

# Partnering Through Faith

*Working With Faith Leaders Towards Peace and Protection for Children in South Sudan*

**Luke 18:16 But Jesus called them to him, saying “let the children come to me, ... for such belong to the Kingdom of God.”**

The history of South Sudan is fraught with challenge and conflict, but also one of deep faith, and ultimately, that of resilience. The region encompassing what is now South Sudan has been in a state of conflict for much of its existence. After gaining independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan entered into its first civil war between the north and south from 1962-1972, and a second from 1983-2005. In 2005 a North/South Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the civil war with a deal that provided for a permanent ceasefire, autonomy for the south, a power-sharing government and a planned referendum for a southern Sudanese independence in six years' time. A fragile peace ensued and in January 2011 the people of South Sudan voted in favour of full independence from Sudan. The Republic of South Sudan (RSS) came into existence on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

After independence in 2011, the people of South Sudan were filled with hope that, as the world's youngest country, they could finally leave behind decades of war and forge a brighter future. But the promise of a better life for most South Sudanese was shattered in December 2013, when the country descended into civil war. To date, 4 million people have fled their homes, comprising 1.9 million who are internally displaced and 2 million who have fled as refugees to neighbouring countries. Of a total population of approximately 12 million, over half the population, or 7 million people, is in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has spurred an economic crisis, which combined together has served to place 48 percent of the population in an acute state of food insecurity, a 40 percent increase from the same period in 2017.<sup>2</sup>

## *The Situation for Children on the Move*

Of the 1 in 3 South Sudanese who have had to flee their homes, 60 percent are children on the move. Children and youth experience violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect on a sweeping scale, linked directly and indirectly to the conflict, and particularly exacerbated during displacement. All forms of Grave Violations Against Children's Rights have been officially observed by the UN since 2013, including killing and maiming of children, recruitment into armed groups, sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, abduction and denial of humanitarian access to children.<sup>3</sup>

Other forms of violence and abuse against children is pervasive; the vast majority of children are not safe nor enjoy the human rights accorded to them by the South Sudan Child Act, 2008 and international human rights law. The year 2017 found one of the highest rates for children recruited by armed forces or armed groups, at 19,000 girls and boys. Gender-based violence (GBV) is tragically common, with 1 in 2 women and girls having experienced a GBV incident in the last two months.<sup>4</sup> Though the majority of incidents affected adult females, 15% of reported incidents involved children ranging in age from 5 to 18 years.<sup>5</sup> The economic crisis has spurred the pervasive practice of child marriage, whereby 52% of girls are married before the age of 18, and 18% prior to age 15.<sup>6</sup> The practice of child marriage causes parents to remove their girl children from school, fundamentally undermining girls' equal access to education. Finally,

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018.”

<sup>2</sup> IPC Key Findings South Sudan: January – July 2018

<sup>3</sup> Protection Trends Report. May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> IOM KAP Survey. November 2017

<sup>5</sup> GBVIMS Quarterly Report. June 2017

<sup>6</sup> Child Protection Sub-Cluster Strategy, 2017.

displacement has resulted in over 12,000 children being unaccompanied and separated, in need of family tracing and reunification services, left vulnerable without their parents, family support system or caregivers.

### *The Landscape of Faith Actors in South Sudan*<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this entire period, the church has been seen as a significant actor. The three largest churches – the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church of Sudan (now of South Sudan)<sup>8</sup>, and the Presbyterian Church of Sudan (now of South Sudan) – have a long history dating back over a century to colonial missionary activity in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Collectively, their geographic spread covered all of what is now South Sudan, and in 1965 they formed the Sudan Council of Churches. This body has been seen as an important source of unity and identity within the country, a catalyst for community-level peacebuilding processes, and as an important part of the voice of the southern Sudanese, and later South Sudanese diaspora.

