



# Prospective LDS Outreach Case Studies

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## Prospective LDS Outreach in South Sudan

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### Overview

South Sudan is a country in Central Africa inhabited by 11.6 million people. Prominent ethnic groups include the Dinka (35.8%) and Nuer (15.6%). Christians constitute the majority and there are sizable numbers of Muslims and followers of indigenous religions. English is the official language. There are 68 indigenous languages spoken in South Sudan although none of these languages appear to have more than one million speakers.<sup>[1]</sup> The LDS Church maintained an official branch in South Sudan from late 2009 until early 2015. Although senior missionary couples have been periodically assigned since the organization of the Juba Branch, there have been no young, full-time missionaries stationed in South Sudan despite the government upholding religious freedom, Christians constituting the majority, and abundant English-speaking African missionary manpower within Sub-Saharan Africa.

This case study reviews the Church's history of administrating South Sudan. Opportunities for initiating formal missionary efforts and achieving growth are explored. Challenges for assigning full-time missionaries and reestablishing official congregations are discussed. The growth of other proselytizing Christian groups that operate in South Sudan is summarized. Limitations to this case study are described and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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### LDS Background

South Sudanese converts have joined the Church for decades in Europe, the United States, and Australia. A Nuer-speaking branch briefly operated in Omaha, Nebraska in the mid-2000s to accommodate small numbers of Latter-day Saint converts from South Sudan. Missionaries have reported successes baptizing South Sudanese and organizing specialized member groups in some nations such as Ethiopia.

The Uganda Kampala Mission investigated reports received in 2008 regarding large gatherings of self-affiliated individuals who desired baptism and an official LDS establishment in their nation. Thousands of prospective members met with the mission president in mid-2008 in the Nyamliell area. Mission leaders distributed church literature to leaders of these unofficial congregations and emphasized that an official Church establishment may take many years due to the lack of an LDS presence in the country at the time. Mission leadership also identified a small group of investigators and converts in Juba where a member group began operating sometime in 2008 or 2009. The Church appeared to officially assign Sudan to the Uganda Kampala Mission in the late 2000s. The mission organized the first official branch, the Juba Branch, in November 2009. Full-time missionaries noted that a member group began operating in 2010 in Akobo.

Missionaries serving in the Uganda Kampala Mission noted that the first humanitarian senior couples began serving in Juba in the early 2010s, but these senior missionaries were removed shortly thereafter due to political instability and safety concerns. Although there appeared to be initial plans to assigning young, full-time missionaries shortly after the independence of South Sudan in July 2011, no young, proselytizing full-time missionaries have been assigned due to political instability and safety concerns. The Church called its first two full-time missionaries from the Juba Branch in March 2013.<sup>[2]</sup>

The outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war in late 2013 has posed additional safety and security concerns for the Church. Many have fled the country due to violence. The Church appeared to discontinue the Juba Branch in early 2015. A member group may continue to operate in Juba under the Uganda Kampala Mission Branch. The Church has classified its presence in South Sudan as sensitive. Although it is not entirely clear why the Church does not publish information on its operations in

South Sudan, political instability and security concerns appear responsible.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and a sizable number of missionary and gospel study materials into Standard Arabic. No translations of LDS materials are available in commonly spoken indigenous languages.

## Successes

The Uganda Kampala Mission has sought to maintain an LDS presence despite few members, isolation from mission headquarters, political instability, and low living standards. South Sudanese have appeared receptive to the LDS gospel witness in many areas of the world. Successes teaching and baptizing South Sudanese converts abroad appeared to play an important role in the organization of the Juba Branch in 2009. The organization of a branch and the calling of full-time missionaries from the branch despite no proselytizing full-time missionaries in South Sudan stands as a significant success that has only appeared possible due to the administrative support of mission leadership and the devotion of local membership.

## Opportunities

The government upholds religious freedom and there do not appear to be any legal barriers preventing an official LDS establishment. There have been no recent governmental or societal abuses of religious freedom that target non-Muslims.<sup>[3]</sup> Foreign missionaries appear able to serve in the country without challenges obtaining visas or acquiring appropriate documentation.

