



Standing in the Gap

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Rachel Yates

On the third day of the “Healing Hearts, Transforming Nations” workshop in the remote town of Pochalla, South Sudan, the confessions began. [Kristi Rice](#), a PC(USA) mission co-worker knelt on a mat facing the gathering of men and women of the Anywaa people. *“I spoke, confessing and acknowledging ways that my ancestors, my people, had hurt the Anywaa tribe. ‘My ancestors are Europeans, and they decided boundaries without regard for the boundaries of tribes and kingdoms that already existed; your tribe was divided between Ethiopia and Sudan.’ I continued with confessions on*



behalf of Americans and missionaries, including our country’s purchase of slaves that perpetuated the prejudice against Africans and disrespect for their personhood and societies. I could feel the emotion, remorse and guilt, knowing that they had been considered disposable and backward, and that their colonizing government had not invested in education and development for their communities. Some people closed their eyes, not wanting to face me or the emotion welling up in them; many were unsure how to respond to these confessions that they had probably thought but never expected to hear. I asked for their forgiveness, and Omot invited anyone who felt the

desire to come and offer forgiveness to me for the confessions I had made. Pastor Jobi was the first to come, hugging me and offering forgiveness.

My confession opened the door for many others that followed. Men and women came forward to confess specific wrongs that their village or family had done against others during a bitter period of conflict within their region. Others confessed how their church had contributed to divisions between denominations in the town and asked forgiveness. As each person confessed, others who were among the group of people who had been wronged would come forward to offer forgiveness. This lasted a full hour, people coming one after the other to acknowledge wrongs done by their group against others. It was a beautiful work of the Holy Spirit, seeing contrite hearts willing to speak the wrongs done and also seeing people willing to choose forgiveness rather than holding on to the resentment of those wrongs.”

Someone recently remarked to Kristi, *“But you don’t need forgiveness for things that your ancestors did.’ ‘No,’ I replied, ‘but some people may need the opportunity to forgive.’ Later, I reflected that perhaps I did need people’s forgiveness — it was a sobering exercise to learn about, recount, and “take on” wrongs done by my ancestors in that confession. I need to feel contrition for those things, to acknowledge that generations of the people I was speaking to had lived with the consequences of those wrongs, and to seek healing together.*

“Standing in the Gap” is an acknowledgement of wrongs done by a group with which you identify, a confession of those wrongs to the people who have been hurt, and a plea for their forgiveness. As she saw participants rejoice at their renewed unity and speak blessings on each village group, Kristi remembered gratefully how Jesus stood in the gap for us, so that we could be reconciled to God. “Acknowledging pain and wrongs of the past, bringing them to light, can open the door for forgiveness, healing, justice, and freedom in our community.”

As the church in America, we, too, are called to admit the wrongs done by the groups with which we identify -- even our distant ancestors -- and those wrongs we allow to persist. Like Kristi, we need to learn about, recount, “take on,” and feel contrition for those things, to acknowledge that generations of the people have lived with the consequences of those wrongs, and to seek healing together. Like Jesus, we must be ready to stand in the gap for reconciliation one to another.