



How a Covenant church in Chicago helped sixteen Lost Boys from Sudan find a new home

WELCOMING REFUGEES: 2001

BEN HELPHAND

Days of GRACE

James Mawal Deng was just five years old the last time he saw his parents.

“The Arabs came and attacked our village. They started shooting people, and bombing homes, and killed many people,” he says. “Our parents ran a different way and I ran my own way. Because the Arabs came suddenly I could not manage to follow my parents. I just ran through the bush. That is the time when separation came. Yes, that was the last time I saw my parents.”

In 1987, more than 17,000 young Sudanese boys like Deng were driven from their homes during an offensive by the Sudanese government against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), the South Sudan opposition group. (The Sudanese government, based in the northern city of Khartoum, is ethnically Arab and mostly Muslim. South Sudan is populated by a number of tribal groups, including Nuer and Dinka, and is mostly Christian and Animist. More than 2 million people have been killed in Sudan’s ongoing civil war.)

Over the next fourteen years the boys would wander from refugee camp

to refugee camp, never able to settle down or return home. When 10,000 of them ended up in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, aid workers nicknamed them “the Lost Boys of Sudan,” after Peter Pan’s Neverland gang. Like their storybook namesakes, who were unable or unwilling to grow up, the Lost Boys were stuck in limbo. They could not return to Sudan, but they were not free to leave the camp and begin life anew in Kenya.

In the past year and a half, about 3,600 of the Lost Boys have been allowed to leave Kenya and come to the United States. About 120 of them were resettled on Chicago’s north side, where many were assisted by churches. Sixteen Lost Boys, including Deng, became part of Grace Covenant Church.

After he was forced from his home, Deng, along with thousands of others, traveled by foot to Ethiopia. Many boys died while attempting to cross the Gilo River at the border. Those who survived the swift currents and crocodiles spent nearly four years in refugee camps run by SPLA soldiers. According to some reports, the camps doubled as a kind of training ground for the SPLA.

When asked if he ever thought about joining the rebel army, Deng responds with frustrated questions. “How do you think?” he asks. “When your right is denied, when it is your country? You have a right [to defend yourself] for example when somebody comes and kicks you out of your house. What can you do?”

He pauses. “Can you leave your house to him or will you fight?...They say that Sudan is theirs. But Sudan, it belongs to all of us. How come they denied our rights?”

In 1991, when a civil war broke out in Ethiopia, Deng and the others were forced to leave. They returned to Sudan, but were forced to leave after a brief stay because of the ongoing civil war. They eventually made it to the Kakuma camp in northern Kenya. About half were lost on the trek to Kenya to starvation, gunfire, drowning, and military conscription. For the next nine years, they lived ration to ration off an array of international aid organizations. As one would later explain, “We didn’t survive from our mothers and our fathers. We survived from the help of different organizations in the United States like the

United Nations High Council for Refugees.”

Stepping Out of Limbo

During the summer of 2000, the US Congress loosened restrictions on refugees from Africa, allowing groups of the Lost Boys, now between ages of eighteen and twenty-four, to leave Kakuma for the United States. The arrangements for the move were worked out by relief agencies in the United States, such as World Relief, which is assisting about 300 Lost Boys.

Grace Covenant Church first started working with Sudanese refugees in November 2000. “Our church council went on a retreat and prioritized—looked at the whole church and sought God,” pastor Debra Gustafson says. “We believed our number one top priority was to grow in compassion ministry. We asked the Lord to lead us.”

Following the retreat, several council members made contact with World Relief in Chicago. Within a few weeks, Grace Covenant began sponsoring a refugee family from Sudan. “Cecily and Idea Minziti walked off the plane and into our hearts from a refugee camp in Cairo, Egypt,” says Gustafson. “Through Cecily we learned about the terrible atrocities and carnage happening in her country.”

Last spring, Gustafson got a call from World Relief, asking if Grace Covenant would be interested in sponsoring additional refugees. Gustafson and others from the church went to a World Relief meeting to learn more about the Lost Boys.

“Our hearts were just hammered by their story and their need,” she says. “We considered sponsoring three of these young men and we decided that we would take an offering in the congregation to discern where our hearts were at. We figured we needed \$3,200 to sponsor three young men. The offer-

ing was for about \$4,200. We proceeded and then God simply started moving us forward much more rapidly than we anticipated.”

