



## Update from Shelvis and Nancy Smith-Mather July 2021, Part 2

It seemed like such a brave move; I remember being impressed she committed to coming. Hosting the gathering, I felt anxious about the sensitivity of the topic for discussion. I imagined my friend, Mary, might also be uncomfortable, increasing my worries.

For the first review of a children's book, a few weeks prior, we focused on the topic of national and religious differences. With religion as a central theme, I hoped the only Muslim member of this mothers' group would find the space safe for her reflections. Based on her feedback, she seemed glad to participate. I was relieved and grateful.

The second book review focused on skin color. The lively discussion surprised me. While a few friends told somber stories, others laughed at childhood misunderstandings of ethnicity or race. Each of us, representing a spectrum of color ourselves, seemed to feel the discussion united us more than it divided us. I was relieved and grateful.

Even with two good meetings behind us, I feared the topic of the third book—colonization—might unfold differently. The painful histories between the countries we each represented generated my concern. The way I depicted the dynamics, Mary's home country, Great Britain, temporarily ruled over each of the nations which would gather in a circle on my sofas.

Would the Kenyan and Ugandan mothers share wounds from their more recent colonial pasts and the impact that remains? How closely would the American women connect with their historic period as a British colony? How might Mary respond to it all?

What strikes me now about the book review held in April 2019, is my mindset at that moment. At that time, my heart raced, worrying about a scenario that placed Mary on one side and all the rest of us on the other. Shortly after the meeting, though, my miscalculation confronted me.

In my U.S. high school history class, the colonization of Africa was presented as a tragedy inflicted by Europeans. The greed of wealthy nations concocted a mischaracterization of entire people groups as less than human for the purpose of exploitation; leading to the degradation of culture, the theft of land, the chopping off of hands, the enslavement and death of millions. While horrified by the evil inflicted, I never connected my identity to the perpetrators or survivors. Now, as an adult more interested in my ancestry, the connection is evident.



*A Few Friends from the Mother's Group who Helped Review Children's Books Together*

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My mother's side came to the U.S. from England, France, Scotland, and Germany. I have roots and, without a doubt, extended family members across Europe. In light of this truth, I see clearly my familial relationship to the named historic period. I should have been right there with Mary, perhaps my distant relative.

As a U.S. citizen living in Africa, I am constantly aware that American consumerism and politics have caused harm. It was not until I called a diverse group of friends together to discuss colonization, however, that I grappled with my link, as European-American, to that particular injustice. That recent past remains a palpable part of the present in East Africa; East Africa—where I lived, worked, and raised my children for ten years; where people undoubtedly associated me with colonial times.

Even with my 2019 realization of involvement with “the scramble for Africa,” it wasn't until 2021, that I took the next step, recognizing my connection to the root causes of South Sudan's Civil War.

For years, Shelvis and I gave presentations on Sudan's war. We described the differences between the northern and southern parts of the country. In the north, the ethnic majority is Arabic and the south mainly “black African;” the north mostly Muslim, the south Christian and indigenous religions; the north developed in infrastructure, the south rich in natural resources yet with very few paved roads. Consequently, the tensions included ethnic, religious, and economic dimensions.



*Addie and Classmates Raising the Ugandan Flag at a School with Children from Uganda, Kenya, the U.S., South Sudan, and the UK.*

Those aspects remain etched in my memory. During a recent look into the war's history, though, one piece of the struggle struck me differently than ever before. After British forces stripped power away from indigenous leaders, they ruled Sudan as two separate colonies, one in the north and one in the south. When handing control back, however, they decided to unite the colonies, under one centralized government in the north.

That decision led to violence. The war that ensued spanned decades, killed millions, and traumatized generations. Even though South Sudan eventually seceded, the lingering, unresolved divisions from the years of conflict contributed to South Sudan's civil war.

So, my ancestors are on the list of root causes of the war that pushed our colleagues, neighbors, and our children out of Yei, South Sudan, in 2013 and again in 2016.

What hits me the hardest about this reality is not that it took me so long to connect my identity with the conflict in South Sudan, though that feels embarrassing. It is not the sense of sadness and brokenness that comes from again connecting my ethnic identity with histories of injustice and oppression, though those weigh heavy. What makes the biggest impression on me, in the midst of my personal discovery about this topic, is that leaders in the South Sudanese church, well aware the majority ethnic group in the U.S. is of European heritage, actually invited the church in the U.S. to partner with them in building peace.

They welcomed me to be a part of resolving the very problem which my ancestors helped to create.

It feels like amazing grace.

So humbling. They gave me an opportunity to learn more about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Thanks be to God.

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So, what happened with Mary and the book review?

Well, she showed up. She came. She sat on the sofa amongst the women with whom she had already spent years building caring friendships.

During the discussion, she shared affirming words about the children's story, stating that the depiction of colonization was accurate. And, she listened intently to the experiences of the other mothers. One Kenyan woman's father was a freedom fighter, part of the movement to push the British out. Now she teaches at a school where Kenyan, Ugandan, British, South Sudanese, and American children sit side-by-side. She struggles to explain to students the significance of Ugandan Independence day, not wanting to create bad feelings among them.

Once again, I think we left the meeting closer to one another. I felt relieved and grateful.

Taking a page from Mary, I pray for the courage to show up for difficult conversations. Historic wounds bleed into today's reality. Listening to and honestly acknowledging the past can help us move towards healing in the present.

Having recently celebrated 10 years of independence, South Sudan still struggles with the residue of colonization, the effects of decades of war, and ongoing cycles of political-ethnic violence. Yet, the hand of the South Sudanese church remains extended towards us, the U.S. church, for partnership. May God use this unearned opportunity to facilitate and inspire a reconciled future.

*Thank you so much for your prayers and support of our family, which allow us to continue to work in partnership with our South Sudanese siblings. At present, the Smith-Mather family remains in the U.S., due to the global pandemic. Nancy continues to work with Across, RECONCILE, and the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan as they implement education programs and peacebuilding activities. Shelvis remains connected with colleagues at RECONCILE and also with students and professors at Oxford University with whom he researches peace-building in South Sudan. Thank you for being a part of the team that makes this collaboration possible!*

Sincerely,  
Shelvis and Nancy