The South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) exists as the primary ecumenical body drawing together different denominations across South Sudan. The current goal of the SSCC as espoused by its staff is to *'bring all churches of South Sudan together around a common vision for a just and peaceful South Sudan that is transformed by Godly values...within that the focus is equitable development for all and a belief in the holistic mission of the church.'* The SSCC is a distinctive ecumenical body owing to the fact that it incorporates Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Pentecostal members. This is possibly due to its historical focus on primarily promoting peace rather than discussions on theology. Operating out of Juba at the national level with a rotating chairmanship between its members, its primary project is currently the Action Plan for Peace (APP). At the sub national level ecumenical structures are uneven and less defined. The SSCC seeks to have regional facilitators across the country and to utilise Inter-Church Committees (ICCs) as the main structure for local-level ecumenical collaboration.<sup>9</sup> This structure exists unevenly across the country, with some seen as stronger due to historic active civil society presence, for example in former state capitals.

South Sudan has a small Muslim population, primarily concentrated in former Upper Nile. The mosques across the country are relatively independent but their activities are known about, and to some extent coordinated by the Islamic Council of South Sudan from Juba. Established in 2010 in light of South Sudanese independence, the Islamic Council is establishing its structures, as previously all activities were coordinated out of Khartoum. It currently has limited funding and few structures or partners but is keen to collaborate and has good relationships with church leaders.

Church and other faith leaders continue to have significant respect from the community and government and are recognised as playing a key role in ensuring the physical welfare of the people, as well as providing spiritual and moral leadership. Faith leaders continue to be identified as the best placed – and in some cases only viable – interlocutors who are able and at times obligated to mediate, speak out when necessary, provide some level of services, connect to the most vulnerable, and cross boundaries between different groups. The churches play a critical role in connecting and bringing people together, and are a sign of hope and encouragement, as well as a voice for the voiceless.

While there is a clear sense that national church leaders and many local leaders and pastors are seeking to act as positive agents for peace, it is also true that there are instances of pulpits having been used for political purposes, and of leaders being complicit within local conflict dynamics. At the national and regional levels, the political connections of some churches and/or church leaders were seen as both a strength and/or a potential liability by those interviewed. Some felt it enabled the advocacy and influence of the church leaders, whilst others felt it opened up the churches to manipulation or compromise. Interviewees

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<sup>7</sup> In October 2017, WV South Sudan commissioned research to map the landscape of faith actors, structures and communities in South Sudan to reflect on WV South Sudan's historical work with faith communities, where faith actors and communities were moving, and how WV South Sudan could better understand and engage with a diverse group of faith actors at national and sub-national level. This research included key informant interviews with 78 representatives of all major faith denominations at national and sub-national level, as well as key actors within the humanitarian community in South Sudan.

<sup>8</sup> This is the Anglican expression of the church

<sup>9</sup> Ecumenical is defined as 'representing a number of different Christian churches'

cited a number of instances where the tensions between the unity and divisions between churches and church leaders had restricted their ability to play a positive and prophetic role. Despite this, faith actors were still felt to be one of the most important groups to partner with to realize peace and reconciliation in South Sudan.

### *Strategic Approach to Engagement with Faith Actors and Communities*

World Vision (WV) South Sudan is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice, working in southern Sudan and now the Republic of South Sudan since 1989. In collaboration with donors, partners and faith communities, WV South Sudan provides life-saving humanitarian assistance, promotes resilience and supports sustainable development outcomes targeting the most vulnerable children and their families, especially those with extreme vulnerability on the move. Interventions focus on improving health and nutrition status, supporting agriculture productivity and restoring livelihoods, strengthening opportunities for education for girls and boys, tackling child protection issues and reducing gender-based violence (GBV), strengthening local governance and civil society, and promoting peacebuilding.

In the footsteps of World Vision International's new global strategy, Our Promise 2030, which calls for the organization to "live out our Christian faith and calling with boldness and humility," WV South Sudan has sought to strengthen and deepen its partnerships with faith actors and communities, as a path to promoting peace, and to ending violence against children. Strategic engagement is focused on three pillars:

- (1) Strengthening key partnerships with Church leaders and groups to support peace and social cohesion;
- (2) Integrating work with faith leaders and communities across WV South Sudan's humanitarian and development initiatives;
- (3) Engaging with faith actors for joint advocacy to end violence against children.

