



People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among Sudanese Expatriates

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Overview

Millions of Sudanese have fled their homelands over the past half century as a result of war and violence between government troops and rebel forces. Many Sudanese refugees have originated from South Sudan; Africa's most recent independent country that seceded from Sudan in July 2011. As of January 2012, virtually no additional refugees have fled the country since independence although as many as half a million have become internally displaced due to political instability.[\[1\]](#)

This case study briefly reviews the history of Sudan since the mid-twentieth century, the worldwide number and distribution of Sudanese refugees over the past half century, and LDS outreach among Sudanese. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for church growth and missionary activity are analyzed and discussed. A comparative growth section compares LDS outreach among other African groups outside their homelands and contrasts LDS missionary efforts among expatriate Sudanese with other nontraditional, proselytizing Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are identified. A future prospects section predicts the outlook for future missionary efforts and church growth among expatriate Sudanese.

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Sudan Historical Background

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 ethnoreligious 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. Conflict in the Darfur region of western Sudan resulted in political instability in central Africa and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. In January 2012, the United Nations estimated that there were 2.4 million internally displaced persons within Sudan and half a million refugees living outside of Sudan as a result of conflict in Darfur.[\[2\]](#) 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.[\[3\]](#)

Sudanese Refugee Background

In 1980, there were an estimated 518,000 Sudanese refugees worldwide who resided in Ethiopia (419,000), Uganda (77,000), Chad (18,000), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[\[4\]](#) The number of Sudanese refugees exceeded one million during 1985-1989 and 1991-1995. In 2010, there were 615,000 Sudanese refugees worldwide residing in Eritrea (333,500), Chad (158,000), Ethiopia (96,700), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (15,000), and other countries (13,000). Between 2005 and 2010, 330,000 Sudanese refugees voluntarily returned to Sudan.[\[5\]](#) Conflict in Sudan and South Sudan has continued to displace tens of thousands notwithstanding South Sudan's recent independence. In March 2013, the UNHCR was planning to resettle as many as 16,000 refugees from the Blue Nile conflict into Ethiopia.[\[6\]](#)

In 2008, countries with sizable Sudanese populations included Saudi Arabia (500,000), the United Arab Emirates (74,000), the United States (42,000), Australia (23,900), Canada (12,600), and the Netherlands (4,700).[\[7\]](#) The number of Sudanese people living outside the two Sudans is currently estimated to range between 1.2 and 1.7 million. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees continue to reside in neighboring African countries such as the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.[\[8\]](#) The 2010 American Community Survey estimated that

there were approximately 42,000 Sudanese residing in the United States.^[9] Sudanese communities can be found in most, if not all, 50 states and in many diverse locations. For example, in the early 2010s there were approximately 1,000 Southern Sudanese in Anchorage, Alaska.^[10] The 2006 Australian Census counted nearly 18,000 Sudan-born individuals resided in Australia.^[11]

Prominent ethnic groups found among expatriate Sudanese include Nuer and Dinka from South Sudan and Arab from Sudan. South Sudanese groups have traditionally relied on nomadic pastoralism for survival. South Sudanese are primarily comprised of Christians and animists whereas Sudanese from the Republic of the Sudan are primarily Muslim with small numbers of Christians.

LDS Background

The Church has baptized and retained Sudanese converts for two decades or more in North America and Western Europe. In more recent years, the Church has baptized Sudanese converts in these regions as well as in Sub-Saharan Africa and Australia.

In the United States, the Church organized a Nuer-speaking branch in Omaha, Nebraska in the mid-2000s to accommodate increasing numbers of Sudanese converts. Returned missionaries reported that the branch closed within only a few years from its organization due to leadership challenges and inactivity. In late 2012, missionaries serving in Des Moines, Iowa reported the baptism of small numbers of Sudanese and as many as ten Sudanese investigators attending church at a time in some units. In early 2013, a Sudan-born member was serving a full-time mission in Florida. Missionaries have reported teaching and/or baptizing Sudanese in over a dozen states in the United States including California, Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Washington.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, LDS outreach among Sudanese began as early as the late 2000s. In Ethiopia, senior missionaries reported an unofficial group of self-identified Sudanese members in Gambela that began meeting in the name of the Church. Distance from established congregations and a lack of baptized members has prevented a formal church establishment for at least five years. Missionaries have occasionally meet with the group, taught its members, and offered support and encouragement until the decision is made by mission and area leadership to organize an official church unit and baptize investigators. In late 2011, a Nuer-speaking group began functioning in Addis Ababa. By early 2012, sacrament meeting attendance reached as high as 80 in the Nuer-speaking group. In early 2013, active Sudanese members have been reported in a few additional African countries such as Ghana and Uganda.

