations 1:1-3, 11-12

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. Judah (Juba?) has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now amongst the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow...

The first chapter of Lamentations is a description of the desolation of Jerusalem. How can I begin to describe the situation we found in Southern Sudan? In distance, it is half a world away, in culture it seems like a different planet, and in suffering, it is another universe. It is hard to find the right words.

Imagine, for a few moments, that you have a large empty hospital building in the middle of nowhere. Fill it with patients so that every bed is occupied. Lock the doors from the outside. Turn off the electricity. Cancel sanitation services. One tap, in the basement, supplies tepid brown water for everyone. All the usual afflictions are present among your patients, along with the additional challenge that every person also suffers from trauma and depression. There are no trained hospital staff, so a few of the healthiest patients move into the head office, the nurses station, and the kitchen. Food and supplies sporadically trickle in through service bays, but there is no power to operate elevators or kitchen equipment. Garbage piles up, until the hallways are treacherous and reeking. Volunteers struggle to distribute supplies, but only a third of the people get enough. Desperation builds as stomachs shrink. Some leaders get greedy, and with the lack of accountability structures, take more than their share. Resentment builds. Now, imagine that 2 other hospitals send all their patients to yours. They arrive and fights break out over who gets the rooms and who sleeps in the halls. Many of the new arrivals are former soldiers, still with their weapons. Soon no one can predict which hallway is safe for travel, it is hard to know who to trust, and it feels like there is no way out.

Southern Sudan is like a vast, undersupplied hospital where people, traumatized by more

than 22 years of civil war, displacement, and poverty are trying to survive and rebuild their decimated country. Refugees who fled to neighbouring countries are now pouring back in to Southern Sudan, straining the already limited resources. And every person has a story, a story of loved ones killed or taken, of being forced to be a soldier, of running and hiding in the wilderness, of horrible refugee camps. Because of violence and high child mortality, the average life expectancy is only 42. Most of the population grew up under siege or in refugee camps and lack education and basic life skills. There is a desperate need for trained leadership in every area. One man told us, you only grow up learning how to hide.

Hear the words of the prophet: Lamentations 2: 11-12

My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, "Where is the bread and wine?" as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom.

In the second chapter of Lamentations, the poet sinks deeper into grief, feeling that God's anger is being poured out on the people and that there is no escape from despair. The first night after arriving in Juba, the capital city of Southern Sudan, we sat down with MCC staff to learn a bit about the situation. That is where we met Simon. Simon is Sudanese, and has recently joined the MCC office staff. He told us his story. Simon is one of the so called "Lost Boys" of Sudan. When he was 14, the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) was forcibly recruiting young boys to be soldiers. Simon escaped them by hiding inside a pit toilet for 6 hours and then running 15 miles to another town. He and 5 friends gathered a few supplies and began a terrifying 10 day walk to a bordering country, the Central Africa Republic, looking for safety and a chance at an education. While on the journey the boys had to fight off a hungry Jaguar, avoid soldiers, and find food. One boy almost drowned in a river. Once they were beaten by a drunken policeman who accused them of being child soldiers and thieves. Finally, they made it to a place where they could study at a Catholic seminary for a few years. When that time ran out, Simon was once again on his own. He gathered a group of 24 other young men to walk through the Democratic Republic of Congo to a refugee camp in Uganda. It was another traumatic experience, they buried two of their friends. One young man died of disease, and another died when he was bitten by a poisonous snake. When they got to the refugee camp, there was an outbreak of Cholera and several of the men were seriously ill. In Uganda, they did manage to get more education. Now Simon works for MCC, but this isn't where his story ends. As we went to our beds that night, we were told; "If you hear shots in the night, don't worry, that's just the way it is in Juba." At 4 am, I was laying awake in a steamy pool of sweat, when I heard shots. Remembering not to worry, I tried to roll into a cooler spot on the bed and sleep. A few hours later, at breakfast, Simon came into the kitchen, a stricken look on his face. One of the shots we heard had killed his 28 year old neighbour. Simon had been shot at too, and his house robbed. From 4-6am, he was under his bed using a cell phone to call for help. The next night, the thieves came back, looting a small store and shooting a mother and her 14 day old baby. Where is God? We join the poet in his lament. The pain just doesn't seem to end. For our tour group, now the agony had a face, and it was our friend Simons. Where could there be

any hope in this place?

Hear the words of the prophet: Lamentations 3:22-25.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

In humanity there is no hope, but surprising words found in the middle of the book of Lamentations remind us that God is still there. In the midst of deepest grief, of hopelessness, and despair, where humanity fails, God is. Let's stand together to sing words from Lamentations chapter 3. Hymn # 327, Great is Thy Faithfulness.

