

# Midlands Voices

## When Easter seemed far away, Sudanese refugees taught joy

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We come to Easter transformed by a book and the people around the world who shared it with us.

What began as a faculty-staff Lenten reading group on Creighton University's campus evolved into a global reading group from 11 countries and five continents.

Connected by Creighton's Online Ministries Web site, 50 people around the world read the same book week by week through Lent. They reflected on it through the Web site, leading us to understand the global church in a new way and offering us tremendous hope.

It centered on the book "They Come Back Singing" by the Rev. Gary Smith, S.J. (Loyola Press, 2008). This remarkable book is Father Smith's journal during his years of working with Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda.

As the Jesuit priest wrote about his six years in these refugee camps, he brought us into the experience of these people of hope. These refugee camps are places where people must search for water each day and share a subsistence meal.

Their stories of suffering and pain, of death and tremendous loss, due to the insanity of war are overwhelming. In the midst of experiences none of us could imagine surviving, they showed us incredible joy as they sang and danced their prayers of thanks to God for the gift of life itself.

Lori in Paris wrote to our Web site, "I have been so moved by these stories... overwhelmed by the ways in which the Spirit is active in this world and can bring joy to even the darkest places."

From Bangalore, India: "We find our redemption by honoring our relationships with God, neighbors and nature."

Carol in Massachusetts wrote, "I am learning that there is suffering that cannot be remedied; however, the suffering can be shared."

From Serbia, where Ivana was reading the book with her country in turmoil: "Chapters of this week showed me that we are not alone, we do not pray alone. A

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community of believers is praying, whether we are in Africa, in (the) U.S. or anywhere."

The experience of the global reading group has left us full of hope, even after encountering so much sadness and deprivation in the refugee camps.

Through the book, we met people in situations we never imagined. And in the process, we experienced their joy and inner peace. Something in them passed a barrier we normally never have to face. We saw surrender, trust in God, support for one another and Spirit-filled community prayer events.

We also met a simple priest who encountered his own powerlessness and his inability to do much more than be there. He

came away from almost every personal exchange having received more than he gave.

We wrestled with a sense that this situation was so big, so complicated, so absent from world attention that there was absolutely nothing we could do.

But the posts on our Web site each week of Lent moved beyond fatalism and despair, because the people we met in the book showed us powerful images of the strength of the human spirit, the incredible self-sacrificing love of parents in the most dire of circumstances and the trust in God to which people came when they had nowhere else to turn.

One reader in Ohio wrote to the Web site, "I realized more deeply that though we are separated by millions of miles and diverse cultures, in the matters of the heart the Sudanese refugees and I share more similarities than differences."

Easter joy is more than gratitude for freedom from suffering. It is more than the natural renewal of nature's revival each spring in the Northern Hemisphere. For the Christian, Easter joy comes from the faith we saw in the Sudanese people 'we have come to know and love.

The one who entered our world, walked our path, suffered rejection and experienced even our death is now alive forever. And we, too, have the promise of life forever.

We saw an Easter joy that renewed us. These poor, almost invisible people, whom we might have been tempted to pity, became our ministers during Lent. With voices made stronger by the singing of refugees, we sing, "Alleluia!"

■ The Online Ministries site at Creighton University may be found at <http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/online.html>.