WV South Sudan has one of the largest operational footprints in the country, with long term presence in seven of ten legacy states, covering 27 former counties and reaching 1,330,877 people including 632,881 children with assistance in 2017. With just under 1,000 employees, over 90% are national staff, with most team members working in their local communities to support grassroots response, recovery and resilience. WV South Sudan's strategic engagement with faith actors thus prioritizes local relationships, partnering with groups that support local Church initiatives such as the South Sudan Scripture Union, or the sub-national Inter Church Committees (ICC) present in former state capitals of Yambio, Kuajok and Malakal. Engagement with faith actors is thus driven from the grassroots up, partnering to strengthen local capacities for peace, support prevention, raise awareness, and jointly advocate for an end to violence against children.

### *Working with Faith Actors on **Preventing** the Root Causes of Displacement*

For children on the move in South Sudan, the root cause is conflict. Whether this be the larger civil war ongoing in the country, or inter-communal between tribes and communities, conflict continues to displace thousands of children and their families each year. In the Greater Upper Nile region, conflict dynamics are largely defined by ethnicity and the more formal frontlines of the civil war. In Greater Bahr El Ghazal region though, these dynamics are more defined by inter-tribal conflicts rooted in the cultural and traditional customs of pastoralism and cattle rustling. Conflict dynamics further vary in other parts of the country, depending on the ethnic groups, cultural and traditional beliefs, and topography or natural resources.

Across South Sudan, WV has partnered with faith leaders to strengthen local capacities for peace, and promote social cohesion to help communities address these dynamics. Each year, WV South Sudan partners with the ICC members across the country to build skills and capacity. ICC members have been trained on Local Capacities for Peace methodology, which helps faith leaders understand concepts of 'Do No Harm' and conflict sensitivity to better promote peace, mitigate conflicts, and facilitate reconciliation in their positions as moral authorities or leaders among their congregations and community.

*“I was provided assistance and guidance in resolving personal, social, or psychological problems. This was the first time to learn to mediate conflicts, and I thank God for this opportunity to assist my congregation.” - Pastor Michael Chal, Presbyterian Church*

In Greater Upper Nile, the most recent iteration of conflict politically divided and physically displaced Shilluk and Nuer tribes, once used to living alongside each other, now unfamiliar and separated. After participating in a regional peace learning event in part supported by WV South Sudan, Pastor Michael and Women’s Presbyterian Representative Beronica reflected on how division by ethnic group can lead to suspicions and tensions. Though both Pastor Michael and Beronica were Presbyterians, they had been leading separate congregations, Michael for Nuer and Beronica for Shilluk. As a result, there were few opportunities to reconnect and see their common humanity and beliefs. After being supported by WV South Sudan to consider how social cohesion could be promoted within their congregations, Pastor Michael and Beronica decided to begin holding joint services with language translation in both Nuer and Shilluk to allow their tribes to meet each other once again in joint devotions. Since this effort, the divisions and “othering” that can breed conflict has reduced.

In Greater Bahr El Ghazal, the history of inter-communal conflict is long. Fighting in mid-2017 between the Apuk and Aguok led to over 100 deaths, and causing significant displacement for affected communities. The conflict was primarily led by youth groups, and was complex, with tensions flaring over cattle rustling and old rivalries or retribution from previous clashes.

*“I do not understand why men are killing us. Women do not go to war but they are killing us innocently at night. No women from Aguok went to Apuk for war neither Apuk to Agouk for war. They only did that for their own interests” - Ajok Majok, Women Representative for Aguok Community*

To prevent another year of inter-communal conflict, faith leaders recognized the need for a peace conference – to put aside ideas of revenge, rebuild trust and promote reconciliation. WV South Sudan supported this grassroots effort in partnership with the Church leaders, with the Gogrial State Peace Conference ultimately involving 1,200 participants. Led by the Honorable Governor of Gogrial State and officially closed by H.E Dr. James Wani Igga the Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan, and with support from the South Sudan National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Gogrial State Government, Gogrial State Diaspora Communities, UNMISS, national NGO Toch, and Saferworld, the peace conference provided a space for open dialogue. Chiefs, women’s representatives, youth leaders and faith actors came together to share their grief, as well as make commitments to a peaceful way forward for the future.

