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Finding Something Good in the Middle

Visiting her congregation in Juba years ago, I didn't know much of Rev. Paska Aciya Nimiriano's story. But, I knew it must be unique. It is rare for a girl to finish high school in South Sudan; attending a theological college and becoming ordained takes a small miracle.

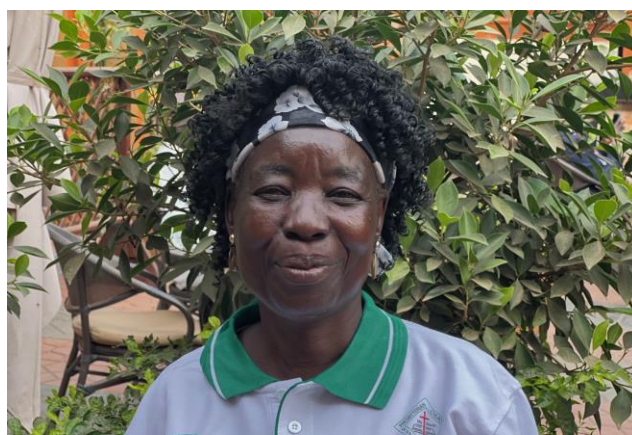
Shelvis' trip to Juba early this year gave him the opportunity to interview Rev. Paska. His interviews seek to lift up the lives of ordinary South Sudanese doing the extraordinary. Rev. Paska fits the description of extraordinary.

The 1956 war between the northern and southern regions of Sudan separated young Paska's family. Her father was working in a place far from her village. *"When the war broke out, it divided us,"* she explained. At that time, many families fled in different directions seeking safety.

Paska, her mother, and her sisters ended up in a difficult situation. *"During our life in the bush, we suffered. There were no clothes. People are wearing the leaf of the tree. There is no proper water. People are drinking water dirty. Where the animal can drink, a human being can even drink... There was not anything. So it was a very sad life."*

In 1972, when temporary peace came, Paska's father tried to reunite the family. After walking for days, he found some of his brothers and sisters, but then he became very sick. He sought medical treatment in neighboring Uganda. It seems a part of Paska's ordination miracle may have started there. In Rev. Paska's words:

"(In Uganda) is where he said, it is a girl, who is a doctor, treated him. So even if you have a girl, they still are helpful. One day, one time they will be somebody who can do something very big."



Overcoming many dangers and trials, Rev. Paska Aciya became a Pastor in the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan. In addition, she is a graduate of the RECONCILE Peace Institute and currently serves as the Chairperson for the South Sudan Council of Church's Women's Peace Committee.

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After recovering, he found Paska and brought their family to Uganda. In 1973, many Sudanese returned to Southern Sudan. Paska's family followed. In Juba, her father enrolled her in primary school, but he passed away before she started secondary.

"I thank God that (my father) put me in the school," she shared. "I schooled during difficult times, but because I liked education, I went and stayed in one of the missions with the priest so that I can work. (I) helped them in agriculture, in cooking, in cleaning, so that I get my education."

She completed secondary school (the equivalent of a U.S. high school), then worked to support her family. After Paska married, she moved to Khartoum to be with her husband. She had the opportunity to attend Nile Theological College (NTC). While initially trained as a teacher, she later became an ordained Presbyterian pastor.

While telling her story, Rev. Paska echoed a refrain commonly heard among South Sudanese elders: *"I did not enjoy a good life, because I was born in war, I grew up in war, I studied in war, I married in war, I am still bringing children up in a war."*

Yet, later she added something else: *"But also there is a good thing, I got it. Even if in the middle, I got a good thing. The good thing that I got is because God really have fulfilled my need... because by being a pastor, there is help in my family, even my community, the community of my father, the community where I am married..."*

She went on to explain the way the Word of God brings people together: *"When we come together as a Christian, we will find that we are the same. We are the same, even if you are educated or you are not educated. In a Christian way, you find that your level is the same because the Word of God is for everybody... It is not because you have a Master's or you have a Ph.D... (That) is good, but the most important is to take (the Word) in your heart and your mind and put it in practice."*

Rev. Paska sees a great division in society, between the rich and the poor. But, *"In the community of the church,"* she pointed out, *"they are different from the world people. Even if you are poor or you are rich you share together."*

One of the impacts of prolonged war, on both Rev. Paska's life and on many in South Sudan, is the weakening of family relationships. She explained: *"So, the war also divided many people. People are far, this one is there. There was not a strong relationship. So, here some time we consider even the relationship is dying."*

Yet, again she finds hope in the church and friendships developed there: *"You see, if anything happens, you will find... the church people, they are the first people to stand with you, encourage you, and to stay with you. You will find that really, I am in a family."*

The church stood with Rev. Paska, as she struggled to get an education, as she created a "new" family when the war separated her relatives, as she pursued her calling to become a pastor and found something "good" in the middle of war. Now, with the conflict still in the background, she is a part of growing that same loving community for others. May God multiply her efforts and bring peace to her nation. Amen



The church Rev. Paska serves in Juba, South Sudan is very welcoming and has a wonderful youth/children's choir.

Thank you so much for your prayers and your support of our family as we learn from and serve alongside the people of South Sudan.

Help us continue this work by giving toward RECONCILE Scholarships, which support further training of church and community leaders in peace-building and reconciliation: www.rca.org/smith-mather.

Nancy and Shelvis