

Parker United Methodist Church and Rev. Paul Jeffrey are in covenant relationship. Rev. Paul sends letters periodically to his supporting churches... Your Parker UMC Missions Team

From: Paul Jeffrey [mailto:pauljeffrey@earthlink.net]  
Sent: Sunday, February 15, 2009 9:52 AM  
To: Supporting churches  
Subject: a letter from your missionary  
A letter to my supporting congregations  
12 February 2009 - Yei, Southern Sudan

Dear friends:

I'm a big fan of early morning sunlight. Especially in Africa, the low angle makes those early rays of light almost magical as they illumine faces, especially eyes, in a way that makes it much easier to capture compelling images. So even though I'd love to sleep late, I inevitably insist on getting up while it's still dark in order to be in the field when the sun comes up. It doesn't win me any points with colleagues, and it certainly complicates cultural relationships in an environment where being on time is a relative concept. Yet it does provide a different vantage point on what's happening in the world.

I'm in Southern Sudan currently, wrapping up a week of interviews and photography. Sudan is the geographical focus of the mission schools this coming summer, so I came here to prepare material to help others understand the unique challenges of the semi-autonomous south of the country. The people here suffered during decades of bloody civil war before a 2005 peace agreement with the Khartoum government ended the fighting and prepared the way for possible autonomy in the near future.

There's a United Methodist Church here-small, poor and somewhat dysfunctional-and UMCOR is drilling wells and building schools, while at the same time training community and parents groups to be involved in making schools work.

As we've set off toward rural villages in the predawn darkness, we've wound through the rutted streets of Yei, the headlights of our four-wheel drive vehicle illuminating the thatched roof huts of the poor and between the houses and along the road, scores of women walking in the dark to fetch water. Women and girls are the water carriers of this world, and here as in so many places they rise long before men to begin that task while it is still cool. And since there simply aren't enough hand-pumped wells to meet everyone's needs, the earlier they start the better chance they have to get what their family needs.

If you've got a little more money, you can hire a woman to get you water. One United Methodist woman I met, Tamara Kako, is a widow who supports her family by carrying water to construction sites and middle class homes. Carrying two to three gallons on her head during each trip, she can earn a couple of dollars in four to five hours of work. When she's done carrying someone else's water, then she can start to carry what she needs to feed and bathe her family and keep her dirt-floored hut clean.

Tamara and the other women who start carrying water in the shadowy mornings work all day long. And they work hard. Like poor women around the planet, they and their children survive because of the women's strength and stamina.

I flee from generalizations, but after years of observing life in poor countries I'm convinced that women work harder than men. Women rise earlier, work later, and while they enjoy moments of conversation at the well, they don't have the apparent luxury that men do to while away hours playing card games in the shade, shooting pool, or whatever else the culture dictates as acceptable male pastimes, activities usually accompanied by alcohol of some sort.

In a place like Southern Sudan, building a functioning democracy and flourishing economy in the wake of decades of war means putting everyone to work, and not just at carrying water. It means ending cultural and legal practices that demean women and devalue the gifts they bring to the common table. That's a long struggle, both within the larger society as well as within the church which too often and in too many places simply replicates internally the sexist logic of the culture around it.

I'll be writing about some of these issues for Response magazine, but for now I just want to give thanks for the many ways that God is pushing us to empower women. UMCOR is drilling wells which mean shorter trips to fetch water, and insisting that girls get a chance to go to school by providing scholastic materials, uniforms and sanitary pads—all items they need to participate fully in school life. The United Methodist Women of Southern Sudan, few of whom are literate and all of whom are poor, are working together to dig community gardens and learn tailoring skills and use microcredit creatively to keep their families healthy even in the absence of support from male church leaders who don't accept women's full participation in the life of the church.

I'm about to head home, a place I haven't been much in the last three months. I'll be home for a solid month, writing articles and editing photos from recent trips to Sudan, Malawi, Central America, and the Congo. I'll probably get up early many days, making coffee with water that I can obtain simply by turning on the tap. I'll think of those women carrying water in the darkness here, and I'll reflect on how the political and economic choices we make in North America impact on their lives in far away places like this. And I'll remember those women who got up early on that Sunday morning long ago, while the men were still sleeping, and went to the tomb to attend to Jesus' body. They discovered the risen Christ, and our lives are still changed today as we listen once again to their story. Let us keep on listening to the early morning stories of our sisters, in our neighborhoods and around the world.

Paul

[pauljeffrey@earthlink.net](mailto:pauljeffrey@earthlink.net)

[www.kairosphotos.com/pauljeffrey](http://www.kairosphotos.com/pauljeffrey)

PS: Thanks to all of you for the creative and often sacrificial ways you've worked to raise money to support my ministry. Despite economic hard times, last year your congregations large and small gave a total of \$45,072.16 toward my support. While that's less than the year before, it's a lot more than my salary as a missionary so it also goes to support health care, pension, and other related costs. If there are ways I can support your fundraising for mission, please let me know.