*“Peace has come to us through this conference in Ajiep [Gogrial]. ...For those who have attended this conference let us go back with this in our heart and in mind.”- Akok Achuil, Women’s Representative, Gogrial East*

For South Sudan, the key to preventing displacement lies in addressing and preventing the root causes of conflict, however diverse and complex these may be. Following conflict and displacement incidents, communities look to their faith leaders for moral leadership and reconciliation; while faith leaders accept this role, they look to partners to build their capacity to address these complexities and for support. It is in these respects that WV South Sudan has sought to partner with faith leaders and communities in preventing future displacement.

#### *Working with Faith Actors on Response to Children’s Needs*

Children are extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation during displacement, and upon return. The chaos of displacement can easily separate children from their parents and family members as they flee, while the conflict too frequently leaves children orphaned or without caregivers as they remain

displaced or attempt to resettle. During such times, it is the Church that is seen as the safe haven, and faith actors who remain present.

In South Sudan, there is no national birth registration system, with registration done at the village health facility. Tragically, thousands of children are displaced without any record of their birth, or may even be born on the move, and thus grow up without any form of identification. This can become a barrier to access health services as a child, attend school, obtain a livelihood, receive protection from the law, or seek refugee status. Recognizing this gap, as well as the access faith actors have to communities even in times of chaotic displacement, WV South Sudan partnered with the Ministry of Health and Church leaders to conduct mobile birth registrations to reach children on the move in difficult to reach locations. This resulted in 1,300 children receiving birth registrations.

When conflict broke out in 2013, displaced children and their families fled to Don Bosco Missionary, led by Father David Tulimelli. After fighting in July 2016, the internally displaced persons camp grew from 4,000 to 12,000 people. Life-saving and social services such as health, nutrition, food assistance, education and child protection are provided by the Mission and humanitarian actors such as WV South Sudan, and coordinated with Father David and the church leadership. Since 2016, WV has worked in partnership with Don Bosco to provide social services for displaced children with psychosocial needs, or experiencing violence, sexual abuse, and neglect through its Child Friendly Space and team of social workers. Mediation frequently engages church leaders to provide counsel to children and their families struggling with an incident of violence or separation caused during their displacement, or to assist with reunification.

Displacement places severe stress on children. UNICEF estimates that 1 million children in South Sudan are in need of psychosocial support as a result of their experiences in conflict and displacement. Spiritual nurture can be an important pathway to recovery for many children, and is a key aspect of WV South Sudan's efforts to partner with faith actors. The Scripture Union of South Sudan (SUSS) supports Bible Study, learning conferences, and camps for children and youth, to help nurture the light of Christ in their hearts, and learn love, friendship and fellowship through safe play and peer interaction. WV South Sudan has held a long partnership with the SUSS, identifying this group as a key entry point to help respond to children's psychosocial needs, as well as contribute to creating conditions for peace and reconciliation among children and youth as the future generation. WV South Sudan has supported the SUSS to develop its organizational capacity, and to conduct its activities, reaching 3,022 children on the move in Aweil, Yei and whilst en route to Uganda in 2017. Discipleship training in Aweil focused on building a relationship with Christ; by the end of one Bible Camp, 115 girls and boys committed to renounce the practice of tribalism and live as one nation.

A critical area of partnership is on the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. The SUSS, with support from WV South Sudan, has facilitated dialogues on these issues specifically for children and women on the move from places such as Yei, as they seek refuge in Uganda.

