



Trip Report – Kulu/Mvolo Team 2008

written by Peter Swann, Executive Director

It was, to state it simply, a trip filled with “God moments.” It was God doing what only He could do. It was our Creator masterfully orchestrating His plan in His way and according to His will, leaving us in awe of His provision.

For months our team had prepared to travel to Kulu, knowing this was to be a special trip. I was deeply grateful for the team which included co-leader and Mission Trip Director Andrew Brown, Shayna Brown, Events Coordinator Jessica Ray, Dave Ray, Kevin Ha, Mittsi Moore, Lee Kapetanakis and my sister Susan Kiser. For me personally, it was to be a return to the place where my wife, Shauna, and I had lived for two years among the Jur tribe. I was elated at the prospect of once again living among our dear friends, even just for nine days, the longest period of time since heart damage forced us to leave three years ago.

I knew it would be a rugged trip, even more so than most of our Aid Sudan mission trips. I expected to find physical devastation left over from the attacks of a raiding tribe over two years ago, who burned down the village. While a significant portion of the population has returned, many still have not. I expected we would also find emotional devastation, as many have died over the past couple years and life has been exceptionally hard. The greatest unknown was any potentially resulting spiritual devastation, and I knew our team had a critical role to fill there.

One of our greatest obstacles came on our first day in Sudan. We had experienced an uneventful flight to Uganda and a refreshing day in the capital city of Kampala, where we enjoyed sightseeing around the city and resting in the home of our Sudan Country Director. Yet that first day in Sudan did not all go as planned. Our DC3 flight headed toward the village of Mvolo, where we were supposed to land, yet the airstrip had not been properly cleared and we could not land. Our only option was to divert to Akot, a village about forty miles away. As we made the quick flight over, I knew it would take a “God moment” to get us to Mvolo. With no public transportation and no vehicles to rent in this mud hut world, we were absolutely dependent on our Provider.



Men load the truck as the women pray

When we landed in Akot, we were immediately met by a friend with Mustard Seed International, an organization running a hospital there. Suddenly another vehicle pulled up as well, this one for the SPLA Literacy Program. It was my friend Billy, who I had met back in 2005 when I still lived in Sudan. I had heard that John was in Nairobi and I had no idea Billy was still there. What a blessing to see those friends! They quickly offered to drive us on to Mvolo and after praying and talking together, our team decided to accept their offer. John and Billy had a Land Cruiser and a small truck that were to transport all nine of our team members and all of our cargo on the long, rough road to Mvolo. The initial challenge was trying to fit all of our team supplies and luggage into the bed of the truck so that all of the people could fit into the Land Cruiser. We began to doubt that such a small vehicle would hold our sizeable cargo, which included a large grinding mill that was to be a gift to the people of Kulu. As the ladies on our team began to pray, the men loaded the vehicle. To our amazement, it all fit!



Campsite in Kulu at Peter's old compound

After a four hour trek through endless mud puddles, we finally arrived in Mvolo around 9:30 pm, where we were warmly met by an old Jur friend of mine, who was our host there. We all quickly got settled into our mud huts and then sat under the stars, thanking our Lord for the "God moment" that resulted in our getting from Akot to Mvolo. We also thanked Him deeply for John and Billy and the incredible representation of Christ that they were to us. For most of the team, it was quite an introduction to southern Sudan.

The next day, we toured the bustling county seat and I was personally very excited to see the growth and development there. We visited county officials, including the commissioner, who welcomed us with open arms. That afternoon, we piled into a truck, owned by an indigenous Jur organization called SIDF, to make the journey to Kulu. Following an old dry river bed, we bounced through the bush until we rounded the last corner into our old village. What a time of rejoicing it was for the people and for us! We set up camp on our old compound, where SIDF had begun construction of a clinic. We were very blessed that they had erected the roof but not yet put up the sides. Pitching our four tents, we raced against the waning light and finally finished setting up camp just after dark.

