

## A Report on “Peace and Christian Care Trip” to South Sudan John Deng Ater

Dear friends in Christ’s Family,

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

It is first and foremost my honor to express my gratitude to all of you who have been continually praying for my safe return. Indeed God heard your voices. His word has been a lamp to my feet and a light for my path, so I am back home safely and now able to share with you my experience during 7 days stay in South Sudan. This includes: first-hand experience regarding security situation in the country, visiting an orphanage center in Yei (Central Equatoria State), witnessing how humanitarian aid that has been sent by Kids Against Hunger and A Child’s Hope International has been utilized, and meeting with Bishops of the Anglican Church of South Sudan to discuss their prospect affiliation with the LCMS and the imperative of their involvement in peace initiative.

### **Security Situation in South Sudan**

South Sudan has drastically changed compared to my previous visit during the time of post-independence and after independence period (2010 and 2012), respectively when it was enjoying relative time of peace and trying to unravel the decades of destruction done during the time of civil war which started 50 plus years ago, (the war of religion and identity): Christians, because of their faith in Jesus Christ were persecuted by the Islamic Government in Khartoum, deprived, and exploited in their blessed soil.

The ongoing crisis which broke out in December 15, 2013, caused by power struggle between the incumbent President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his former Vice-President Dr. Riek Machar Teny now turned rebel, has not only claimed considerable lives, mostly innocent souls, and resulted in wanton destruction of properties, but has created deep wounds in the hearts of the citizens. These wounds will take years to heal and to once again live in harmony.

South Sudan for those who are not familiar with its painful road to independence has been in civil war for more than five decades. This was Africa’s longest and most expensive war in terms of lives and it was brought to an end following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya. This peace agreement in which the United States was a key player paved way to the independence of South Sudan in July 9, 2011.

With no respite, the long awaited freedom with all its joys, celebrations and ululation became a nightmare. As we speak, the world’s youngest nation has regressed to its darkest time: many lives lost, three out of ten states are basically ghost states (with many areas not accessible), more than 1 million return to terrible life of refugee in neighboring countries including Northern Sudan which they just seceded from, while similar number are internally displaced or

under United Nations protection sites, and others are stranded and no one can tell their fate, only God. But regretfully, both the government and the rebels, despite how they see the profound suffering of their own people, are not willing to bring peace to them—that was my keen observation during my brief stay in South Sudan. Peace is “pie in the sky.”

### **South Sudan—a Country in Crisis of Growing Number of the Orphans**

One of the worse scenarios and heart-wrenching stories of this crisis is an increasing number of the orphans. The first civil war which was ended in 2005 was won with too much blood and left millions of children as not only orphans, but living in the nadir of despair. But the current crisis has added more on the existing number. Their life's struggles are unspeakable: wandering on the street, scavenging for food in garbage dumps, begging, stealing, etc...

Our Orphans' Scholarship Program, which we started few years ago with fewer children under the auspice of the Anglican Church of South Sudan, the only church that open its door to such disadvantaged children, is now hosting 800 orphans. The numbers have exceeded the capacity of a program which is operating on a shoe-string budget.

The St. Paul of the Anglican Church in Yei, Central Equatoria State, though overwhelmed, keeps its doors open and gives these children love, care and inculcates them with God's Word—the only hope for their future. Their mother in Christ, Monica Stillwell, the Director of this program with help from altruistic individuals (those who have sponsored some children) is continuously praying for better opportunity for all these children.

### **Humanitarian Aid: Kids Against Hunger and A Child's Hope International**

Although the needs are enormous in South Sudan, the humanitarian aid that has been sent by two organizations: Kids Against Hunger-Louisville (KAH) and A Child's Hope International has saved lives that could have faced starvation. In February 2014; a little over a month after South Sudan plunged into political upheaval, the first container with more than 300,000 meals arrived in Juba. The food-aid was used to feed people who were hospitalized, orphans and the internal displaced person (IDPS) who were fleeing the ghost states: Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity.

