



# Reaching the Nations

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



## South Sudan

Population: 11.56 millions (#75 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

### Geography

**Area:** 644,329 square km. Landlocked in Central Africa, South Sudan borders Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic. Floodplains, swamps, and pastureland along the Nile River and its tributaries constitute most the terrain and are subject to tropical climate. Wildlife flourishes in South Sudan in the swamps and floodplains that are generally sparsely populated. Flooding, drought, and wildfires are natural hazards. Environmental issues include pollution, deforestation, wildlife conservation, and improper disposal of waste. South Sudan is divided into ten administrative states, although there are plans to institute thirty-two administrative states. The status of whether Abyei State pertains to Sudan or South Sudan remains undetermined.

### Peoples

Dinka: 35.8%

Nuer: 15.6%

Other: 48.6%

The South Sudanese population exhibits extreme ethnic diversity, with the largest ethnic group comprising only 35.8% of the national population. Ethnic groups in the country pertain either to Nilotic, Sudanese, or Semitic-Hamitic ethnic families. Pertaining to the Nilotic group, the Dinka are the largest ethnic group and are estimated to number nearly four million. Most ethnic groups rely on subsistence agriculture and reside in rural areas. Other major ethnic groups include the Shilluk, Azande, Bari, Kakwa, Kuku, Murle, Mandari, Didinga, Ndogo, Bviri, Lndi, Anuak, Bongo, Lango, Dungotona, Acholi, Baka, and Fertit.

**Population:** 10,561,244 (July 2020)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 2.7% (2020)

**Fertility Rate:** 5.54 children born per woman (2020)

**Life Expectancy:** 54.6 male, 56.5 female (2020)

**Languages:** Dinka dialects (13%), Nuer (7%), Bari (6%), Zande (4%), other or unspecified (70%). Arabic and English are the official languages. Only Dinka has over one million speakers (1.35 million). Arabic is spoken by 3.1 million as a first or second language.

**Literacy:** 34.5% (2018)

## History

Most of the tribes that populated South Sudan settled the region a millennium ago and maintained self-rule until the late nineteenth century. Egypt conquered Sudan during the nineteenth century but only maintained a few outposts in the south during this period. Slave raiders would at times venture into the south and carry away indigenous peoples as slaves in the north. The United Kingdom annexed Sudan in the late nineteenth century but had little involvement in the south and restricted its administration primarily to northern areas and Khartoum. Sudan achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1956, but civil war enveloped the country between the Muslim north and animist and Christian south for nearly the entire remainder of the twentieth century due to ethno-religious differences, repression of non-Arab and non-Muslim peoples, and debate over the representation of Islam in government. Violence was most severe in the south, where an estimated two million perished and four million were displaced between 1983 and 2005. In 2002, Sudan granted South Sudan the right to self-determination, and in 2005, the north and south signed a peace treaty ending the civil war. In January 2011, an independence referendum was held for South Sudan in which 98.83% of South Sudanese voters opted for independence from the north, resulting in the formation of an independent nation named the Republic of South Sudan in July 2011.<sup>[1]</sup> Civil war persisted between oppositional forces and the national government for most of the 2010s, resulting in a major humanitarian crisis that resulted in millions of displaced people. Recurrent peace agreements have failed to resolve the political crisis, particularly between President Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar. In early 2020, a peace deal had been reached although it is unclear whether this agreement will result in sustainable peace and stability.

## Culture

Tribalism, war, and violence have dominated local culture for the past half century as a result of one of the longest civil wars in African history. The current civil war since independence has further worsened the situation. The civil wars have been extremely devastating on South Sudanese populations. For example, Latter-day Saint senior missionary couples reported in 2008 that in some areas most adults perished in the war, and there were none of the rising generation who knew how to grow traditional crops and engage in subsistence agriculture.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$1,600 (2017) [2.7% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.413 (2018)

**Corruption Index:** 12 (2019)

The economy is largely undeveloped, and most of the labor force is employed in subsistence farming and agriculture. Petroleum reserves and arable farmland are the primary natural resources and have been poorly utilized and exploited. War, poverty, political instability, corruption, and landlocked location have limited economic development and international trade. Two-thirds of the population lives below the poverty line. The government is highly dependent on oil revenues. Corruption is perceived as widespread and present in all areas of society. In 2019, South Sudan was ranked only higher than Somalia in regards to perceived corruption.

