**The Benjamins: A Story of Accompaniment**

by Claire Cifaloglio and Rob Abbot

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Ruben Benjamin’s life was in danger.  He was a civil servant in the south of Sudan who resisted the suffering imposed on his people by a repressive government.  In 1991, he and his wife, Agar Mayen, their three children, and Ruben’s sister fled to Egypt.  Their story of accompaniment started there.

Life in Egypt was hard.  The Benjamins lived in a tiny apartment and had little food and no jobs. An Episcopal church there welcomed them; Agar started a Bible study and prayer group at the church.

More people from Sudan were making their way to Egypt.  Agar started preparing food at the church for the newest arrivals.  In her apartment, she shared her floor and whatever food she had.

Agar went to the hospital in labor with their third child.  She and Ruben could not afford to pay for the delivery.  The custom at the time was for the hospital to keep the baby until the family could pay.  Someone from her church--a woman named Susan whom she didn’t know well--came to pay the ransom.  Agar named her baby Susana.

Agar and Ruben became more involved with the church -- providing food, clothes, and guidance for the newly arrived.  Church officials institutionalized these efforts and hired Agar to lead the mission.  Ruben took a job organizing and addressing the needs of new refugees -- not only those from Sudan but from other parts of the world.

When Agar found out that the US had accepted her family for resettlement as refugees in the US, she packed her bag: one change of clothing for each person and three cooking pots.  She left everything else for those staying behind in Cairo.

As soon as the family -- now including five children and Agar’s brother, William -- arrived in the US in 1996, Agar realized that the US was not the paradise it was rumored to be.  The apartment provided by the resettlement agency was sparsely furnished, and -- as luck would have it -- without pots and pans in the kitchen!  Ruben and Agar were afraid of the world outside the apartment -- fast cars and people speaking many languages, perhaps ready to rob or hurt them.

When no one from the resettlement agency showed up for three days, the family became desperate to get milk for the children.  Agar’s brother went out and, by happenstance, met a woman, Simba, on the street who was from the northern part of Sudan and spoke a common language.  She showed him where to buy milk and asked to meet the family.  She provided the Benjamins with much needed information -- and friendship from that day until she passed away years later.

Agar and Ruben were relieved that Ruben’s life was no longer in danger, but they could not imagine their future -- a future without the important connection to their extended family.  As they adjusted to life in their adopted home, they confirmed their priorities: a stable home, a job for Ruben, and education for the children.

The PAX community encountered the Benjamins about three weeks after they arrived in Arlington.  Ruben and Agar were invited to tell their story at a PAX gathering.  Agar reminded me that, on their first visit to the Benjamin home, PAX members sat on a mattress in the middle of the floor.  She saw this as a kindness, a blessing, and a part of God’s plan for them. The Benjamins decided to open their hearts and minds to PAX. From that moment to this, PAX members have provided friendship and guidance as well as material and spiritual support. Agar earned her driver’s license and enrolled in English, and later, nursing classes.  Ruben worked first in maintenance, then in healthcare, and finally as an interpreter in the Iraq War.  Two more children were born.

In 2000-2001, the US took in many of the Lost Boys of Sudan [boys who fled the civil war in that country], and Arlington County hired Agar to assist in the settlement of some of them.  She became “mother” to the boys.  She helped them with the usual things -- food, clothing, and shelter -- but she and Ruben gave more.  They took the boys shopping, gave them a warm meal, boarded them in their home when apartments were not ready, and connected them to the local community of South Sudanese people.  Many of these boys continue to call and visit Agar.  They still call her “mother.”

PAX members helped the Benjamins with family budgeting, tuition payments for the children, and citizenship preparation for the adults.  When it became clear that the family needed a bigger space, PAX members went house hunting and found a larger house in Dale City that, with financial assistance from PAX, the Benjamins could afford to buy.  PAX members helped them move, furnish the house, and tame the back yard.

The lives of the Benjamins are rich and full. Their children have excelled in school, graduating from Cornell, William and Mary, the University of Virginia, and Drexel. Agar earned certification as a Licensed Practical Nurse and now works as a home nurse for children with complex health problems.

Ruben and Agar became US citizens.  Their house became temporary home to Agar’s mother and various brothers.  They host visitors from South Sudan on a regular basis.

In 2011, Ruben returned to Sudan to assist in the referendum that led to the creation of an independent South Sudan. After several years, he became the ambassador to Israel from South Sudan. The Benjamin family dreams of peace and reconciliation in South Sudan.  But as their daughter Susana says, “our leaders have failed us”; the people of the world’s newest country are divided by tribal identity and continue to fight one another instead of coming together to build their country.  When ten people in Agar’s clan were killed recently in an attack, she and Ruben called the chiefs and governors of the clans they know and asked them not to seek revenge for those deaths.

Ruben hopes to continue working and to be united with his family one day in South Sudan.  Agar is involved in her church in Woodbridge, which has a large Sudanese membership. She wants to get her RN degree and, when her last child finishes college, to teach nursing in South Sudan.  Even now, when Agar visits South Sudan, she goes laden with medicines and medical supplies.  She sets up a mini-clinic in her home there and tends to the nursing needs of her neighbors. The Benjamin children are poised to do their share to make the world a better place.

Agar says she is nourished by her faith in God.  This faith led Ruben and Agar to help others in Egypt and to continue helping others even as the PAX community helped them.  There are no limits on accompaniment.

**Epilogue, 2022:**

As of 2022, PAX members still help with the mortgage, as Ruben works for unity in the government of South Sudan and gets paid quite poorly.

Rob and Claire keep connected and help as needed. The Rubens help us remember that we are one big family.

PAX has also helped three Syrian refugee families (tutoring, seeking and paying for dental care, and helping with them prepare for citizenship exams). With PAX’s Syrian Family Fund mission group, these families also know that PAX is and has been there for them in many ways.