Gustafson worked with Pam Hubbard, a member of Grace, to assemble

Resettlement touches every aspect of a refugee’s life—from the basics of shelter, transportation, and clothing to education, cooking, and job applications, says Dori Dinsmore, executive director of World Relief in Chicago.

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A group of the Lost Boys arrive at Chicago’s O’Hare airport from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. From left: Jacob Ding, Gabriel Akoon, John Akuak, James Giik, James Thiok, Secondiano Redento (World Relief case manager), James Agang, Benjamin Akol, Joseph Paul, Dominic Maleek

a team of volunteers to work with the refugees. Their first plans called for working with three men—that number eventually increased to five. Then the church learned of five other Sudanese men in the area and decided to work with them as well. And the number of men continued to grow.

“In September we heard of six more Lost Boys who arrived in Chicago without even World Relief knowing they were coming,” Gustafson says. “They had no host family ready to greet them, no sponsoring church.” With the help of Hope Covenant Church in Indianapolis, Grace Covenant was able to sponsor this new group. There are now sixteen Lost Boys at Grace.

“Making a new life in the United States is not an easy thing to do,” Dinsmore says. The first three months are critical: “That’s when the refugees don’t know what’s up and down.”

To help meet the challenge, Hubbard organized a team of ten families, each helping the men with an aspect of life in the United States and in the city. They took the men shopping for food and clothes, and to the bank to open savings accounts. And they did so with an eye towards self-sufficiency. Rather than go to the nearest mall,

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Jacob Ding, Gabriel Akoon, James Giik, James Thio, with the Grace Covenant youth group

where the boys are unlikely to be able to afford much of anything, volunteers scouted out thrift shops. Donated bicycles and trips on the public transit system, provided reliable transportation.

The need to give refugees the means to support themselves in every way is pressing, says Dinsmore. After three months they will be essentially on their own, especially financially. And the job hunt has not been easy. Because of their years on the move and in refugee camps, few of the men have developed any job skills—so they’re starting at the bottom of the ladder. As Dinsmore puts it, “these guys haven’t even been sheep herders.” But the Lost Boys are enthusiastic for the climb, and speak of the jobs they’ve been able to find (room attendants at hotels, cart handlers at supermarkets and airports) with pride. One boy did a stint at an engraver’s shop and carried around a plastic bag of inscribed toothbrushes to show the others.

They have also started working on their education, says Hubbard, which makes her confident that they will succeed. Four have already begun taking classes at St. Augustine College, while others are working on their GEDs. One of the biggest concerns of the older Lost Boys, who are close to twenty-five, is that they’re too old to complete

their education. Because of that, they have been taking a pro-active role in working on their education. When a team member from Grace offered to take them to go get library cards, they

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politely declined. They had already gotten them on their own.

This is one of the biggest challenges when helping the Lost Boys, said Dinsmore. “You don’t know where their knowledge gaps are.”

New Home, New Challenges

A particularly touchy aspect of the Lost Boys’ transition has to do with racism. Several of the Sudanese men at Grace Covenant have seen racial prejudice firsthand. “Because they are black, they have been stopped by the police numerous times,” Gustafson says. “Joseph, one of the guys, just walked out of his apartment and a police officer came up and handcuffed him to a fence because he thought he was someone who robbed a McDonalds.” After a shooting near one of their apartments, several of the boys were stopped and questioned. Gustafson had to call police and

explain who they were.

“We’ve had to speak to the police at our local precinct and carefully ask the police to quit stopping these men because of the color of their skin,” she says. “We have seen much more clearly what our African-American brothers and sisters live with on a daily basis.”

A second issue has to do with the way that police and others in the community view African Americans and African immigrants. “There is often a double standard,” says Dinsmore, between the way Africans and African Americans are treated. African immigrants are often welcomed where African Americans are not. Once police learned that the Lost Boys at Grace were refugees, they received better treatment.

Because of this double standard, the relationship between African-American communities and Sudanese refugees has not always been smooth.

Though in Chicago tension has been slight if at all, in Nashville, which has the largest Sudanese community in the country, the two communities have come to blows. Many of the people who work with the Lost Boys say their presence forces all who come into contact with them to confront certain realities of the world—racism, civil war, refugees, religious persecution.