Early that Thursday morning, we woke up to many who had come to greet us. I was personally overjoyed at seeing so many old friends. At the same time, it was heartbreaking. As I asked about people I found that so many had died, either from the attacks or from disease. I began to identify a bit with our Moses Project missionaries, who face the same challenge many times over after returning to their home areas twenty years later. Like them, although still wondering about old friends, I simply stopped asking.



Remains of a hut burned in tribal raid

Our team toured our old compound that morning and then walked through the village. I was encouraged by all the rebuilding that had taken place since the attacks. We were all struck by the fact that the church, the one building left untouched in the attacks, had its grass thatch roof burned down just days earlier in a fire that had accidentally spread there. The realization of all the devastation was almost overwhelming to me, yet even more than the degree of physical devastation, I was struck by the brokenness of the people. They were humble, gracious, and utterly dependent on God. From believers and nonbelievers, we continually heard them talking about calling upon God in such a moment of need. It is

amazing how, if we suffer enough, almost all of humanity will eventually get past whatever restrains us and begin to call out to God.



School in Kulu built with the help of SIDF

Our last stop in the tour of the village was the local school. When Shauna and I lived in Kulu, the classes met under trees or in mud huts, with children often writing in the dirt. When I rounded the corner and saw beautiful block buildings, I was amazed! I thank God for Sapana Abuyi, my good friend and the Executive Director of SIDF, a Jur man himself who is building the school and clinic in Kulu and who continues to work so tirelessly for the sake of his people.

As we arrived at the school, we were greeted by the singing of the children. It was a great personal joy of mine to see that the deputy headmaster was a former student of Shauna's from when she taught in the school. It came time for the meeting with the officials and as we all gathered in a circle, the chief began by extending perhaps the most gracious invitation a team has ever received to work among his people. One by one, the village elders also shared, telling of how they had cried out to God for help and they knew our arrival was an answer to their prayers. They were all overjoyed by the gift of the grinding mill that we brought to them, in addition to the school supplies. They listened to each team member share some thoughts, as is traditional in a meeting like this, and gratefully accepted our offer to train church leaders and women in Chronological Bible Storying and work in the school. Overall, our whole team was struck by the credibility that six-and-a-half years of working in that village had given our team. In a place where most foreigners hardly ever come and those who do rarely stay long at all, nothing replaces longevity.



Team enjoys traditional Sudanese dancing

On Friday morning, we spent time again walking through the village visiting with the people and it was amazing to see the growth in the market and further signs of development this deep in southern Sudan! We then walked to the school, where many team members began teaching the students and playing with them while Andrew and I met with the school officials. That afternoon, the church leaders arrived and we made all arrangements for our Chronological Bible Storying training, which would begin the next day. Yesepa, the pastor in Kulu, told of how he had cried out to God after Shauna and I left. He said that they had been craving more teaching from the Word of God. He prayed and thanked God for answering His prayer by bringing us to Kulu.



Ladies hand out yarn after sharing Bible stories

That day was also filled with two amazing cultural experiences. The first was a money exchange with the chief, who wanted a different currency that he hoped I had. We were able to help, but it was fascinating for the team to watch what could have been a five-minute exchange take one-and-a-half hours! The second cultural experience was traditional dancing and singing, which occurred late into the night. Many team members took part in the traditional dancing, which the villagers loved. Some of the songs had been composed about seven years ago, when the church leaders had



Zechariah and Kezia's compound after church

learned the Bible stories and made up a song to go with each story. How powerful it was to see the Bible stories be told and retold again and again through song!

On Saturday morning, our team headed to Yesepa's compound. His wife, Asinita, was the leader for the women and from her compound she sounded the drum to summon the women. Two hours later, approximately fifty women filled the wooden logs that served as pews in the church. Years ago, an American missionary had lived in Kulu had a powerful ministry to the women in Kulu where the women would learn to crochet while also learning Bible stories through

Chronological Bible Storying. It was amazing for us to be able to come with a large quantity of yarn, generously provided by First Baptist Church in Columbia, Mississippi, and bring so many women together!