*“When I was in Yei, my sister was shot dead near me and from that time, we buried her and then we had to run away from Yei to Uganda and I came with pain in my heart because of what was done to us by the Dinka. I said I will not forgive the Dinka. However, since we were taught about forgiveness in the conference, I have forgiven the Dinka and I am trusting God to deliver us from the pain many of the South Sudanese is going through.” – Joyce,<sup>10</sup> Uganda.*

The work of the SUSS exemplifies how faith actors and groups can access communities on the move, even in the most difficult circumstances, and find ways to provide comfort and reconciliation to those affected. These organizations are deeply committed to social justice, but may lack the resources and capacity to take advantage of the access they maintain by themselves; partnerships with NGOs such as WV South Sudan can provide critical financial support, but also organizational capacity development to more

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<sup>10</sup> Name changed to protect identify.

effectively reach their communities, and technical support to help strengthen the impact of efforts to realize psychosocial and emotional recovery.

### *Working with Faith Actors on Raising Awareness & Sensitization*

WV South Sudan also partners with faith actors to raise awareness, sensitize, and promote positive attitude and behaviour change among children on the move, their families, and host or receiving communities. As faith leaders are often the last or only partners on the ground, working together to share information about available relief services, practices to avoid water-borne and infectious disease transmission, how to access medical care or response services if a victim of sexual violence, and where and how to benefit from food or material assistance, family tracing and reunification, or re-enrollment in temporary education, can be an extremely effective approach.

Partnership with faith actors can extend much further beyond basic information sharing though. Displacement breaks down local protection systems and rule of law, but also traditional beliefs about gender and social norms. This presents both a situation of vulnerability for increased violence, especially against children, as well as a unique opportunity to address social norms and beliefs that contribute to violence against children, on the move and in the home.

In Yambio, the former state capital of Western Equatoria State,<sup>11</sup> fighting and ensuing displacement in 2015 caused children and their families to flee to the bush, many becoming separated; children were also routinely taken by armed groups, recruited to perform military duties, or other acts to support the armed actors, such as spying, stealing, domestic works, and family ‘duties’ such as forced marriage. Though sexual violence existing prior to the conflict, the presence of armed actors and breakdown of the rule of law caused rape and sexual assault incidents to flare. Survivors are heavily stigmatized, ostracized from society and left extremely vulnerable. For over two years, WV South Sudan has been partnering with 50 faith leaders from all denominations to reduce the stigma against survivors of sexual violence and children born of rape, through the Channels of Hope – Gender Equality model, which uses scripture and devotional study to help faith leaders promote more protective and less harmful attitudes towards women, particularly sexual violence survivors.

After intensive training, faith leaders are supported to plan and implement local advocacy initiatives, engage their congregations in devotionals to promote gender equality, and provide spiritual counsel from a perspective that better protects the rights the survivor. Before participating in this program, 51 percent of faith leaders felt a female survivor of rape may have been at fault and should marry her perpetrator as a form of settlement. After participating in the program 97 percent understand the harm of SGBV, and seek to respect the wishes of survivors in their approaches.

*“I think the church we have not been doing the right thing especially when telling people about relations [between men and women]. We have just been doing it for the sake not so much concerned on how this could hurt, but in Channels of Hope we have learned how to tell people [how to] live inharmony as men and women.” - Reverend Richard Reuben*

Channels of Hope has also empowered faith leaders to change their approach to family counselling to better protect children. The highest rate of child marriage in South Sudan is recorded in former Western Equatoria State, with over 50 per cent of girls married before the age of 18. Religious beliefs were perpetuating this cultural practice, whereby emphasis was placed on the right of the man to select a wife as the head of the household, without any consideration for the girl child.

*In May 2017, 14 year old Maria<sup>12</sup> was forced to marry a 65 year old man in Yambio County [former Western Equatoria State]. Maria’s father believed his daughter could not be trusted to*

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<sup>11</sup> Gbudwe State, current.

<sup>12</sup> Name changed to protect identity.