## Faiths

Christianity: 60%

Indigenous religions: 33%

Islam: 6%

Other: 1%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 4,280,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 39,857 – 257

Jehovah's Witnesses – 1,595 – 32

Latter-day Saints – less than 100 – 0

## Religion

The religious demographics of the South Sudanese population have not been well studied due to war and political instability lasting for decades, but many estimate that Christians account for more than half of the population. Christianity has rapidly spread in South Sudan since the early 1990s. Most Christians incorporate indigenous beliefs and practices into their worship. Roman Catholics outnumber Protestants approximately two to one. Followers of indigenous religious beliefs account for most of the remaining half of the population, whereas Muslims appear to constitute a small minority. Religious organizations have been a key source of stability to South Sudanese during the current conflict.[\[2\]](#)

## Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is generally upheld by the government. Registration with the government requires a \$3,500 fee. Although the government mandates religious groups must register to operate in the country, this requirement is not strictly enforced. There are no proselytizing restrictions and no penalties for defaming religion or apostasy. However, there have been repeated instances in which religious aid workers and those attending religious meetings have been attacked or killed by government or opposition forces due to the ongoing civil war.[\[3\]](#)

## Largest Cities

Urban: 20.2% (2020)

Juba, **Wau**, **Malakal**, **Uwayl**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

One of the four largest cities has an LDS congregation. 9% of the national population resides in the four most populous cities.

## **Church History**

The first Sudanese Latter-day Saints joined the Church in Europe, the United States, and Australia, but no Latter-day Saint missionary activity in South Sudan occurred until the late 2000s. In late 2007 and early 2008, reports began to circulate among members and missionaries in Uganda of large numbers of self-identified Latter-day Saints perhaps numbering in the hundreds who were unofficially meeting in the name of the Church. To investigate these reports and under the direction of the Africa Southeast Area Presidency, Uganda Kampala Mission President Christensen became the first Church authority to visit South Sudan in July 2008. President Christensen traveled to a small town in eastern South Sudan named Nyamlel where approximately 2,500 individuals assembled to learn more about the Church. Due to flooding in the region prior to the visit by President Christensen, many of those interested in the Church were unable to travel to the meeting from nearby villages. At the time, there were six or seven congregations of self-identified Latter-day Saints in the Nyamlel area who likely initially heard about the Church from Sudanese converts baptized abroad. President Christensen informed the assembled congregation during his visit that the Church would not be immediately established in South Sudan but that the congregation was to prepare and learn more about the Church in order to be baptized and for official congregations to be organized. Several local leaders were provided with Church literature and taught to teach others in the area. South Sudan was assigned to the Uganda Kampala Mission in late 2008 or early 2009. The registration of the Church in South Sudan was approved by the Church in the spring of 2009. Several members from neighboring East African nations like Kenya were residing in Juba in 2008, and by November 2009, the first official congregation was organized in Juba. Several investigators in Juba learned about the Church through a Canadian member who shared the Gospel with them in Khartoum over a decade before and many were baptized in 2009 and 2010. In 2010, full-time missionaries reported that an additional group of members operated in Akobo. Senior missionaries also briefly served in South Sudan during the early 2010s. However, the Church eventually discontinued the Juba Branch by the mid-2010s due to civil war. Missionary efforts among South Sudanese occurred in several countries during the 2010s, such as Ethiopia, Uganda,[\[4\]](#) and the United States. In early 2020, there was no official Church presence in South Sudan. In 2020, South Sudan was assigned to the newly organized Africa Central Area.

## **Membership Growth**

### **Church Membership: ~100 (2019)**

No official figures for Church membership in South Sudan have ever been reported. Total Church membership is estimated at approximately one hundred. In 2020, approximately one in 105,000 was estimated to be a Latter-day Saint.

## **Congregational Growth**

### **Branches: 0 Groups: 0 (2019)**

One branch operated in Juba under the Uganda Kampala Mission from 2009 until the mid-2010s. Member groups operated in additional cities such as Akobo and Nyamlel, but it is unclear whether these congregations were officially organized congregations under the Uganda Kampala Mission or self-established, unofficial groups of prospective Latter-day Saints. No member groups appeared to meet in the country as of 2019.

## **Activity and Retention**

Active membership in early 2011 was estimated to range between fifty and seventy-five, or 50%–75% of total church membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture:** English, Arabic.

All Church scriptures and most church materials are available in Arabic.

## **Meetinghouses**

The Juba Branch appeared to meet in a rented space whereas other groups met outdoors or in members' homes.