Mitsi, Susan, Jessica, and Shayna led the storying training to the women as they walked through the standard eight stories we do in all our short-term training. These stories go from creation through the crucifixion and resurrection. The ladies committed to going through two stories a day, teaching the stories and then dialoguing the stories. As it came time for the Jur women to repeat the stories they heard, it was absolutely incredible to watch some of the older women stand up and perfectly tell the stories! We know it is an oral culture in southern Sudan, but it was phenomenal to see the women recall the stories they had learned so many years ago.

Our team was concerned about the younger women learning the stories as well as the older women, but the older women gladly committed to teaching the younger women the stories. They simply talked about how thrilled they were to once again be hearing and telling these stories of God.

That afternoon, we all gathered again in the church for church leader training. The church leaders continued the theme of talking about how it was simply the power of God that had brought us to Kulu to train them. As with the women, the church leaders perfectly told the stories. When I lived in Kulu, I led the oral Bible school based solely on Chronological Bible Storying previously established by another missionary. Only one of the church leaders today had been in the Bible school, yet others were also able to tell the stories perfectly! It was clear that the stories had gone far beyond just those who were in the Bible school. It was an incredible encouragement to our hearts as we saw the retention of the stories and knew how hungry these church leaders were for more Bible stories.



Team enjoys honey and peanuts from the chief

On Sunday morning, we worshipped God together with the villagers at church. It was a typical service and a special opportunity for the team. Afterwards, we all walked to the compound of Zechariah, one of my closest friends from our former time in Kulu. Zechariah's wife, Kezia, was pregnant and in a lot of pain. She was past her delivery date and she and Zechariah were very concerned. They asked if any of the women on our team were midwives and none were, but we offered to pray for her. Zechariah and Kezia love God deeply and they eagerly welcomed our prayers. We were all fearful of what could happen and we boldly asked God to save the baby and Kezia.

We then walked with Buksa, the deputy headmaster from the school, to his home. It was a 30-minute walk through the bush, walking through one compound after another. All along the way we greeted many old friends. I was deeply grateful to the Lord for blessing my language skills and allowing me to retain my fluency in the tribal language, which gave me entrance into cherished conversations with all those we met.

We finally arrived at Buksa's home, where we took our seats under the large tree and received our honored meal. It was a large bowl of honey and crushed peanuts. We each took a spoon and began to dig in. The meal was delicious, although the raw, unprocessed honey was quite strong for our tamed western stomachs!

Monday, the women on our team again trained about fifty women in the stories and crocheted together with them. At the same time, Kevin, Dave, and Andrew were able to share the first two Bible stories with about 150 children in the school. That afternoon, we all shared again with the leaders at the church. Afterwards, we enjoyed our standard dinner of rice and beans with honey for dessert!

One of the most striking moments of the day was when we heard the follow-up report on our famine relief campaign from March of last year. During that campaign, about sixty tons of food and seed were delivered to Kulu and other key villages that had been devastated by the attacks. The chief told us that about two thousand people were saved by the food and seed. We learned Monday that the seed from that famine relief campaign was producing the food the community is now eating! One type of seed we had delivered was peanuts, and it amazed our team to think that mixed in with our honey was quite possibly some of the peanuts harvested from the seed Aid Sudan supporters provided.



Kezia and baby Andrew are healthy and happy

The most impactful moment on Tuesday was also the most heartbreaking. I was asking some of the church leaders about spiritual power in the community, knowing that spiritual power is of utmost importance for Africans as they see witchdoctors perform incredible feats. I asked what someone might do if their daughter was sick. The church leaders shared that the witchdoctor had quite a bit of power and the person might take their daughter to the witchdoctor, or they might take their daughter to the church for prayer. The church leaders shared that the witchdoctor and the prayers to Jesus both may or may not be effective. While we all recognize that a prayer to Jesus is not a magic formula and God only grants a positive answer if He wishes, I was deeply saddened and burdened by the way in which it came across as if the power of the witchdoctor was basically equivalent to the power of Jesus. This should never be! After spending much time working in southern Sudan, it is my opinion that this notion and the resulting lack of realization of the power of Jesus in their lives is perhaps the key issue behind the stagnant church growth. Again, knowing the significance of spiritual power in Africa, our team was burdened to pray for God to reveal Himself to the people in great power.

