



Update from Rachel and Michael Weller in Ethiopia

Dear Friends,

The first quarter of the year came and went so fast Michael and I didn't realize it. We managed to get our taxes in—just after the U.S. deadline—and that's when we noticed we missed our communication deadlines, too. Read on to find out what we've been up to.

Michael and I are now in separate places after having enjoyed five months being together in the same house for five consecutive months (minus one week while he was in meetings). The past five months, however, are now a blur in my mind. I have memories of seeing Michael in Gambella with a phone stuck to his ear speaking loudly to people in South Sudan so they could hear him. To cut a very long and dramatic story inappropriately short, I will just say that, with the help of staff in Louisville, Michael successfully brought our PC(USA) staff out of South Sudan shortly after the violence started there on December 15. He and I then welcomed several of them to Addis while the others went to Uganda and Kenya as they had previously planned. All of them spent many weeks thinking about the friends they had left behind, unable to be whisked away from danger as they had been, and wondering when they would be able to return to their work and homes. Currently Nancy McGaughey and Leisa Wagstaff are in Juba, and Debbie Blane, the Georges and the Smith-Mathers are in the U.S. To learn more about their experiences go to www.pcusa.org/find-mission-worker/.

After a short holiday for Christmas, we met with and encouraged our displaced missionaries, having long discussions about the ramifications of the South Sudan violence and its impact on the local communities. We had an unforgettable evening with the head of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS) Rev. Peter Gai, who came to Addis along with other church leaders to petition the peacemakers to allow the Church to participate in the discussions. Rev. Peter told his story of standing at the gate of the PCOSS compound in Malakal welcoming people of all ethnicities seeking refuge and telling others, "You will find no enemies in this compound; we have no enemies here." Unfortunately while he was in Addis Malakal was virtually destroyed.

Meanwhile, normal activity continued in Ethiopia. During the first week of January we met newly appointed mission co-workers at the airport. Brenda and Stephen Stelle are living in Addis Ababa studying the Oromo language until they move to Dembi Dollo in August to teach at Bethel Evangelical Secondary School and Gidada Bible College, respectively.

The next week Michael and I flew back to Gambella and then drove up the escarpment to Dembi Dollo to participate in Western Wollega Bethel Synod (WWBS)'s celebration of (nearly) 100 years of the gospel coming to the area. Thousands of people, including visitors from the U.S., Germany, and Finland who have worked in partnership with the WWBS, gathered in the new church building erected just below the old formerly grass-roofed worship house that has been used since the first Protestant Christians started gathering to hear the scriptures and good news (nearly) 100 years ago. The people of western Ethiopia are truly grateful for the sacrifice of the early missionaries who came to them to tell of God's justice, show his kindness, and invite them to walk daily with the Creator of the universe! We enjoyed many hours of praising God using old songs, praising God using new songs, praising God using refurbished old songs! Sadly, our partnership is in question now as the Mekane Yesus Church questions the PC(USA)'s Biblical understanding of sexuality.

In February Michael and I joined the leaders of the West Gambella Bethel Synod on a memorable boat trip to Akobo-Tirgol in Ethiopia, just across the river from Akobo, South Sudan. The occasion was the annual synod convention, which had been scheduled for that location a year ago because of the significant work the church had done to broker peace and reconciliation between arguing clans of Nuer, some of whom had been displaced from Akobo-Tirgol and some who had moved in. The church had gone on a similar boat trip, stopping at

villages along the way to pray that God would lift the curses on the land and the water in those places. I could write a book about the trip—ask me about the frog and the army ants—but most of all we enjoyed the fellowship and adventure with our colleagues.

In April Michael and I flew to the States for two meetings. Michael joined all of PC(USA)'s regional liaisons in Louisville to learn how to do his job better and receive updates on policies and procedures. I participated with him in the Ethiopian Mission Network meeting held this year near Philadelphia. Between the two meetings we had a wonderful Weller family reunion, gathering with all four kids, daughter-in-law, and grandson in a beautiful mountain home just 15 minutes from Warren Wilson College, where Lydia is studying. We are thankful for the blessing of kids who take their faith seriously and for the joyful opportunity to gather together to be reminded that we do belong together.

Landing in Addis, we found we are being whisked in different directions once again. A group of volunteers is gathering now in Pokwo, the old mission station to the Anywaa people in Ethiopia, to build a building and build relationships. After two years of conversations with community, government administrations, and church administrations we decided that the best way to move forward with the Pokwo Clinic is to build a small house where volunteers who wish to support the local staff can stay while they offer their expertise in various aspects of health. David Preston, who grew up in Pokwo, agreed to lead the group with his wife, Leah—whose builder father, Ted Pollock, taught her a lot about putting up buildings. I am working with the Prestons and other volunteers to facilitate a good work experience and to build bridges between the local community and the visiting volunteers.

While I drove to Gambella Michael drove to Mizan Teferi to participate in a church leadership reconciliation meeting. Returning to Addis, he then flew to Nairobi to participate in a meeting of South Sudanese leaders discussing their responsibilities in bringing about peace and reconciliation in their country. He is now in Gambella with me and has already been asked to participate in leadership meetings to develop capacity and understanding of peaceful, servant leadership processes.

Our lives are full. Our hearts are full of God's peace. Your partnership in our work sustains us.

Thank you
Rachel Weller

The 2014 Presbyterian Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study, p. 133

Our financial support of the Wellers helps to allow them to devote their lives to God's call and the people of Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan.

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