

South Sudan Mission Update – from Diantha and Steve Hodges – December 2011

“Love came down at Christmas”... “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14.) With the birth of Jesus, God's love and power to give life and well-being has become concrete in human lives. It was/is not an illusion, not a short-term temporary fix to our problems, but a permanently life-changing improvement in our lives, helping us discover and fulfill the capacity we were created to have.

So the question that persists daily for Diantha and I is how can we find and join what God is already doing in South Sudan to be incarnate, to be made concrete life and well-being for the people here. These are people God loves so much, yet people striving to overcome abject poverty, people dying of preventable diseases and preventable childbirth practices. It is our ongoing effort to push beyond simple short-term charity to improvements that are sustainable, that make a permanent increase in the capacity of local people to live healthier lives. I confess that short term charity along with words of hope (“go in peace, be warm and filled” James 2:16) are more easily and quickly given – and provide us with an immediate sense of having done something. But joining God's ongoing work already underway – to develop longer-term, sustainable improvements in people's capacity to live more fulfilled lives – requires a more substantial commitment of thought, time and effort; and also much more patience that we are used to, with a slower process of figuring this out and getting anything done.

Even when we do our best job of looking for where God is at work and joining it, we are never completely certain, it always takes a risk. Diantha took a risk in spending considerable time and effort to bring together TBAs, the Traditional Birth Attendants who are by far the most likely persons to be assisting a woman at birth, if anybody is. Background: According to the South Sudan Ministry of Health, maternal mortality rates here are among the worst in the world with 2,054 mothers out 100,000 dying during labor in South Sudan; and there are less than 100 trained (1 year training) midwives for the entire country, which has a population of over 8 million. So as we reported in our September Update, working across mission groups and denominations, Diantha organized a training that added to their knowledge and skills to enable a safer birth experience for both baby and mother. The training also aimed at encouraging the TBAs with recognition and chance to network with each other, to strengthen their ties to government health centers, and to churches by setting up healthy birth committees in churches to provide ongoing education on how to have a safe birth. This took a lot of effort, detailed organizing, and Diantha was not sure how it would work, but God gave confirmation as the very next weeks pastors report excitedly on the successful births in their churches. And now when Diantha visits villages, TBAs stand up proudly with their name tags on, and greet Diantha. She has followed up the training with three all-day meetings each of which gathered TBAs and church women leaders from 4-5 churches in each of three geographic regions. In each case the women set up a regional group that will meet ongoing (without further funding from Diantha, an accomplishment in itself!) and will help members follow through on setting up Health Birth Committees in each congregation to carry out simple trainings on healthier birth for women in each congregation.

We've discovered incarnation also in working slowly but steadily to introduce what seems to local farmers as a new way of farming, conservation agriculture, which is actually similar to older traditional methods of no-plowing farming practiced before western methods of turning over the soil were introduced. Background: With a large quantity of fertile land, increasing the production of food and cash crops is key to South Sudan's path out of poverty. The conservation farming method I have been learning and slowly introducing has been taught as “Farming God's Way” by Christian groups in Africa for over 20 years in a way that allows the predominantly Christian farmers in Sudan to connect their faith to the way they care for and replenish the soil. This method happens to be far better in retaining water in the soil (5-10 times) which means it helps farmers withstand the unexpectedly longer periods of drought that have begun to occur the last 3 years in east Africa. It also happens to cut the amount of labor needed to produce a given amount of food in half, making it easier for women who do

much of the cultivation but have many other time-consuming tasks, and also making it possible for families to raise more food. As the only proponent in our area so far, I have been introducing it very gradually, with a day-long workshop for United Methodist pastors (many of whom farm to support their families.) Out of 20 pastors, two decided to try it, and only one came back with a report in August – excited by the good yield in a year when other people's maize (corn) dried up, and asking “let God give you more teaching to share with us.” So my Farm Manager Alex Lupayi and I are working with 19 farmers (half church members, half their village neighbors) there to develop the first village-based demonstration of conservation agriculture in this state and the only one I know of in the whole country. The Pastor and members of the Logo United Methodist Church have chosen a half acre plot not far from a stream, and we are showing them a way to prepare the ground for maize, groundnuts, and sweet potatoes that will increase yields by building up the fertility of the soil and its ability to hold water.

Its common in South Sudan for village groups to demand all kinds of assistance from the helping organization, whom they see as having huge amounts of funds. So with some fear of these demands, and help from a Sudanese pastor colleague, I worked out a covenant with the Logo farmers. It feels like a minor miracle that they accepted it, and are willing to settle for about half of the tools they requested (still enough that everyone has a tool), food provided only during trainings, no salaries, and a willingness to divide the food harvested so that 10% goes to widows and orphans in the church, and percentages saved for seed, some sold to build up an emergency fund, and about half distributed among the working members of the group. In other words, they are willing to see this project as a partnership in which they supply some of the tools and food as well as time and labor which I will match with training in business, farming methods, some tools and food and cost of a fence. I am very thankful for God at work in their hearts. I'm also grateful for the words of Pastor Simon, their leader, who has vision for what this could do: “I give thanks to God for Steve and Alex (farming trainer) and Joice (business trainer) and for the teachings they bring. Let this project develop well and let it be used to inspire others. We have been raising the concern about feeding the widows and orphans in our church, and now they will get more.” Unexpectedly more doors are opening: recently a local NGO decided to focus a large grant next year on providing this training for thousands of farmers in an underserved area.

We give thanks to God for being at work in South Sudan, becoming flesh in the concrete improvements in life and well-being of Sudanese children, women and men. And we give thanks for being allowed to be a part of it. You can too. Here are the main General Advance Numbers related most directly to the work we do. You can go to www.advancinghope.org and search projects on any of these numbers to find out more about that area of our work, or how to make a contribution online or by mail.

- Health: General Advance #3021298 (Sudan HEAL)
- Sustainable Agriculture: General Advance #3021296 (Sudan REAP)
- Village Microfinance: General Advance #3021289 (Sudan COME)

