

South Sudan/Uganda update

September 29, 2011

From Kathy Smarrella, in route to South Sudan---

My Ugandan morning started at 3:30 am. Storms woke me up, then the electricity went out at 3:40 am, which means pitch black and no more fan! I couldn't go back to sleep, so I figured God means for me to be praying. I was able to use the time to pray for our team, for folks back home, for travel mercies, and for the sweet children of the New Generation Dreamland Children's Home that I would get to see later during the day. God answers prayers, too, and I just love that I get to see it happen hours later.

After our 6:30 am departure from the hotel, we arrived at the airport, had a relatively seamless check in, and then God blessed us again by getting all of our bags on board the small plane. There was a good chance that they would hold half of them back, forcing us to make some tough decisions about what to take, and what to leave behind (they likely would have come to South Sudan on Saturday, but you never know). But, they all got on the plane (one was in the middle of the aisle, but all were there nonetheless!) A great answer to prayer!

A couple hours later, we arrived in Yei, South Sudan. Pastor Stanley Lonathan was there to greet us in his Texas cowboy hat. So good to see his friendly face. Driving to the Sudan for Christ compound, it was interesting to see the changes that have taken place in Yei. I was on the mission team in 2009, and now, in 2011, South Sudan has become an independent country, and it seems there is a renewed desire to improve their country. What was an hour long trip two years ago, is now about 20 minutes. Billboards announcing their independence were everywhere. Very cool.

We reached the compound of Sudan for Christ Ministries at about 11 am, and my heart just smiled to see this "home away from home" again in-person. Friendly faces greeted us. Esther, who takes such good care of us while we are here, smiled from ear to ear and first chance she got, she prayed with us all. It was a quick stop, because then we were off to the new immigration office in Yei, where we got a Republic of South Sudan stamp in our passports. After that, we ran some errands around town—Marc Merrill and Carrie Biggers stopped at the local pharmacy in Yei to check out medical supplies, exchanged some money, and experienced great local color. Then, we headed back to the compound, where Esther cooked us a delicious lunch (rice with goat "stew," baby bananas and green oranges, and even peanut butter and jam!) We got settled, and while waiting out a huge rain storm, put together all our goodie bags for the children (to be handed out later in the week). Thanks to Bethel College for the bags, to the Vineyard middle school students for the toys! Then we headed to the New Generation Dreamland Children's Home.

And for me, this is where it gets really personal. From when I was here two years ago, the Dreamland is a changed place. There are new dorms (with the old ones, significantly different) next to them. There is the school building we helped put a roof on, with another new classroom building next to that. There is a new dining hall (with tables!!), and the tiny little one they served food from in 2009 was just this afternoon being torn down. It's amazing. I looked around and saw all of this that God used us--The Vineyard Church--to help build. God used Art for the Heart of Africa to help build this. Tears filled my eyes, and do still as I am writing this. And then there are the children. The precious faces that fill the frames of my house (and, I'm guessing, many of your homes, Vineyard family) are right in front of us! They come and shake our hands in greeting and we get a few hugs. Now, they recognize some of our team who have been here before. And though they are a little shy today, they will be less so tomorrow. Today, we had no agenda—it was just time to greet them, play a little (Joe Biggers got into the soccer

game immediately!) We passed out some candy and some cookies which was fun for us and even more fun for them! We will head back tomorrow morning to work on our photos and art projects for our upcoming Art for the Heart of Africa Benefit & Auction. Our medical team will have a clinic at the orphanage tomorrow, too, so we will spend the day there.

What a blessing to be here. I think our team is full of anticipation for the days to come. Thank you Vineyard family, for all you've done to make this possible.

To God be the glory!

Kathy Smarrella

From Steve Schwartz, in Uganda---

Well, it was a good day today in Uganda. I was up around 5:30 this morning to see the rest of the team off to the airport as they made their way to South Sudan. After they left at 6:30, I went back to my room, took a small nap, and got ready for Charles, the driver that works with Pastor Solomon, to pick me up. He was supposed to pick me up at 10:00, which of course meant he was at the hotel at 10:35 sharp.

After the drive back to Pastor Solomon's school and church, I spent an hour or so meeting with Solomon and Henry, who leads some of the men's groups in Solomon's church and handles some of Solomon's business affairs. We talked about the microfinance loans that we have helped them with, and how the process was going. Solomon is of the same impression as I am in that it could be going better. Some things have been going well, but some have been going poorly as well. We will continue to evaluate how we can improve that process going forward.

After a good discussion, a short tour of some of the land developments going on around Kampala, and a walking tour of Pastor Solomon's farmland, we returned to the church and picked up a couple of other people that work for Solomon. We set out to deliver some of the food that was purchased yesterday with the funds from the "Radical Offering for the Poor" that was taken up at The Vineyard last weekend.

The first stop we made was at the house of a woman named Margaret. I use the term house loosely here. It was a 6 by 10 foot shack that we probably wouldn't use for livestock. Margaret lives here with her three children. Her husband has died of AIDS, and it's probable that her children have the disease as well. Margaret struggles to make the \$20/month rent payment on her house. She was so pleasant and such a good hostess. She wiped the dust off a small wooden bench in the corner and invited me to sit. We sat and talked with her for a little while. To say that Margaret was thankful for the rice, beans, milk, sugar, and corn meal that we brought would be a severe understatement. She repeatedly thanked me for the food. I told her through Pastor Solomon that she should be thanking God, not me. I did nothing. God is the one who moved the hearts of the people of The Vineyard and allowed me the privilege of sitting in Margaret's house.

Margaret's story and situation is heart-wrenching. I saw it repeated over and over again today. Josephine who lives in a small shack with her 6 children since her husband died. Sissy who lives in a dilapidated house with 9 children (6 of her own, and others from neighbors who have become victims of AIDS). Make no mistake church family: the radical generosity that you showed with the offering last

Sunday was used to make a difference in the lives and hearts of real people today! I was fortunate enough to witness it, and on behalf of the people who were blessed today, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I'm back in my hotel now, getting ready for a shower and night of sleep before heading off to the airport early in the morning for a flight to Arua, Uganda. I am meeting with a microfinance group there that has been very successful to see how they run their business and how we can do things better, not only here in Kampala, but also possibly in Yei. It should be fun!

God bless,

Steve Schwartz