On Wednesday morning, we awoke to tremendous news. Kezia had given birth in the night! They had a very healthy baby boy, whom they named Andrew in honor of our team. It was a very powerful answer to prayer for all of us, and especially for the ladies on our team who had prayed so diligently for Kezia and the baby.

Later in the morning we received a gift of a live chicken from Yesepa and Asinita, the church leaders, who explained how sorry they were that they did not have a goat they could give us. Most of what they had was taken or burned in the attacks and we were humbled to receive the best of what they had to give.



Asinita honors the team with a rooster

It was a moving day for us as we shared the final stories of the crucifixion and resurrection with the women, school children, and church leaders, including walking through salvation themes from the stories. It was the most storying we had ever done on a short-term team and it was incredible to do it among every segment of the village - women, men, and children!

One of the more unusual moments for many on our team, familiar only with a conservative western church experience, was when a demonized boy attended our church leader training that afternoon. We heard from the church leaders that he was demonized but that he was eager to hear the Word of God. This twelve-year-old boy sat calmly through most of the stories, but when the last story got to the part about Jesus standing in front of Pilate, the boy was suddenly thrown into a fit. The fit lasted a couple minutes, as our team prayed diligently, before the boy calmed back down and sat through the remainder of the training. Perhaps even more striking than the fit the boy experienced was the lack of response from the church leaders. Our team grappled more with that lack of response than with the fit itself, reflecting on the conversation with church leaders from the day before.

We know from Scripture that all of life is a battle between God and Satan. After much prayer, I felt very strongly led to tell the church leaders that when we next return, we want to pray with them over those who are demonized. Immediately, they welcomed our offer and asked that we start with many of their own children who have long been demonized. We were so deeply saddened to hear that their children were being held in such captivity. It is our conviction to pray with great fervency for God to move and demonstrate His power as only He can as our next team returns to Kulu.

I believe, without a doubt, that Kulu is primed for a great move of God. The people have suffered much and are broken more than I've ever seen a people broken. They hunger deeply for God and they cherish His Word. They simply have not yet experienced His power in overwhelming ways at work in their lives, and for a power-based society, that is critical for absolute allegiance and lordship. I am convinced that God's heart is passionate about the Jur people and that He is orchestrating something very special among them.

That Wednesday evening, the team visited Zechariah and Kezia in their home. They killed one of their two roosters in order to serve us dinner, once again giving the best they had for us. Culturally, a baby boy must remain inside the hut and unseen for four days, but Zechariah and Kezia went against cultural guidelines in order for our team to see the baby. It was a very special moment for all of us as we gathered together and dedicated the baby to the Lord, asking Him to use baby Andrew in a very powerful way as he grows up.



Chief of Kulu says goodbye to team

As we packed Wednesday night and Thursday morning, people kept begging me to bring my family back to live among the Jur people. They also asked for all the help Aid Sudan could give them. Our team was repeatedly honored by the people and so touched by their hospitality and by the credibility Aid Sudan has in that village and among the Jur people. As we drove out of the village Thursday morning, it was with a very deep sense of gratefulness to God for the privilege of sharing those memorable days with the people of Kulu.

Despite cultural and environmental differences, we all share a love for God and a hunger for His Word. The time together was rich and I believe it helped significantly in stirring the stories of God once again. I also believe God used our team to potentially prepare for even much greater things among the Jur people. To all those who prayed for our team, we express our heartfelt thanks. May we each continue to pray for the Jur people, asking that God help the stories spread like wildfire and asking that He indeed work among the people of Kulu in great power for His glory!