*attend school and wished to receive dowry as soon as possible so he arranged to marry her off immediately. During the dowry negotiation, Maria refused the marriage. Maria's father locked her in the house, completed the dowry exchange with the old man, and forcibly married Maria off. Veronica Ani, a faith leader supported by WV South Sudan, was engaged to counsel the family using what she had learned through Channels of Hope. After months of family counselling, Veronica was able to change the mind of Maria's father and counselled him to return the dowry to the old man, reverse his daughter's marriage and reunite Maria with the family.*

This demonstrates the power of partnership with faith leaders to not only raise awareness, but to actively and positively change attitudes and beliefs to help end all of the forms of violence that children can face, on the move, as well as upon return.

### *Working with Faith Actors to Advocate for Children*

In South Sudan, faith actors represent a powerful voice for social justice. Though religious leaders and communities may not always be politically neutral, the moral leadership and authority they hold within their sphere influence define these partners are critical agents of change. WV South Sudan has partnered with faith actors at various levels to advocate for an end to violence against children, leveraging the faith perspective, scope and voice of the Church.

At the grassroots, partnership with faith actors has focused on micro-level advocacy to end the violence that occurs against children and violates their rights on a day to day basis. Since October 2017, WV South Sudan has trained and supported 111 multi-denominational faith leaders in Renk, Melut and Malakal with the Celebrating Families Curriculum (CFC). The intention of CFC is to journey together to acknowledge the wounds in the past; create space for love, grace, healing and forgiveness in the present; and be equipped with tools that will help fulfil dreams for the present and future. Though it is conflict that causes displacement, the violence children experience in various stages of displacement is most often perpetrated by parents, family members or relatives. Thus, focus is placed on promoting gender equality and respect for children's rights, as a path to reducing harmful attitudes and behaviours.

The Celebrating Families model helps inspire change among faith leaders, who as agents of change themselves, influence positive attitude and behaviour change among their congregations and communities.

*"I went and taught different women in our community. Some are believers and some were not. I taught them to love their children, work for them, their husbands and accept Jesus Christ and they responded." - Sarah Nyabeer, Melut*

*"I am happy to inform you that I told my wife 'Thank you' after meal for the first time ever. And also 'I love you' which I did not used to say before. She laughed and said 'This is new and this is my happiness!' I thank God for being part of this workshop. Thank you." - Joseph De Garang, Renk*

*"Yesterday, I made peace with the one I fought with. For a long time I didn't want anything to do with him – no greeting or anything. After the workshop on forgiveness, I thought about it. I called him, talked about forgiveness and we ate together. I felt good!" - Thon Miyar, Melut*

After decades of fighting, grievances, mistrust, separation, displacement and disruption, many in South Sudan have never known a relationship based on love or respect. This impacts not only the parent-child relationship, but replicates in social relations, and influences the bounds of 'acceptable' behaviour, in part contributing to the particularly vicious and gruesome nature of conflict in South Sudan on a larger scale. While these testimonies may not seem significant, these simple acts that turn towards love, kindness and respect have a ripple effect in South Sudanese communities. When exemplified in life by respected faith leaders, the result has been even more powerful.

Due to the history of displacement in South Sudan, regional advocacy has played a historical role in promoting peace and creating conditions for return, and continues to do so today. One example of joint advocacy between faith and NGO partners has been the Great Lakes Initiative, a faith-based partnership led by Duke University's Center for Reconciliation (CFR), Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM) and World Vision International. The Great Lakes Initiative (GLI) is a network of Christian organizations working towards peace and reconciliation in seven countries of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. For ten years, GLI has provided a space for reflection, renewal and refreshment for Christian leaders. Faith leaders the annual region gain the opportunity to learn from other countries, and be exposed to new ideas to take home.

In January 2018, WV South Sudan supported five multi-denominational faith leaders (4 male, 1 female) to participate in the annual GLI workshop, selected from the Inter Church Committees. For four of five participants, this meeting in Uganda was the first time traveling outside of the country. In South Sudan, entire generations have grown up never knowing peace; for these faith leaders to visit another country to see what peace can look like, or to hear from colleagues about how they reconciled and moved on from civil war, was extremely powerful and motivating.