The reestablishment of the Church in Juba may occur quickly and with few challenges once the political situation in South Sudan stabilizes. Juba is the most populous city in South Sudan and is the city most easily accessed from outside the country. Mission leadership maintaining contact with members in Juba during the current civil war will be essential for the reintroduction of an official LDS congregation one day. The opening of multiple member groups in Juba once full-time missionaries are assigned presents good opportunities for the Church to adequately saturate Juba with LDS congregations. Similar church-planting tactics in West Africa have yielded excellent results due to easier accessibility to congregations, greater permeation of LDS outreach in urban areas, and focus on establishing a sense of LDS community.

South Sudanese have exhibited high receptivity to LDS outreach both within their native country and abroad. South Sudan is the nation that has had the largest number of self-affiliated, prospective members who have requested baptism within several decades. Thousands met with the mission president in 2008 to request more information on the Church, explore opportunities for church membership, and discuss the feasibility of establishing an LDS presence in the Nyamliell area. These conditions offer unique opportunities for the Church to achieve rapid growth and improve the self-sufficiency of the Church in the country, dependent on acceptable convert retention rates and adequate mission support in the local leadership development process.

There are many cities in South Sudan that appear favorable for the assignment of full-time missionaries and the organization of member groups. There are approximately three dozen large or medium-sized cities scattered throughout the country. These locations offer some of the best opportunities for growth due to high population densities in urban areas and better accessibility by mission leadership compared to rural areas. Cities that may number among the first to receive LDS outreach include Aweil, Wau, Yambio, and Yei. A map displaying the most populous cities in South Sudan can be found [here](#).

## Challenges

Civil war, political instability, and interethnic violence constitute the greatest barriers to an official LDS establishment and the assignment of full-time missionaries. South Sudan numbers among the most conflict-ridden nations in the world as civil war has plagued the region since the mid-twentieth century. Only brief periods of peace have been established within the past six decades. Two million perished and four million were displaced between 1983 and 2005. Hopes that a sovereign, independent South Sudan would secure long-term peace and prosperity have been dashed in the onset of the South Sudanese Civil war in late 2013. The central government has struggled to maintain order and subdue rebel groups since independence. Conflict between ethnic groups may pose challenges for integrating these ethnicities into the same congregations. These conditions pose significant safety concerns for the Church to assign foreign, full-time missionaries. Thus, the Church has never assigned young, proselytizing missionaries to South Sudan due to persistent and severe problems with interethnic violence and political instability.

Poverty and a lack of economic development present challenges for LDS growth. Approximately half the population lives below the poverty line and most are unemployed or underemployed. South Sudan's landlocked position and adversarial geopolitical relationship with Sudan have made the extraction and export of natural resources such as petroleum reserves and precious metals difficult. The nation has a poorly developed infrastructure and only 250 kilometers of paved roads.<sup>[4]</sup> Consequently the Church faces challenges for local members to obtain adequate employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency. Lacking national infrastructure presents difficulties for the Church to open additional areas to missionary activity and establish congregations outside of Juba due to challenges for mission leaders to regularly visit and supervise these congregations.

The discontinuation of the Juba Branch constitutes a significant barrier for the Church in South Sudan to achieve growth. The

closure of the branch appears attributed to active members leaving the city, or country altogether, due to the current civil war. Security concerns preventing regular mission president visits may have also contributed to the decision to close the branch. The process of reestablishing the Juba Branch may take many years, or decades, and will likely depend on the stabilization of the country, return of active members to Juba, and interest by mission and area presidencies to reestablish an LDS presence. The size of the Church in South Sudan did not appear sufficient to maintain an LDS presence with minimal mission president oversight prior to the outset of the current civil war. Thus, the Church closed its only official congregation due to these challenges.

It is unclear whether the Church has maintained contact with the thousands of prospective members in the Nyamliell area since the initial mission president visit in 2008. No convert baptisms have appeared to occur in Nyamliell. No member groups have appeared to function in the area. It is unclear whether these isolated groups of self-affiliated individuals continue to express a desire to join the LDS Church after so many years of delays in the Church extending mission outreach. Opportunities for growth in this location may have been lost due to civil unrest, distance from mission headquarters, a lack of LDS mission resources in the Uganda Kampala Mission, and hesitance from mission and area leaders to baptize large groups of converts without a previous LDS leadership base in the area.

The Church has not translated LDS materials or scriptures into commonly spoken indigenous languages such as Dinka, Nuer, Zande, Bari, or Acholi. A lack of basic gospel materials in these languages may pose challenges for local populations to understand the LDS gospel message and obtain a testimony. No translations of LDS materials in these languages may convey a sense that the Church is not compatible with local culture or society.