In humanity there is no hope, yet we did hear some stories of hope in the midst of the Lament that is Sudan. Throughout the years of war, when every human institution crumbled, the church survived. The church suffered and stayed, distributed what ever aid they could, mediated between rival tribes, passed news to people, and preached the way of Christ. A young Catholic leader, named Emmanuel, told us this true story. He said; "There was something serious happening between two boys. They fought and one of them injured the other seriously enough that he had to go to the hospital. When he was cured, he went back to his village, full of anger and looking for revenge. He went to the market and bought a sharp knife. It happened to be Sunday, so before going to kill his enemy, he went in to a church. The pastor was preaching about the crucifixion. He proclaimed Jesus' words to his killers as he hung on the cross; "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do..." The young man was shocked that Jesus asked for his enemy to be forgiven. "Now I have to forgive." He thought. He went back to the market, bought a bag of candy, and went to face his enemy. When the other man saw him coming, he was afraid, but he held out the candy and said; "Be calm. I'm not going to fight you. Let us sit and eat. I forgive you." God is steadfast. Pardon for sin and a peace that endures, these are the things that the message of Christ shines into the darkness.

Hear the words of the prophet: Lamentations 4:11-13

The Lord gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. The Kings of earth did not believe, nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem. It was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her.

After a brief glimpse of hope, the fourth chapter plunges back into grief. As all those who deal with depression and trauma know, the path to healing is rocky. Even when things seem to get better, there can be many setbacks, Peace is fragile, hope is wavering. Here in chapter 4 there is a strong element of confession, realization that it is because of the sin of humanity that such despair exists. There needs to be a turning, a change in behaviour to bring about peace. In Sudan there are 115 distinct tribal groups with long histories of fighting over land and grazing rights. There is a strong culture of revenge, an eye for an eye, if someone wrongs your people, you go after them. A cultural shift in understanding

is needed for peace to grow. MCC is supporting the Sudan Council of Churches in a variety of peace education projects. Isaac is a young church leader. Along with other young leaders, he received peace and conflict resolution training from an MCC worker. He told us this story: "In October last year, in the village of Maperdit, there was a conflict between two communities regarding the abduction of a girl. At 1 am, one of the groups went to attack the other. I told them please, the other group is coming, wait here in ambush. I ran to the other group and told them the same thing. One group was out in the bush, and the other was waiting in town. Then I went to the chief of the village and asked if he was aware of what was happening. The chief said; "What can we do? The young people are wired to fight." We went to the group of elders, and told them to talk to their sons. They went to talk and their sons were already exhausted. It was 11 o'clock and they needed water. The elders asked them to go home. The next day we involved the district commissioner. I gave him the idea to call both sets of elders together. They looked into the problems that caused the anger and solved them. Later, the groups clearly saw the trick I had played on them, and none of them asked why. They were interested in peace and only a few people were leading the whole group.

Hear the words of the prophet: Lamentations 5: 19-22.

But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old -unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.

The final chapter of Lamentations ends on a tenuous, fragile note of hope. Lord, restore us. The poet has gone through the spirals of grief. He has confessed. He has acknowledged that it is only through God's intervention that peace will come. His poem ends in prayer and utter dependence on God. What is our response? What can we offer to our brothers and sisters who are crying out in Sudan? We asked some of them what we should tell our people in the North American church. Here are some of the things we heard:

1. "I am excited to see you, not because you are going to support us, but your presence with us. We are not alone. We are brothers and sisters and are going to be together. You are going to take our story back there." (Samuel Deng)
2. "Thank you for coming to listen to us." (women's circle with sister Mu Mu)
3. "Support Sudan to rebuild itself, sustainability is key. The church development activities are important, they last longer than others. If there is a conflict, the church built things are respected while others are destroyed." (Rev. Peter Tibi)
4. Referring to MCC's work in Sudan, one woman leader said to us in front of her church; "You are the heart of God in the heart of Africa" (Sister Florence)
5. "We need teachers." (Father Giovanni)
6. We were told that the work of the Mennonite Central Committee to train and equip people for life and peace is making a difference. That people are learning Christ's way of peace, that they are regaining the farming and life skills lost in the refugee camps, that education for the people is the key to a sustainable future. We were encouraged to become aware of and to support the work financially and with volunteers. And over and over again, the people we met asked us to pray for them and their country.

Prayer: Lord, this morning we have lamented with the people of Sudan. We have heard a small piece of their story and together with them we raise our spirits in prayer to You as the only source of hope and light in a dark and hurting place. It is difficult for us, in this land of peace and prosperity, to truly feel for the struggles of others far away. We get so caught up in our own lives, our pleasures and pains, that we easily forget who is really in charge. We forget that you love all your children equally and that we are called to do the same. Lord, our Christian brothers and sisters in Sudan have no delusions about the true source of hope and life. We ask that their stories of faith, courage, and perseverance touch us where we are at and teach us to look to you. We pray for the fragile peace in Sudan, we petition you on behalf of the people. Inspire us to open our hearts, minds, and souls to Your calling so that we might be Your hands and feet wherever you call us to go, and whatever you call us to give.

