

Joining Hands with Dewitt Community Church



DeWitt Community Church (DCC) has been supporting HOPE for Ariang's work for over four years. Before moving to East Africa, Gabriel and Elizabeth Deng's family were part of this Syracuse New York church. Over the years, congregants heard Gabriel's inspiring life story and his example of hope and resilience in the face of difficulty.

After supporting HOPE for Ariang for so many years, DCC decided to send a team of four to Ariang, South Sudan as part of our first Ambassador Trip. The primary purpose of this trip was for DCC representatives to see, hear, experience, and learn about the people and context that we work in, to then share this with the wider DeWitt Community Church community and be a "bridge" between DCC and Ariang.

"The improvement of understanding is for two ends: first, our own increase of knowledge; secondly, to enable us to deliver that knowledge to others." John Locke

Our Guests Arrive in Nairobi



Our guests, Quinn, Erica, Kim, and Elizabeth arrived in Nairobi Kenya airport on June 17, 2019, where they were received by our HOPE leadership team. With two hours before the connecting flight to Juba (the capital of South Sudan), the HOPE's leadership team started to introduce the guests to simple field logistics such as what to expect, Dinka greetings, cultural interactions, and self-care for staying healthy.

As one strong team, we boarded the plane to Juba and we were received by HOPE's founding Director (Gabriel Deng) and Program Assistant (Mr. Paulino Wol). We rested in a hotel for one night where the team had the chance to dine by the Nile River and early the next morning we proceeded to Wau (around one hour by plane). From there, the team embarked on a (bumpy) four-hour road trip to Ariang.



As the car approached Ariang, the team was warmly received with hugs, songs, and ululations by men, women, and children of Ariang. Our guests quickly got a chance to practice local greetings like **cheebak** (*hello*). There was an explosion of joy wherever we stopped and whoever we talked to welcomed us and our guests with open arms.

With time elapsing quite fast, we helped our guests to unpack their boxes which contained gifts and program items needed for the rest of the week.

Meeting Ariang School Students and Staff



The next day, we took our guests to Ariang school to meet the students and staff members. Ariang School has a student population of 1,100+ (50% girls) and 21 teachers. The school has grades one to eight but student distribution across grades is quite unbalanced. Lower grades have the highest number of students per class (for example, grade one alone has close to 300 students).

On arrival at the school, students and staff members burst into welcoming songs and poems to welcome our guests. It was amazing to see girls taking lead in many of these events.

We then took our guests to the staff room for a brief introduction and debriefing session. Many teachers across South Sudan have no college or formal training. There is also a huge imbalance of teacher-student ratio. In Ariang School, for example, teacher-student ratio is 1:58.

Teachers are also underpaid with most of them earning less than \$50 per month from the government. Going around the classrooms, our guests were amazed by the fact that a teacher attends to over fifty students with only textbooks, a chalkboard, and a few charts. To help reduce this kind of lesson delivery stress, our guests brought math-teaching equipment, anchor charts, and stencils to help teachers and students to easily duplicate teaching resources. They



held a half-day teacher-capacity-building workshop and shared new strategies with the teachers on how to deliver lessons effectively using the anchor charts. The workshop gave the teachers and opportunity to each create their own appropriate anchor chart. All the teachers praised the newly donated supplies and assistance in making the charts.

Another key component of this trip was to promote recreation and establish a game club at Ariang School because we know that recreation and games are an important component in a child's social and physical development. The guests brought thirty sets of checkers board games (many of which were made by the DCC sewing group). They trained a number of classroom teachers and over 100 students how to play.

In the spirit of recreation and play, the DCC and HFA team challenged the students to play a few sets of volleyball, a well-liked game by many Ariang students.



During the final day at Ariang School, the team helped us distribute seventy-three backpacks and solar lanterns to all of our grade eight students. This is part of our ongoing educational welfare programs. These tools help our grade eight students prepare and sit for their important National Primary exams later this year.



Our visitors talking to students after distributing their educational gifts.

Visiting Mading and Nyieth Primary Schools

Ariang Primary has two sister schools: **Mading** and **Nyieth**. These two schools have a total of 950 students. Together with the guests, we distributed books and pens to every teacher and student and conducted a needs assessment with the aim of increasing our support to upgrade the general welfare of both the teachers and students.

A closer look at Mading Primary:



Mading Primary has neither offices nor classrooms. The school has Grade 1 - 6 and all teaching happens under trees. Students sit on rocks and write from their laps. The teacher-student ratio is unbalanced and teachers lack formal teacher training. During rainy seasons, learning stops until the season is over.



With students of Mading Primary. The pictures show a part of the students parading outside while others show teachers delivering lessons under trees.

A closer look at Nyieth Primary: Nyieth faces a lot of challenges as well. Nyieth has grades 1 to 7. It has a few classrooms but some classes are taught in a nearby church building. A block of three classes had its roof completely destroyed by a storm a few years back. The roof remains unrepaired to date, due to lack of funding. The teacher-student ratio is also unbalanced. **THERE ARE TWO FEMALE TEACHERS** at Nyeith primary, and this is a huge achievement and the news are worth spreading.

It is increasingly important that we increase our support to these schools. Both Mading and Nyieth have grades extending to grade six and seven respectively. Once the students finish, they walk several miles to Ariang primary so that they can continue their education through grade eight. This is one of the reasons the dropout rate at both schools is high (and the situation

is largely like that in the county). Those who manage to come to Ariang school often get a chance to finish primary eight and a possible high school scholarship.

These school visits reached a total of 2,150 students and teachers and empowered them with educational gifts that we hope will encourage their continued learning. HOPE for Ariang is developing new and more meaningful ways to partner with Mading and Nyieth schools in the near future.

Meeting the community



A group of women entertaining our guests through folk music. Music and poetry are deeply ingrained in the culture and traditions of many Ariang communities. They are largely their way of passing history to the next generations and welcoming important visitors to the village.

Throughout the week, we took our guests around the villages of Ariang so that they could mingle, share stories, and learn from the community. The guests were able to witness and even participate in some food collection and preparation, collecting water, canoeing at the river, and

tending to sheep and cattle.



This is a formal music and dance team of Ariang village. They practice every so often so that they are all up to date when it comes to entertaining visitors in the village. This is a great way forward to think of how they can earn from music and dances as they entertain tourists and general visitors to the village.

On the last evening, the DCC team surprised the community with a gift to the local youth football (soccer) club. They provided them with new team jerseys, balls, and goalie gloves. The youth and their organizers were greatly encouraged by their generosity. Community sports and recreation like football clubs play a tremendous role in engaging young people in positive activities and helps reduce other reckless behavior.



We met with the Madul football club now know us Elizabeth Gabriel Football Club. We gave out soccer balls and football jerseys to the club.

Many people spoke highly of the efforts of HOPE for Ariang to empower the community through education and providing clean drinking water. The community did not hesitate to recognize the efforts that HOPE is making **to sponsor students to join high school** after graduating from Ariang Primary; **women and girls empowerment through menstrual hygiene management and business training opportunities**; **water and sanitation hygiene (WASH)**; and even taking visitors to the village to meet them.

We're grateful to DeWitt Community Church for sending these four ambassadors to see, experience, and learn about the people of Ariang and HFA's partnership with the community to provide access to education and opportunities for children and youth.