## **Health and Safety**

Safety is a major concern that has led the Church to move very cautiously into South Sudan despite abundant opportunities for rapid membership and congregational growth. One of the members in the Akobo Group was killed in a nighttime attack in late 2009 but did not appear to be targeted because of religion. Those meeting in the Church's name in the Nyamlel area during the late 2000s took care of hundreds of freed child slaves from the Darfur region. Civil war in the 2010s prevented visits from mission leaders. Most in South Sudan do not have access to clean water. HIV/AIDS has infected 2.5% of the population. Tropical diseases are common, and living standards are very low.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

The Church has conducted at least one dozen humanitarian and development projects in South Sudan.<sup>[5]</sup> Latter-day Saint senior missionary couples began planning humanitarian and development projects in late 2008. In 2009, bore holes for ten wells were drilled in South Sudan, wheelchairs were donated, and school supplies for orphaned children in the areas by Nyamlel were distributed. The Church has also provided emergency relief for the victims of religious violence in Akobo and Chikol.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects**

## **Religious Freedom**

The Church benefits from widespread religious freedom in South Sudan, as there are no proselytism restrictions, and Latter-day Saints and other Christians may worship and assemble freely. There are no restrictions on foreign missionaries operating in the country, but safety concerns may prompt area and mission leaders to only assign African missionaries to South Sudan once greater political stability is established. Widespread violence and the Church's recent establishment in the country appear primarily responsible for the Church's decision to discontinue the Juba Branch as it was likely too dangerous for mission leaders to visit to mentor and support the fledgling branch.

## **Cultural Issues**

Poverty, tribalism, and war have been the predominant influences on South Sudanese society for decades, creating serious economic challenges for locals to obtain an education and stable employment. Indigenous beliefs are widespread, and Latter-day Saint teaching and proselytism approaches will need to adapt to the understanding and religious background of non-Christian animists and syncretic Christian-animists. The Church may face challenges with prospective converts retaining

local religious customs and practices following their baptism in the Church that could lead to some doctrinal integrity issues. The degree of member-missionary work exhibited by Sudanese in sharing Latter-day Saint teachings with friends and family and high rates of receptivity to the Church are major cultural advantages that favor long-term, self-sustaining growth. Literacy rates are low and present additional challenges for training illiterate or inadequately literate members for local leadership and administration. Opportunities for humanitarian and development work are immense and in many areas take precedence over proselytism to meet basic humanitarian needs.

## **National Outreach**

The Church in South Sudan once operated one official congregation in Juba that potentially reached 5% of the national population if missionary activity occurred. However, no formal missionary efforts or Church operations have occurred in the country since the mid-2010s. Groups of self-identified Latter-day Saints in Akobo and Nyamlel offer opportunities to expand national outreach outside of Juba upon the decision by Church leaders to begin proselytism, assign full-time missionaries, and prepare and baptize investigators in these locations once conditions stabilize and safety concerns are mitigated. It is unclear whether these self-affiliated groups continue to operate or express interest in the Church as of early 2020.

Delays in opening South Sudan to formal proselytism are varied and complex and include the semi-official political status of the country until independence in 2011, low standards of living, political instability, religious and ethnic violence, isolation from mission headquarters in Uganda, and limited mission resources dedicated to the region. The lack of large cities and the majority of the South Sudanese population residing in rural locations will present major challenges for missionary paradigms that traditionally utilize full-time missionaries to effectively expand outreach over remote, large expanses of terrain that are sparsely populated. Continued emphasis on local members to perform missionary activity will most likely ensure growth and outreach that is widespread and minimally reliant on full-time missionary resources. The creation of the Africa Central Area in 2020 presents opportunities for greater oversight and resources to one day assign to South Sudan. However, the Uganda Kampala Mission will continue to service the entire country of Uganda and neighboring Rwanda. As a result, the Church has few resources to spare to open additional countries like South Sudan once conditions improve to the point that full-time missionaries can be assigned and regular mission leader visits can occur.

Sudanese populations in Uganda, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia provide opportunities for Sudanese to learn about the Church and spur leadership and missionary resources that can be later allocated to South Sudan. Outreach to Sudanese has generally been sporadic and uncoordinated, but efforts to systematically reach Sudanese worldwide may provide for accelerated growth and stability for the Church in South Sudan over the long run. One ward in the Kampala area of Uganda was predominantly South Sudanese according to full-time missionaries in the late 2010s. Also, South Sudanese-specific outreach has recently occurred in Salt Lake City, including Church meetings that partially hold services in South Sudanese languages. These efforts outside of South Sudan have also included online proselytism, such as through social media sites like Facebook.<sup>[7]</sup>

## **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

As of early 2011, member activity and convert retention rates were high, as the few recent converts who have joined the Church developed habitual church attendance prior to baptism and several known foreign Latter-day Saints attended church meetings in Juba. The dedication and devotion of many prospective Latter-day Saints is impressive, as it has endured for years despite no official church establishment and provides a fair outlook for future member activity and convert retention rates due to extended preparation of investigators for baptism and undertaking church responsibilities. The status of these members as of early 2020 is unclear. However, many have likely fled the country to neighboring Uganda. Member activity and convert retention challenges have occurred among Latter-day Saint Sudanese populations in the United States, as a Nuer-speaking branch once operated in Omaha, Nebraska in the mid-2000s but was discontinued due to low member activity rates and the apostasy of several members and leaders.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Reports from senior missionary couples visiting South Sudan have reported no significant ethnic integration issues among the local population, although ethnic conflict has been intense in the past with the Arab north. Tribalism presents ethnic integration

issues.

