

MISSION MOMENT: GIFTS TO LIVE ON Women's Clinics in South Sudan

South Sudan is a new country and there have been major conflicts since it became its own nation in 2011. One of the side effects of the ongoing conflict is the impact on the health systems, particularly on women and girls, who are especially vulnerable given the limited health care in the country. There is little infrastructure to support women and their health, leaving NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to deliver 80% of services like prenatal and postnatal care, along with family planning counseling and HIV screening and treatment.

Providing such care is hard, and many women have to walk for miles to the health clinics. Truly amazing are the nurses and doctors and the care they provide – as important is the community space they create for women to support one another and empower one another to move forward. The impact is incredible.

Week of Compassion supports a medical clinic in Juba because of the deep impact it has on the lives of patients who are ultimately victims of poor maternal health services. The work is a collaboration on the ground with partners including Lutheran World Federation, Barbara May Foundation, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Government of South Sudan, and others. The Center sits within a vast community of IDPs (internally displaced persons) just outside Juba City, and the hardworking Center staff provide important care to an underserved and fast-growing population.

Elizabeth is in her late 20s and is from Tonj County, north of Juba; it takes about 4 days to get to The Center by car. Ten years ago she was pregnant, but unfortunately lost her baby. Since then she has been living with fistula, which has caused her to be incontinent and not be able to give birth again. Her husband left her and returned her dowry. As a result, she was cast out and rejected by her community – her safety net is gone and she has been alone ever since. She has survived on minimal resources and in the face of rejection by her community because she cannot bear children.



all photos: Bruce McCoy

Elizabeth is not alone. Many women develop fistula due to the extremely poor prenatal health care and lack of services to girls and women when they give birth.

Atong Atal and her son Deng-Magai are from Warrap state in the Bahr-El-ghazal region, a village called Majook. When she developed a fistula following childbirth with her son, her husband rejected her, and all of his attention is now focused on his first wife. Atong has one other child, and when she returns to her village her hope is that she will be healed and that her husband will accept her again.

In Juba, at The Center supported by Week of Compassion, these remarkable women had surgery to relieve these painful issues, and both were fully successful cures! As important as physical recovery, healing means empowerment – being made whole and recognized within their communities. They left The Center and returned to their communities in South Sudan with their lives and dignity restored.

The gospels tell of a woman who came to Jesus after suffering for years from bleeding that made her a ritual outcast in her community and consumed all of her financial resources. She dared to reach out in faith to be healed, and Jesus praised her for it. The

gospels also tell of a woman who came to the temple and, poor as she was, gave all she had as an offering. She dared to give in faithfulness, and Jesus praised her for it. We honor the courage of these women—in the gospels and in South Sudan—and we praise God for the ways our partners bring **GIFTS TO LIVE ON** – gifts of compassion and healing.