*"I saw people walking late at night on the streets with no fear. I had forgotten that this was something possible. At first I was afraid, but then it became so nice. I will tell my congregation that if we can find peace, this could be for us too." – Reverend Charles, Yambio*

*"I was motivated by the Pastor from Rwanda. They did brutal things, the Hutus and Tutsis, like Dinka and Nuer. Now they are developed. They have paved roads and the economy is good. This is what comes with peace, and now I know that after fighting like Rwanda, it is still possible to turn around." – Pastor Michael, Malakal*

Following the GLI Conference in Uganda, WV South Sudan continues to support these faith leaders, and the other members of their Inter Church Committees to advocate for peace and reconciliation at the sub-national level, based on action plans developed following the GLI conference. Guidance, technical support, and regular coaching has helped strengthen these partnerships, leveraging the capacity of both parties.

Finally, in October 2017 WV South Sudan launched its national advocacy campaign, *It Takes A Nation to Protect the Future Generation*, in collaboration with the global World Vision International campaign *It Takes A World* focused on ending violence against children. WV South Sudan's campaign seeks to raise awareness on and promote the protection of children and youth in South Sudan, advocating for four key objectives:

- (1) Increased awareness, changed attitudes and behaviours at community level that promotes protection and a reduction of all forms of violence affecting children and their families, particularly GBV;
- (2) Strengthening prevention, mitigation and response measures to address violence against children;
- (3) Increase in short term and multi-year resources to promote the protection of women, girls, boys and men;
- (4) Strengthen accountability for implementation of global commitments to end violence against children (SDGs, World Humanitarian Summit) in South Sudan.

In the context of South Sudan, the protection of children requires advocacy to realize a reduction in violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children, but also a reduction in gender inequality, gender-based violence, and conflict. It further includes the promotion of girls education and an end to child marriage, of human rights, especially for children and women, and of peace and reconciliation. The scope of the problem, and the scale of the advocacy, inherently requires partnerships.

Engagement with faith leaders and communities was an integral aspect of the It Takes A Nation campaign design. Since the launch, WV South Sudan has leveraged its partnerships with the Inter Church Committees, their congregations, and the Scripture Union of South Sudan, to become key stakeholders and advocates for ending violence against children through this campaign. Inter Church Committees have been supported to develop local advocacy action plans to raise awareness and promote attitude and behaviour change to promote the reduction of violence and greater protection for children and youth. Advocacy activities have included sermons on peace in the home, why violence does not belong in a Christian home, and against the stigmatization of teenage mothers and children out of wedlock. Prayer sessions are led on peace, and local and national reconciliation each month; a fast for peace was also arranged. Advocacy work has also been through example, whereby church leaders refused to bless child marriage, and are now blocking attempts at forced marriage for adult women as a resolution to sexual assault.

The advocacy action plans, developed collaboratively, are reviewed monthly for progress, to identify what is working, and where faith leaders and their congregations may need support. Partnership with faith leaders for the It Takes A Nation campaign is a recent development, but one that is already showing promise, as this type of joint advocacy is well suited to get to the heart of the attitude and behaviour change needed to end violence against children, recognizing the trust and moral authority held by faith actors.

#### *Reflections: Learnings, Best Practices*

Religion is at the center of South Sudanese social norms, and thus any community level engagement will almost necessarily involve some interaction or partnership with faith actors. There is significant value add to partnering with faith leaders for several reasons. First, faith leaders and the Churches are almost always present, even as conflict is occurring; the Church is the last to leave, the first to return, the place of perceived safe haven. Any efforts to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance can thus be expanded through partnerships with faith actors, particularly in hard to reach or sudden displacement scenarios.

