

A letter from Nancy Smith-Mather in South Sudan

June 2013

Gathered Around Mango Trees and World Mission

Mango trees have a way of bringing people together. My face softens when I see my colleagues side-by-side, gazing up and pointing a hunting-finger beneath the wide arms of a mango tree. Throughout mango season, the stick-extension-invention for plucking the perfect mango remains resting on the ground under the tree (the device involves three long sticks fastened together with a rope and a short twig on the last stick jutting backward, making a v-like hook).



After a keen eye spots a ripe mango in the crowd of leaves, the stick is hoisted into the air, making the person's reach 10 times longer. The twig-hook is placed at the top of the oval-shaped mango, by the stem, and then, with a short, brisk tug the mango falls to the ground with a thud. After carefully setting the long stick down, the harvester claims the treasure from the dirt, and an irresistible grin connotes appreciation for the sweet taste, even before taking a bite.

During mango season you find people sitting together in circles. A bucket is set in the middle, with mangoes, submerged in water, captured inside. Ever so often, a hand reaches into the bucket, lifts a mango up, splashes water around the fruit, takes a knife and begins to peel. The one knife is shared within the circle as people take turns carving the skin away from the sweet, orange inner fruit. And then...over the bucket, within the circle, beside the carving knife, the stories commence.

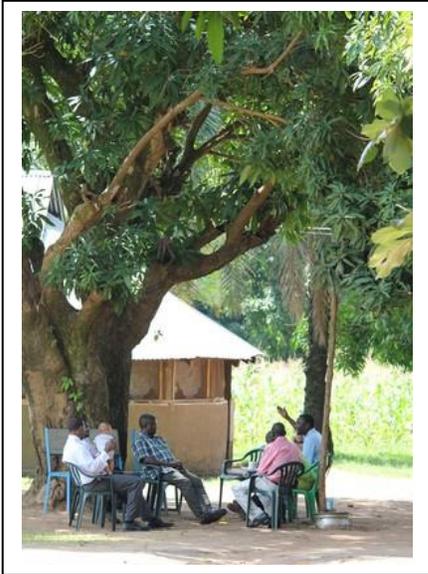
Sometimes only a few thoughts. Other times the stories go long and meander past the empty bucket into the space where time is lost, memories made, and dreams depicted. Occasionally there's a sense that a particular story has already been told at another time in another place. Yet the story, deemed worthy of another life, greets the new day's air in the company of the mango eaters.

Mango trees are huge. Bigger than any trees in my hometown, but perhaps rivaling the live oaks near the East Coast with their elbows that touch the ground and reach back up to the sky. Children climb the strong, stable arms of live oaks, as they do the mango trees' limbs, yet mango trees differ from the oaks in their ability to collect storytellers who wash, carve, slice, and savor sweet fruit together in the haven of their shade.

Global missions, like mango trees, call people to gather, sit, listen and share. As mission co-workers for both the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA), we are often invited to sit in such circles listening to and sharing stories. We sit at Sunday afternoon covered-dish lunches, peacemakers' potluck dinners, mission committee evening meetings, prayer group breakfasts, and hospitable church elders' dining room tables.



These places welcome us as sharers in the belief that God invites us to join in God's work in the world. In some such events we pass the plate to people we know, whose love for mission follows us in our travels. Oftentimes, however, we meet folks for the first time, but we quickly find connection in our desire to serve alongside and learn from followers of Christ living in distant places, with various cultures and languages, yet united by the same Spirit. In such gatherings, stories are given like fruit that nourishes the faith of and strengthens the bond between those gathered.



The precious time in mission gatherings, unfortunately, only occupies certain scattered dates on our calendar. Likewise, the mango season comes and it goes, once the dry season replaces the rains. When the hot of the dry season surrounds us with heaviness, however, we can always reach back and be refreshed by the words, the space, the stories, and the hope in possibility that was shared in those Spirit-filled moments. The memories and the company can keep us moving forward until the next rains come, the mangos flourish, and we are reminded of the sweet goodness—enjoying together again the fruit of God's hand.

Thank you for sitting with us under the mango tree of global mission. We gain strength from your company, hope from your prayers, support from your financial gifts, insight from your stories and experiences, and refreshment from our sharing in mission together. Thank you!

Sharing stories in the shade of the mango tree

Thank you, Creator God, who in Your infinite wisdom and goodness gave us lessons in mango trees and in global mission. May they both teach us to pause, reflect, connect and enjoy the sharing of our lives and faith together. Amen.

Nancy