An Example of Faith

However much support the Lost Boys have received, they have also given back with their example of faith and community. “They have such a strong sense that God has preserved them,” says Hubbard. “It’s wonderful for us, who have so much and have never had to live through the privation that they have, to see that kind of faith and to experience it.”

When Peter Mawel Machok retells

his story of survival, it sounds as if God were traveling alongside the Lost Boys. There is a directness, an intimacy, in the way Machok speaks of his relationship with God. Whenever he was confronted with an impasse, such as hunger, despair, pests, or lack of direction, Machok says he turned toward God for guidance. Macock's village was destroyed while he was out tending cattle. "At that time," he says, "we just go and sit, and ask, 'God, where can we go now our village is destroyed?'"

According to sociologists who interviewed the Lost Boys when they first crossed into Kenya, 97 percent had witnessed a killing, 85 percent saw someone die of starvation, and 74 percent survived shelling. But when asked about these terrible experiences, Machok talks about his faith.

"Even though I saw people getting killed," he says, "I increase to ask God. When I am in danger I remember God a lot....There in Sudan you cannot

A Visit to Hope

In late August, two vanloads of Lost Boys from Chicago, including some from Grace Covenant, traveled to Indianapolis to visit Hope Covenant Church. They were guests for what was called an International Sunday. Paul Macharia, a North Park Seminary student from Kenya, preached the sermon, which was translated into Spanish for Hispanic members of Hope Covenant. The Lost Boys told their story and sang for the congregation. A dinner following the service featured dishes from about a dozen countries, from Peru to Japan. Macharia and the boys brought the main course—roasted goat.

Hope Covenant has joined Grace Covenant in their work with the Sudanese refugees. When Grace was asked to sponsor six additional Lost Boys, who had shown up unexpectedly at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, Hope Covenant contributed funds, bicycles, and clothing to help sponsor the new group of refugees. □

Becoming a Refugee...Officially

For the Lost Boys, the trip from Kenya to Chicago was about thirty-six hours long. The process leading up to that flight, however, was years in the making. Dori Dinsmore, executive director of World Relief in Chicago, says that three factors made the Lost Boys' resettlement to the United States possible. First, in 2000 there was a dramatic increase in the number of African refugees allowed into the United States. This happened after the number of Eastern European refugees allowed, which had been raised during the war in the Balkans, was lowered. That made room for an increase in the number of African refugees.

Second, the majority of the Lost Boys are no longer minors. Resettling children is difficult, and few countries want to volunteer. After refugees turn eighteen, the resettlement process becomes easier. However, it's worth remembering that nearly half of the world's refugees are children (approximately 10 million).

Third, the current resettlement came after six or seven years of tireless advocacy by relief groups. In addition, many people in the United States have become aware of religious persecution around the world, and have pressed politicians to act.

Once a group achieves refugee status, the next stage is to negotiate a course of action. It's always best if they are able to eventually return home. If that is impossible, then permanent resettlement enters the picture. Either way the goal is a "durable solution." In the case of the Lost Boys, resettlement was clearly the most durable option. A civil war still rages in the Sudan so repatriation was out of the question. In addition, without parents and having missed out on the usual lifecycle events of their tribal communities the Lost Boys would have a difficult, if not impossible, time reintegrating, says Dinsmore. Because they have missed these rites of passage, she says, they are not seen as "adults" in their culture. "If they went back home they would be cultural misfits."

Before being resettled to the US, refugees must work through the bureaucracy of UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees). They must undergo a series of interviews, health, and security screenings. The biographical information of those selected is sent to the Refugee Data Center in New York City. There, representatives from the nation's major relief organizations decide which refugees they can assist. Who ends up in Fargo and who ends up in Tampa is essentially up to chance—whatever agency has room and resources will take them. □



James Giik, Pastor Debra Gustafson, James Thiok, Jacob Ding

worship God in a comfortable place. Like now we are worshipping God in a building. But when we are in Sudan, when we run away from our areas, we just go and sit under the trees, we pray there, because God says, 'You pray wherever you are. Whether you are in the water, whether you are up in the tree.' If you believe in God you pray wherever you are. So we can't forget God. We pray wherever we are." □