Second, faith leaders represent the moral authority within most South Sudanese communities, and are considered the voice of reason, justice and hope. Faith leaders themselves, for the most part, believe they have an obligation to promote peace and reconciliation, whether on an individual basis or on a national scale. Given this role, faith leaders are thus extremely important partners to help influence attitude and behaviour change, such as to realize positive shifts in social norms towards those that better protect the rights of children on the move.

Third, faith leaders offer a unique, spiritual voice to prevention, response and advocacy. As humanitarian and development actors, these functions as daily work can become a business, or a logistical exercise, that can lead to an unintentional divorce from the humanity of those in need of assistance, causing a failure to connect on a deeper level. Situations of displacement, particularly for children on the move, are psychologically, emotionally and spiritually stressful. These instances are perhaps thus the most critical to link humanitarian or development assistance to a deeper spiritual and emotional recovery that can be most strongly and intentionally prioritized and guided by faith actors.

As a faith-based organization, WV South Sudan has had a long but varying history of partnership with faith actor and groups. Partnership and engagement has recognized the aforementioned areas of value add, as well as many others, but has also struggled with the challenges of partnering when an actor is not officially part of the humanitarian and development system. Though WV and faith actors share many of the same values and ideas on social justice, faith actors do not subscribe to all humanitarian principles per se. Where the Church or specific faith actors may not be maintain political neutrality, it can prove challenging for NGOs that do subscribe to this principle to maintain broad partnership.

As a learning, WV South Sudan has mapped the faith actor landscape in South Sudan to identify entry points to partner with faith actors that are both committed to social justice, and in general, maintain enough neutrality as to avoid too great of a compromise on the humanitarian principles WV South Sudan subscribes to, and to which are critical for maintaining operational access in a complex environment. This has meant building on WV South Sudan's traditional strengths – grassroots engagement – and strengthening its partnerships with the ICCs and Scripture Union of South Sudan. For other agencies considering partnering with faith actors, the agency may wish to reflect on its organizational perspectives on humanitarian or other principles, and similarly assess what entry points would be most effective for partnership; broad partnership may be challenging, but targeted engagement can be a productive way forward in a dynamic context such as South Sudan.

Beyond principled and ethical dilemmas, it has been a learning to recognize that faith actors and the Church, while having some similar ideals and functions to NGOs, are not humanitarian or development agencies. They may not work on the same timelines, have the same organizational capacity and structures, or follow the same levels of reporting as required for auditing in comparison to NGOs, and public, bilateral or multilateral donor expectations. This can present a barrier to formal partnership for many NGOs, who wish to partner with faith actors, but require partners with the capacity and willingness to meet external donor requirements, or other professional standards associated with the aid industry.

Still, the proverbial baby need not be thrown out with the bathwater; two key learnings emerged. First, there are many ways to 'partner' other than those that require a traditional or contractual arrangement. WV South Sudan identified and customized different ways of partnering with faith actors depending on their capacity and the relationship that would be mutually agreed to be beneficial between both partners. In some cases this was limited to in-kind guidance, mentorship and technical support; in other cases, where capacity was greater, small grants were provided, such as to the Scripture Union. Second, and related, is to consider intentionally building the organizational capacity of faith actors, should this be a common goal for both parties. This is not to push a faith group or Church to become an NGO, but to collaboratively consider building capacity in functions such as reporting, communications, or accounting for Church dues. For those faith groups interested in moving more towards an NGO, such as the Scripture Union, WV South Sudan has explicitly invested in organizational capacity building and coaching in key NGO functions, such as quality and timely donor reporting, financial accountability and transparency standards. These approaches can help overcome some of the administrative barriers or perceived organizational risks to partnering, and allow for the significant value add of engagement with faith actors or group to be realized.

WV South Sudan has engaged with and partnered with faith leaders, actors and groups in various capacities throughout its history in South Sudan. There is considerable space to continue learning, improving and collaborating. These partnerships have proved to be invaluable to supporting prevention, response, awareness and sensitization, and joint advocacy for children, and efforts to end violence experienced by children on the move in South Sudan.

**Psalm 127:3 Behold, children are the heritage from the Lord**