In South Sudan, church leaders and senior missionary couples began visiting to investigate reports of thousands of prospective members requesting baptism and a formal church establishment in the late 2000s. Non-Sudanese members visiting Sudan and Sudanese members who join the Church abroad, return to South Sudan, and share the gospel with others have been the primary methods that most prospective members have learned about the Church. As of 2013, the Church operated only one branch in South Sudan in Juba and appeared to maintain several dependent groups in other locations. Very few, if any, of the approximately 3,000 self-identified Latter-day Saints have been baptized due to political instability, distance from mission headquarters, and the semi-official presence of the Church in South Sudan at present. In 2013, the Church called two members from the Juba Branch on full-time missions for the first time.^[12]

With perhaps a few exceptions, all formal teaching and convert baptisms have entirely consisted of South Sudanese. Few missionary contacts have been established with Sudanese from the Republic of Sudan due to most Sudanese from Sudan exhibiting strong ties to Islam.

Successes

Returned missionaries and members from around the world have reported that many South Sudanese are uniquely receptive to the Church. High receptivity is evident in the estimated American Sudanese population numbering less than 50,000 yet missionaries report frequently teaching and baptizing Sudanese in many states. It appears that all countries with sizable African immigrant communities have at least a few Sudanese Latter-day Saints. Recent reports from mission leaders regarding thousands of self-proclaimed members awaiting baptism in South Sudan indicates that Sudanese have been highly receptive to the Church within their homelands and abroad. As of early 2013, the number of prospective members awaiting baptism in South Sudan appeared dramatically higher than any other country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similar reports of hundreds of prospective members awaiting baptism were common in Ghana and Nigeria prior to the official establishment of the Church in these countries during the 1970s.

The organization of the first official branch in South Sudan in late 2009 stands as a major accomplishment for reaching South Sudanese throughout the world as a church presence is established in their home country notwithstanding war, political instability, and poverty. With many returning back to their homelands within the past decade, expatriate South Sudanese Latter-day Saints have previously provided valuable resources and effective member-missionary work that has culminated in many awaiting baptism in several locations.

Opportunities

Sudanese converts provide opportunities for member-missionary work among nonmember Sudanese refugees and immigrants, especially in Western Europe, North America, and Oceania. However, there are relatively few Sudanese Latter-day Saints. The small size of the Sudanese diaspora in many locations make the organization of separate branches unfeasible at present. The establishment of Nuer, Dinka, and Arabic-speaking Sunday School classes and cottage meetings may be effective approaches to kindling church growth and improving proselytism efforts. Past problems and delays organizing and maintaining Sudanese-specific congregations suggest that organizing Sunday School classes and church groups instead of immediately organizing a branch may be the most effective method to form a sense of LDS community, baptize and retain converts, and prepare new members for leadership responsibilities. Branches can be organized once there is a sufficient number of active members to merit the establishment of a separate unit that provides sacrament meeting and Sunday School, Priesthood, Relief Society, and primary classes.

There are unrealized opportunities for reaching Sudanese refugees in East African countries with an LDS presence. In 2013, the CIA World Factbook estimated that there were 40,000 Sudanese refugees in Kenya and over 18,000 Sudanese refugees in Uganda.^[13] Missionary efforts that target Sudanese in these countries may accelerate growth in South Sudan if refugees return to their home country. However, the transient nature of many refugees in these countries and their often dire humanitarian needs may make any outreach efforts inappropriate in order to help these individuals meet their basic living needs prior their spiritual ones. The tiny size of the Church in other Sub-Saharan African countries poses a major difficulty for reaching Sudanese as the Church cannot effectively reach the largest ethnic groups in these countries, let alone the comparatively tiny Sudanese refugee population that is transient and difficult to reach.

Challenges

Low socioeconomic class and the transient nature of many Sudanese refugees and immigrants pose the greatest challenges for church growth due to a lack of stability in these populations. In the United States, many Sudanese refugees leave the first city they are resettled to in order to find cheap housing, a sense of Sudanese community, and employment elsewhere.^[14] Many expatriate Sudanese experience significant financial hardships incurred by political instability, war, violence, and a lack of modernization in their homelands; conditions that do not help these individuals acculturate into Westernized countries. Many have obtained little education and literacy rates are low. Employment opportunities are often limited due to a lack of education, difficulty assimilating into foreign cultures, racial discrimination, and language barriers. Within the past decade, Sudanese youth have increasingly become involved in gangs and illegal activity in many areas of the Midwest of the United States.^[15] Sudanese gangs have also emerged in Australia. Consequently many Sudanese are prone to living in poverty and have been perceived by the general population as delinquent and dangerous. These challenges present opportunities for development work for the Church to help instill self-sufficiency through assisting individuals and families to find employment, secure stable housing, meet basic living needs, and obtain additional education to acquire higher-paying and more reliable sources of income.

