

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORIES FROM SOUTH SUDAN

Background

Across South Sudan, years of conflict have left deep and visible scars on communities, manifesting in widespread trauma, fractured relationships, displacement, and persistent mistrust. Yet, within these same communities, a quieter but powerful transformation is taking place. From 2022 to 2025, the African Council of Religious Leaders - *Religions for Peace* (ACRL-RfP), in partnership with the Interreligious Council of South Sudan (IRCSS), implemented the *Trust and Peace: Peacebuilding from the Ground* project to respond to these challenges.

This initiative placed local actors at the center of peacebuilding efforts, recognizing that sustainable peace must be rooted in community ownership. Insider Reconcilers, religious leaders, Women of Faith, interfaith youth, and selected state actors were equipped with tools in trauma healing, dialogue facilitation, and reconciliation processes. These actors did not merely participate in peacebuilding, they led it, navigating complex social dynamics and working within fragile environments to rebuild trust and restore dignity.

The Most Significant Change stories emerging from this work provide rich, evidence-based insights into how transformation occurs in practice. They capture not only outcomes, but also the processes, struggles, and breakthroughs that define community-led peacebuilding in contexts affected by conflict.

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY 1 (Women Leading Forgiveness Beyond Loss)

1. **Title:** *Mrs. Magret Barsaba Imani – Women of Faith Coordinator - South Sudan*



Mrs. Margaret Barsaba addressing delegates at a High-Level UN meeting

“I could not forgive them. They killed my two sons. How could I ever sit with their tribe?”

In our Most Significant Change story series, we highlight women who choose healing and peace in places deeply scarred by war.

Margaret Barsaba has worked with the Women of Faith Network in South Sudan for five years. Like many others, she was personally affected by conflict. However, participating in trauma healing and reconciliation trainings transformed her role from a survivor into a peace builder.

“The training gave me courage and capacity,” Margaret explains. “I began calling other women, training them, and travelling to Juba, Malakal, Bor, and other areas to reach sisters affected by war.”

One of the most significant moments came when Margaret and her team accompanied a woman whose two sons had been killed in the conflict. The woman completely rejected any engagement with the community linked to the perpetrators and refused all reconciliation efforts. She was also suffering from illness and deep emotional pain.

“We sat with her, shared scripture, prayed, and gently spoke about forgiveness,” Margaret recalls. “It was an emotional moment. We all cried.”

After sustained accompaniment and prayer, the woman chose to forgive. Three months later, when Margaret returned to Malakal, she found a remarkable change.

“She was happy, healthy, and interacting freely with everyone,” Margaret says. “The bitterness was gone.”

This transformation became a catalyst. Women trained through the network began cascading messages of forgiveness to their families. Husbands and wives started praying together. Women from different communities began collecting firewood together without fear. Peace gradually took root in homes, displacement camps, churches, markets and later in entire neighborhoods.

“We always say peace must start in the home,” Margaret explains. “And that is exactly what we witnessed.”

The impact expanded further. The network was invited to churches, prisons, hospitals, and to assist street children. Women in prison accepted messages of forgiveness and faith, including one woman who, after years of accompaniment in jail, was later released and came to visit the movement. Street children were mobilized, prayed for, and linked with schools and technical training through collaboration with chiefs, church leaders, and the Ministry of Education.

“The future of our country depends on these children,” Margaret emphasizes.

In recognition of her leadership, Margaret handed over her role as Women Chairperson in December 2024 and was elected Treasurer of the Interreligious Council of South Sudan.

“I am proud of how far we have come,” she says. “This work is now recognized, sustained, and growing for the greater good and lasting peace in South Sudan.”

Mrs. Magret Barsaba with the South Sudan Women of Faith (SSWOF) during an initiative to help street children reconnect with their families in Juba



MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY 2 (Youth as Frontline Healers)

2. Title: Nuela Henry Jackson Ali, Interfaith Youth, Juba



“Trauma made her stop eating. She could not even speak about what had happened.”

In our Most Significant Change Story series, we highlight young people who turn personal pain into pathways of healing for others.

Nuela Henry Jackson Ali is a youth of faith based in Juba. She works as a cashier and serves in her church’s praise and worship team. After participating in trauma healing training, she gained skills that reshaped how she responds to suffering within her community.

“The training helped me understand trauma and build resilience,” Nuela explains. “It also gave me confidence to support others.”

One case that deeply affected her involved a young woman preparing for graduation. Her gown and savings were stolen shortly before the ceremony. Due to the economic crisis, replacing them was impossible.