AMEN

Gifts from Sudan

A learning tour is about seeing needs and shaping a response. In Sudan the needs are overwhelming, but the giving is not one directional. We came home with stories and insights more valuable than any souvenir. Here are a few gifts received from our Sudanese brothers and sisters:

Belief and Hope. The Sudanese church is astounding! Where human institutions fail and there are no banks, social programs, governments, or industry, the church does more than just survive. It feeds rivers of displaced people. It educates about health issues and elections. It supports farmers. It speaks against injustice. Most strikingly, it projects hope where there otherwise is none. It is highly respected. Even the government of the South sends workers to church programs to learn about peace, health, and development. What an inspiration for us, as North American Christians, to see this healing and hopeful power even as our churches struggle for relevance.

Encouragement. The drive and focus of Sudanese leaders is incredible. After a 6 week course on conflict management, (MCC provided the scholarships), 3 young men from Yei are empowered to make a difference in their communities. For example, Taban Francis, a teacher, immediately used his new skills to help a student and her parents work through relational difficulties. His community now calls him a peacemaker and goes to him to learn how to peacefully solve conflicts. The stories of these young leaders giving to their communities inspire us to use our resources for the benefit of others.

Peace. The Mennonite church is a peace church, yet transmitting the importance of this is challenging in North America. Sudanese people understand the horror of war. Over and over, we heard them say violence is not the answer. They have a burning passion for peace and are willing to risk much for it. Their stories of peace building in the midst of war are real and we need them to remember who we are.

Priorities. Living simply without the demands of technology and too many choices, the people of Sudan have time. On Sundays, people often stay at church for hours, enjoying each other. Also, where there is lack of so much, there is clarity. Basic necessities, faith, education, and relationships are paramount. Being with these people is a gift that helps a fragmented North American to evaluate what is truly important in life.

Prayer for Sudan

(Journal excerpt from Sunday, September 6)

Our last night in Juba, and the last hot, sticky sleep in a mosquito-net draped bed surrounded by sounds of crickets, generators, and the wafting smells of burning plastic bottles and B.O. As I write this, I'm very aware that within a stone's throw of this place there are people sleeping in Toukals, (grass roofed huts). Some are comfortable, others sleep on the ground exposed to mosquitoes. Many children are laying there hungry. Thousands will toss, sleepless, afraid of recurring nightmares. Many fathers are in bars, drinking the families change and anesthetising against the darkness while creating a longer night for their families. Without exception, they all fear the insecurity of night.

As I lay me down to sleep,
I pray that Juba, Lord you keep.
That there'll be no death before they wake,
That screams and hungers Lord, you take.

As I lay me down to sleep,
I pray your mercy Lord is deep.
Be near all who tomorrow wake,
To endure the pain that war did make.

As I lay me down to sleep,
I pray that Sudan, Lord, you keep.
Strengthen Leroy, Simon, Joan, and Jake,
To be disciples darkness can't break.

Amen.



Joan and Leroy Willems, MCC Sudan
Photo by Dan Driedger



Left to right: Jacob Mathre, MCC Sudan, and
Dan Driedger



Simon Mikanipare Agume, MCC Sudan

Coming Home Sudan MCC Partners

(Funded through Sudan based budget unless otherwise noted. For more detailed information, contact your local MCC office.)

Adventist Relief and Development Agency

-development of feeding and education programs, schools and latrine construction. Funded through Canadian Food Grains Bank.

Total: \$566,600

Diocese of Rumbek:

-construct an HIV/AIDS teaching and healing center

-service workers for vocational training center, women's desk, and peace programs

- Total: \$351,550

Sudan Council of Churches

-Educational assistance for AIDS orphans. Funded through "Generations at Risk" HIV/AIDS program

-Juba and Magwi Counties Peace Initiative. Conflict resolution training where there are tribal disputes

-Trauma healing and training for church leaders

Total: \$91,700

ACROSS

-Service worker promoting integration of rural households into the emerging peace economy

Total: \$45,750

Broader Horizons Institute

-Employs cooks and provides breakfast to 100 students. (Funded through Global Family)

-Basic living skills for handicapped youth, teacher training, educational materials. (Funded through Global Family)

-Total: \$37,000

Episcopal Church-Development and Relief Agency

-basic supplies for refugees. Simple farming tools and seeds. Funded through Food, Disaster, and Material Resources

Total: \$30,798

Episcopal Church-Mother's Union

-vocational, life skills, and leadership training for women

-Total: \$22,386

Reconcile

-scholarships to trauma healing and conflict transformation studies for community leaders

Total: \$16,128

Sudanaid

-scholarships for displaced university students in Khartoum

Total: \$9,000

African Peace-Building Institute

-intensive training in peace building

Total: \$5,000