



Spirit Inspired
Worship



We Didn't Know What to Expect

September 6, 2023

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In honor of Labor Day, I stopped laboring. Today, I'm sharing a wonderful story of reconciliation and hope from PC(USA) mission co-workers Nancy and Shelvis Smith-Mather, serving in South Sudan. May it inspire you as it did me.

We walked into the meetings not knowing what to expect. Usually, when we present on South Sudan, we stand in front of a home crowd. Church members hug us and say, "We have been praying for you." Then we share updates.

In these meetings, however, we did not peer through stained glass windows. Instead, we stared out at the New York skyline, the sun sparkling on glass and metal for miles. With help from our PC(USA) Representative to the UN, Sue Rheem, we met members of three different missions to the UN: Ireland, the Netherlands and the U.S....

After introductions, Shelvis shared a powerful story about our RECONCILE colleagues, Lucy Awate and Margaret Sadiya. Both South Sudanese women endured horrific trauma from war, and both now serve as peace-builders. "These leaders stand in a liminal space," Shelvis explained, "they have one foot in the world of international peace organizations, and one firmly planted in their communities."

In South Sudan, many outside organizations enter the war-torn country hoping to encourage peace, yet they struggle to understand the culture and complicated context. Working through indigenous organizations, like RECONCILE, bridges that gap. Collaboration with South Sudanese faith-based organizations (FBOs) can transform good intentions into effective programs.

Touched by the stories of South Sudanese women who transformed pain into purpose, the diplomats began asking questions.

The Africa point person for the Netherlands respectfully questioned the reason for partnering with religious organizations. In response, I explained their unique niche, "In South Sudan, the institution of the church fills important gaps. The government is very limited in providing services to the people, so churches often step in. For example, a congregation will say, 'Look, our children are running in the street, let's start a school for them.' Then, the church building becomes a classroom and the young adult members become teachers..."

The U.S. point person on South Sudan asked about the effectiveness of UNMISS, the United Nations mission in South Sudan. With over 15,000 personnel, UNMISS has become the UN's largest mission on the globe. Most of these UN personnel serve as peacekeepers.

I did not feel equipped to speak about the overall effectiveness of UNMISS, so I responded with what I knew, "The UNMISS peacekeepers are dealing with the branches, the leaves, the things that you can see," I explained. At RECONCILE, my colleagues often analyze conflict using the model of a tree. The branches and leaves are the visible symptoms, such as the cycles of conflict. "For the country to move forward, the root causes of the conflict, the things under the surface, the trauma and deep divisions must also be addressed."



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At the end of our meeting with Ireland's mission to the UN, we received one final question: "Do you see any hope for South Sudan?"

"I see hope when a mother says, 'I did not get the opportunity to go to school, but I am going to make sure my child gets an education.... I see hope when South Sudanese church members fast one meal a day. Then, they use the money they would have spent on their meal to support internally displaced people taking refuge nearby," I offered.

Shelvis insists, "The South Sudanese who I serve alongside have not given up on the possibility of peace for their children and their children's children. They know the seeds of peace they plant today will provide sweet fruit for those who follow them tomorrow."

The different missions offered to connect us with others in their networks. The U.S. mission asked if our colleagues at RECONCILE could brief the UN Security Council. We thank God for the doors opened.

In addition to meeting with diplomats, we also met with the ecumenical groups in the church center at the UN. In all our New York meetings, Shelvis described the crisis unfolding on the border of Sudan and South Sudan. In the meeting at the church center, something unexpected happened at the end of that story.

Shelvis began with the fighting sparked in April in Sudan. Fleeing the violence, people poured from Sudan into neighboring South Sudan. After crossing the border, Sudanese citizens received refugee status which allows them some food aid and supplies from the UN refugee agency. South Sudanese fleeing the same violence, however, received the label of "returnees" not "refugees." Consequently, they do not receive support.

"When our delegation of South Sudanese church leaders, one government official and I (the only American) reached the border," Shelvis shared, "the level of tragedy was much greater than we expected... We saw an infant, only a few days old. The baby was actually born there in that open field. No doctor. No nurse. No medical care... The drinking water was dirty. There were no toilets. Nothing was given to the South Sudanese returnees to make shelter..."

After watching a video of the situation on the border, a PC(USA) pastor raised his hand. "I am a pastor of a small congregation," he told the group. "We only have 30 members. We are committing \$10,000 to this effort. People have given millions of dollars to help Ukraine, our response here should be the same. This is just as important..."

We thank God for Sue Rheem, Ivy Lopedito, Emma Johnston, Victoria Alexander, Anthony Harris and Kaela Hawkins serving the Presbyterian Office at the UN for organizing our visit. They bring the work of our global partners to the world stage. May God multiply their efforts. Amen.

Thank you for your support of our family. We could not do this work alone.

Nancy and Shelvis

Learn more about their ministry [here](#).