The closure of the Nuer-speaking branch in Omaha, Nebraska and ongoing delays to create a Nuer-speaking branch in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia are serious barriers to church growth among expatriate Sudanese that indicate leadership development problems and also suggest member activity challenges. Counter-proselytism efforts from other Christian groups have been a challenge for the LDS Church to retain its Sudanese converts who previously attended other denominations or are attracted by churches that have a more developed sense of Sudanese community than the LDS Church. In the United States, other Christian denominations have played a long-term role in addressing the needs of Sudanese refugees. Some denominations have played a vital role in the relocation of Sudanese from their homelands to their assigned American city. Consequently many Sudanese immigrants have been shepherded into other denominations since or prior to their arrival in the United States. Returned missionaries report that some Sudanese are reluctant to join the Church due to feeling indebted to other churches for their arrival and adjustment to American society.

No formal proselytism efforts occur in South Sudan and no known LDS presence operates in Sudan. Many Sudanese baptized abroad that have returned to South Sudan face challenges locating the Church due to the semi-sensitive nature of the Church in the country as the Church does not publish any information regarding the existence and location of the Juba Branch on its online meetinghouse locator website, [lds.org/maps](https://www.lds.org/maps). Political instability, military conflict with Sudan, and interethnic conflict since independence in 2011 have delayed the introduction of full-time, proselytizing missionaries and the formal establishment of branches in locations outside of Juba with sizable numbers of self-affiliated, prospective members. Few, if any, Sudanese from the Republic of the Sudan have joined the Church due to many adhering to Islam and the strong ethnoreligious ties of Islam and culture and society.

No LDS materials have been translated into any indigenous languages in South Sudan or Sudan. Sudanese must rely on English and Arabic translations of LDS scriptures and materials to study the gospel. Extremely low literacy rates in many indigenous languages may require the development of audio translations of scriptures and basic study materials.

Comparative Growth

Church leaders, missionaries, and members around the world have reported higher receptivity among African immigrants than among immigrants from most other areas of the world. Sudanese have appeared to be some of the most receptive African peoples, especially considering their comparatively small numbers in Western nations. The Church has had success baptizing large numbers of Nigerians and Ghanaians in many areas of the world, but these converts appear to constitute a smaller percentage of total expatriates from these countries than from expatriates from South Sudan.

Several Christian groups have established Sudanese community churches around the world, namely mainstream Protestant groups and evangelicals. Seventh Day Adventists report one Sudanese-designated small congregation (company) in Omaha, Nebraska that had 58 members in early 2013.^[16] Seventh Day Adventists report no printed materials translated into Nuer or other commonly spoken indigenous languages native to South Sudan or Sudan. Jehovah's Witnesses do not report any Sudanese-specific congregations outside of Sudan but have translated a couple basic proselytism materials into Nuer.^[17] Both Witnesses and Adventists report a presence in many areas of South Sudan and Sudan. In 2012, Witnesses reported 1,253 active members and 34 congregations in South Sudan and 658 members and 17 congregations in Sudan. In 2010, Adventists reported 18,591 members and 52 churches in South Sudan^[18] and less than 1,000 members in Sudan. The Church of the Nazarene reports nearly 500 churches in South Sudan.^[19]

Limitations

No member reports were available from Sudanese Latter-day Saints during the writing of this case study. Consequently data on receptivity, member activity, and societal and cultural challenges were ascertained from other sources including returned missionaries, former mission presidents, non-Sudanese members who have had experience fellowshipping Sudanese converts, and media reports. The Church does not publish membership data on country of origin for its membership and language usage. Consequently, it is unclear how many Sudanese have joined the Church worldwide.

Future Prospects

Sudanese refugees who have immigrated to modernized countries in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania have exhibited strong receptivity to the Church but their small numbers and the transient nature of their comparatively tiny communities in these regions have deterred the establishment of Sudanese-specific congregations in the LDS Church. Opportunities to establish a self-sustaining LDS community among Sudanese appears most favorable in Midwest cities in the United States with the largest Sudanese populations such as Omaha and Des Moines. Organized and long-term proselytism and humanitarian programs that target Sudanese refugees headed by other Christian denominations will pose challenges for LDS missionary efforts to baptize and retain sizable numbers of Sudanese in specific locations. The organization of the first official branch in South Sudan in late 2009 and ongoing reports of thousands of individuals awaiting baptism and a formal church establishment outside of Juba suggest that rapid church growth among Sudanese may occur in their homeland if the window of opportunity is not delayed until receptivity wanes and previously interested individuals are shepherded into other proselytizing denominations. Delinquency among Sudanese youth and young adults in some industrialized countries such as the United States and Australia pose challenges for missionary activity and church growth due to poverty, the failure of many assimilate into mainstream Western society, discrimination, and crime.

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<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e483b76.html>

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^[4] "Migration in Sudan - A Country Profile 2011," IOM International Organization for Migration, retrieved 25 March 2013.
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^[5] "Migration in Sudan - A Country Profile 2011," IOM International Organization for Migration, retrieved 25 March 2013.
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^[8] "Migration in Sudan - A Country Profile 2011," IOM International Organization for Migration, retrieved 25 March 2013.
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^[9] "American Community Survey," United States Census Bureau, retrieved 25 March 2013.
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[17] <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter=nus>

[18] "Greater Upper Nile Field," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 30 March 2013.
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