“She was devastated,” Nuela recalls. “She stopped eating and withdrew completely.”

Nuela chose to walk closely with her. Drawing from her own experience of loss and separation, when her belongings were also stolen after a family conflict, she shared her story honestly and patiently.

“I did not rush her healing,” she explains. “I stayed, listened, and encouraged her that life does not end with loss.”

Over time, the young woman began to recover. She started eating again, engaging with others, and regaining hope.

“This journey taught me that trauma can damage emotions, the body, and the spirit,” Nuela says. “But healing is possible when people do not isolate themselves.”

Today, Nuela continues to cascade trauma healing skills in her community, even in environments where pain runs deep and outreach is difficult.

“My message is simple,” she concludes. “Do not distance yourself when trauma comes. Speak, connect, and allow others to walk with you toward healing.”



Ms. Nuela with fellow Interfaith Youth from South Sudan in a group discussion developing their action plan

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY 3 (Faith Leadership in Preventing Division)

3.Title: *Sheikh Peter Yai Deng Secretary General of the Interreligious Council of South Sudan (IRCSS)*



Sheikh Peter addressing the Insider Reconcilers during a Mentorship Visit at the African Inland Church in Juba

Upper Nile

“Violence was spreading fast, and people were beginning to speak in the language of tribe instead of truth.”

In our Most Significant Change Story series, we highlight faith leaders who step into moments of crisis to prevent deeper division and protect community cohesion.

Sheikh Peter is a religious leader based in Upper Nile State. He serves as the Secretary General of IRCSS and Sheikh at his local mosque and works closely with interfaith networks committed to peacebuilding. After engaging in trauma healing and reconciliation trainings and initiatives, he strengthened his capacity to analyze conflict dynamics and respond with timely, preventive messaging.

“The training helped me distinguish between political conflict and ethnic identity,” Sheikh Peter explains. “It gave me the tools to calm fears before they turned into hatred.”

In early 2025, Nasir County became the center of violent clashes involving the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces and armed youth groups, associated with the Nuer White Army. The fighting led to casualties, displacement, and widespread rumours that risked framing the crisis as an ethnic confrontation between Nuer and neighbouring communities.

“People were receiving messages that made it sound like one community was fighting another,” Sheikh Peter recalls. “Fear was rising, and fear can quickly become revenge.”

Recognizing the danger of tribalism, Sheikh Peter joined other religious leaders to intervene early. Drawing from his training and his pastoral responsibility, he used sermons to clarify that the violence was rooted in political and security disputes, not inherent hostility between ethnic groups. He emphasized shared faith values, the sanctity of life, and the responsibility to protect civilians regardless of identity.

“We reminded our congregations that Islam and Christianity both teach the protection of neighbours,” he explains. “Conflict between armed actors must not become hatred between communities.”

Beyond the mosque, Sheikh Peter collaborated with interfaith partners to spread consistent peace messaging. Through local radio broadcasts and community dialogues, they corrected misinformation and discouraged inflammatory narratives circulating on social media.

“We acted quickly to counter rumours,” he says. “If misinformation is not challenged, it becomes belief.”

Over time, these coordinated efforts helped reduce the risk of retaliatory attacks in surrounding areas. While the political tensions remained complex, communities resisted calls to mobilize along ethnic lines.

“This experience showed me how easily political violence can be manipulated into tribal conflict,” Sheikh Peter reflects. “But it also showed me that timely, united faith leadership can prevent escalation.”

Today, Sheikh Peter continues to promote conflict-sensitive preaching and intercommunal dialogue across South Sudan in Juba, Upper Nile and other conflict affected areas

“My message is clear,” he concludes. “Do not allow political crises to divide communities along tribal lines. Seek truth, protect one another, and choose peace before anger decides for you.”



Conclusion and Forward Outlook

The *Voices of Courage* stories demonstrate that even in the most challenging environments, meaningful change is possible when local actors are empowered and supported. They provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of community-led approaches and highlight the importance of sustained investment in grassroots peacebuilding.

As ACRL-RfP moves forward, the priority remains to amplify these lessons, strengthen partnerships, and support the replication of successful models across South Sudan and the wider region.

The call to action is clear. Peace must be nurtured intentionally, supported collectively, and sustained through continued commitment to dialogue, inclusion, and healing.

Hashtags:

#VoicesofCourage #Peacebuilding #SouthSudan #TraumaHealing #WomenOfFaith
#InterfaithYouth #SocialCohesion #FaithInAction #StoriesOfChange