## **Language Issues**

Church services in the Juba Branch were conducted in English, and initial proselytizing efforts will likely occur in English for many years as at present there are no Church materials translated in local languages. Dinka and Nuer are likely candidates for prospective translations of Church materials due to their widespread use in South Sudan and use among local investigators and members.

## **Missionary Service**

There have been a few South Sudanese Latter-day Saints who have served a full-time mission from South Sudan, including some from the defunct Juba Branch.

## **Leadership**

All former local leaders appeared to be native South Sudanese Latter-day Saints or African members from neighboring nations. Fledgling local leadership appeared too few in numbers to sustain a Church presence during the civil war after independence. There is no official Church leadership in unofficially organized congregations. The Church tends to shy away from baptizing entire congregations because conversion is seen as an individual process that requires personal commitment to live the teachings of the gospel. The seeds of apostasy can also be subtly sown when converts join the Church en masse, as some previous leaders may desire to retain leadership authority or persuade others to disobey Church teachings based upon personal opinion. Due to some previous problems retaining converts who join the Church collectively, the Church prefers to develop local leadership and slowly and steadily add to its numbers. Once local membership and leadership can better address the needs and responsibilities of larger numbers of converts and a higher degree of self-sufficiency, greater flexibility is exhibited in permitting the baptism of larger groups of people.

## **Temple**

South Sudan is assigned to the Kinshasa Democratic Republic of the Congo Temple district, but the country will likely be reassigned to the Nairobi Kenya Temple once it is completed.

## **Comparative Growth**

South Sudan is among the few African countries where the Church once operated an official presence but currently does not maintain official congregations. Other countries or locations where the Church no longer has an official presence include Somalia and Mayotte. The number of self-identified Latter-day Saints during the late 2000s was comparable to Nigeria and Ghana in the 1970s prior to an official Church establishment in both countries. Receptivity to the Church by the general population is among the highest in Africa even though there is no official presence today. South Sudan is one of several African nations with groups of self-identified Latter-day Saints who have awaited an official Church establishment in their cities and villages.

Other missionary-oriented Christian groups have experienced rapid growth over the past two decades and operate in South Sudan despite civil war and political turmoil. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 8,062 members meeting in twenty churches in 2010. Both Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have reported rapid growth in recent years although each of these denominations have maintained a presence in the country for decades. Mainly mainstream Protestant denominations have reported rapid membership growth since the 1990s.



## Future Prospects

South Sudan presents valuable opportunities for future growth in the Church given a highly receptive population with several groups of prospective Latter-day Saints who appear to continue to await baptism. However, civil war, low living standards, and political instability all pose nearly insurmountable barriers to the Church's use of foreign full-time missionaries unless conditions markedly improve. The lack of a Church presence in South Sudan today despite the operation of a branch between late 2009 and the mid-2010s underscores the Church's struggles to develop greater self-sufficiency in local leadership that is capable to maintain the operation of basic congregations without the close support of foreign missionary manpower and leadership oversight. During the 2010s, other Christian denominations have achieved significant headway and growth through the use of local manpower and resources, whereas The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ceased its official operations. The lesson learned from the Church's brief operation in South Sudan is the need to find creative and effective methods to support local leaders who have minimal leadership experience in the Church and who may not be able to be met in person by mission or area leaders for considerable time due to safety concerns for foreigners. Use of technologies such as videoconferencing may be helpful to overcome these challenges in the largest cities such as Juba. Flexible strategies that foster organic growth and self-sufficiency in the Church are greatly needed in countries such as South Sudan which may remain unreached by traditional Latter-day Saint missionary paradigms for years or decades.

[1] "Background Note: Sudan," Bureau of African Affairs, 8 April 2011. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5424.htm>

[2] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Sudan." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 18 February 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-sudan/>

[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Sudan." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 18 February 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/south-sudan/>

[4] Swensen, Jason. "How 1 Sudanese Latter-day Saint convert survived a civil war and is on a mission 'to help the rest of humanity'." The Church News. 20 September 2019. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/members/2019-09-20/sudan-brigham-young-university-lds-convert-160910>

[5] "Latter-day Saint Charities." Accessed 29 February 2020. <https://lds-gis.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=e1e8234a88604e4e8f60d0f686441ac7>

[6] "Projects—Sudan," Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 3 May 2011. <http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607-1-2008-123,00.html>

[7] <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ChurchofJesusChristSouthSudanese/>