Moreover, in October 2014 the second container arrived and our entrusted institution, the Anglican Church of South Sudan (ACSS) used some for orphans and designated the rest to be taken to Jonglei and Upper Nile, (Unity state is inaccessible). A lack of funds to transport this food to the respective states delayed their plan until recently when I went to South Sudan to meet with all the Bishops of the ACSS. We assigned each Diocese to take some food to where the needs are. Now the third container is expected to arrive in Juba this or early next month. So it is imperative to close this section by thanking these organizations and all the generous donors for helping desperate population of war torn nation. My first-hand experience about the

situation on the ground is millions of people are in critical need of food. Famine is imminent. Let us continue to pray for peace and more help.

### **Peace Conference and the Prospect Affiliation of the ACSS with the LCMS**

The Conference held January 6 - 8, 2015 at St. Mark of the ACSS in Juba was attended by 6 Bishops of the Anglican Church of South Sudan: 1 Bishop of the Christian Church International, 1 Bishop of the Reform Episcopal Church and Pastors from other congregations. The agenda discussed during the three days Conference addressed the political crisis in the country, how the church can play key role to bring peace and reconciliation to people and the connection that is developing between the two churches: the Anglican Church of South Sudan (ACSS) and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS).

In May of 2014, 5 months after war broke out in South Sudan, the delegations of South Sudanese now U.S. citizens with the help from the U.S. concerned friends went to Washington, DC to meet with the U.S. State Department, asking U.S. intervention to broker peace negotiations between South Sudan government and the rebel group. The 90 minute meeting seemed promising then, but not much has materialized to date. The reason behind the U.S. sluggishness to respond and bring this needless war to an end is very complex.

But our mission to advocate for South Sudan peace is to continue to work in earnest to build a network: either with South Sudanese in diaspora and those at home. So under South Sudan Lutheran Church Mission with its auxiliary, Restoring Hope for South Sudan, we formed peace committee in South Sudan headed by The Most Rev. John Machar Thon and another group in Australia headed by Rev. Simon Deng Nuer and one group here in United States headed by Rev. Dr. Curtis Peters.

The outcome of Juba meeting is for all Bishops plus the diverse committee to promote state to state, county to county and village to village peace and reconciliation campaign. Also, they will use a radio transmitter if fund to buy this is secured to reach those who are far away. The U.S., Australia and other groups to be formed will use podcasts and to lobby their respective governments to pressure the warring parties to stop fighting. All these strategies are in the making and your prayers and support are greatly needed.

Finally but not least, the Conference discussed how two churches as mentioned above can strive to build strong connection. In my trip I took with me some gifts donated by Resurrection Lutheran Church and from other individuals, these include: 10 books of The Lutheran Confessions, 9 books of The Luther's Small Catechism, and 20 binders of letters with message of peace and encouragement. These were received graciously by the respective Bishops and Pastors, and they kindly asked the LCMS to send missionaries to visit them.

## Final Note

I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for accepting God's noble call to help and stand together with the people of South Sudan in this great time of need. The items that have been entirely discussed above: peace initiation, orphans' assistance, humanitarian aid, just to mention but few are all tight in one, when **"Jesus went through all the villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:35-38).**

May God bless and remember you in the same way you remember His people in need.

Your fellow laborer In Christ,

John Deng Ater



Addressing more than 800 orphans in Yei



Orphans receiving gifts sent by sponsors



Children sharing food provided by humanitarian organizations.



From left to right in sitting row: Bishop Elijah Abuoi Arok of Lith Diocese, Bishop John Machuei Ater of Akhot Diocese, Bishop David Machol Dau of Khorfulus Diocese, Bishop Daniel Deer Chagureek of Cuei Bet Diocese. 2<sup>nd</sup> row standing from right to left: Bishop Daniel Dau Deng of Kongoor Diocese, Bishop Francise Buol of Bor Diocese, Archbushop John Machar Thon, head of the Province and Bishop of Duk, and Paul Chol Deng of Melute Diocese.