## **Comparative Growth**

The history of the Church in South Sudan has mirrored other Sub-Saharan African nations that have had a history of a brief LDS establishment followed by the cessation of official LDS activities due to political instability or civil war. The Church in Burundi organized a branch and assigned four African full-time missionaries in 1993.<sup>[5]</sup> However, the missionaries were withdrawn shortly thereafter due to the onset of civil war. The Church appeared to close the Bujumbura Branch around the year 2000 and did not reestablish a presence in Burundi until 2010. The Church in Somalia established a branch in the early 1980s for foreign members temporarily living in the country. However, the branch was discontinued by the late 1980s/early 1990s due to political instability prompting the evacuation of foreign members.

Essentially all missionary-focused Christian denominations with a worldwide presence report a sizable presence in South Sudan that completely dwarfs the size of the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 11.3% of the population and report the highest percentage of adherents among the Zande (25%), Dinka (16-18%), and Acholi (15%).<sup>[6]</sup> The Seventh Day Adventist Church has experienced rapid growth in South Sudan within the past decade. Adventists reported 6,270 members, 16 churches (large or well-established congregations), and 59 companies (small or recently-established congregations) in 2004 and 24,092 members, 59 churches, and 168 companies.<sup>[7]</sup> Adventists do not appear to translate materials into indigenous languages. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported slow growth within recent years. Witnesses reported an average of 1,201 publishers (active members who regularly engage in proselytism), 30 congregations, and 99 baptisms in 2014.<sup>[8]</sup> Witnesses translate their official website, jw.org, into four indigenous languages including Acholi, Bari, Nuer, and Zande.<sup>[9]</sup> Witnesses have translated online proselytism materials into two additional indigenous languages: Lango and Moru.<sup>[10]</sup> The Church of the Nazarene maintains a significant presence in South Sudan and reported 8,961 full-members, an average weekly worship of 29,187, 25 organized churches, and 474 churches not yet organized as of 2014.<sup>[11]</sup>

## **Limitations**

The Church has never published membership statistics for South Sudan. It is unclear how many members currently reside in the country. The Church does not publish the locations of member groups on its online meetinghouse locator. It is unclear whether any member groups currently function in the country. There are no official membership statistics on country of origin or language usage for languages not within the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the Church. There are no reliable estimates on the number of South Sudanese Latter-day Saints worldwide. There was no information regarding the specific cause of the discontinuation of the Juba Branch during the writing of this case study.

## **Future Prospects**

South Sudan presents some of the greatest opportunities for LDS growth among nations where no full-time missionaries are presently assigned and where no official LDS congregations operate. The Church will likely experience rapid growth once a proselytizing presence is established and an adequate number of mission resources are allocated. However, civil war, interethnic conflict, low living standards, and a lack of LDS mission resources assigned to the region suggest that the reestablishment of an official LDS congregation and the assignment of missionaries may take many years to accomplish.

[1] "South Sudan," [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), retrieved 20 May 2015. <http://www.ethnologue.com/country/ss/status>

[2] Andrus, Ann. "The First Missionaries to Serve Missions from the Southern Sudan," [lds.org](http://www.lds.org), 25 March 2015. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/the-two-first-missionaries-to-ever-serve-missions-from-the-southern-sudan>

[3] "South Sudan," International Religious Freedom Report 2013, retrieved 23 May 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222099>

[4] "South Sudan," CIA World Factbook, retrieved 25 May 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/od.html>

[5] "From around the world," LDS Church News, 21 August 1993. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22942/From-around-the-world.html>

[6] "Countries: South Sudan," Joshua Project, retrieved 23 May 2015. <http://joshuaproject.net/countries/OD>

[7] "East-Central Africa Mission (2003-Present)," [www.adventiststatistics.org](http://www.adventiststatistics.org), retrieved 23 May 2015. [http://adventiststatistics.org/view\\_Summary.asp?FieldID=D\\_ECD](http://adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=D_ECD)

[8] "2015 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 18 March 2015. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/2015-yearbook/>

[9] [Jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 23 May 2015

[10] [Jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 23 May 2015

[11] "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2004-2014," [Nazarene.org](http://www.nazarene.org), retrieved 23 May 2015. <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fn>