

Stepping up to the challenge of the world's newest nation

Focus on South Sudan

The way the colonial powers drew Africa's national boundaries—cutting across or lumping together ethnic and religious groupings—created problems that continue to plague the continent. Sudan provided a prime example. Its territory straddled the east-west line between the continent's Arab-and-Muslim north third, and its animistic, non-Arab central and southern two-thirds—where adherence to Christian faith has spread rapidly after more than a century of missionary effort.

Since gaining its independence from Egypt and Britain in 1956, Sudan was ruled by the northern part of the country, which tapped the oil resources of the south but consistently marginalized its peoples. The civil war that resulted extended over 22 years, ending in 2005 with a signed peace deal that granted southerners the right to self-determination after six years. In that referendum, held last January, nearly 99 percent voted for secession. On July 9, the Republic of South Sudan was born, accompanied by delirious celebration.

But while the threat of being ruled by Sharia law has been removed, the new nation faces a daunting set of challenges. For starters, the demarcation line between Sudan and South Sudan leaves in Sudan proper two large pockets of peoples who previously sided with the south: these are the Nuba Mountains area of South Kordufan state and Blue Nile state. And how the two nations' still-shared oil industry will be managed remains unsettled. These irritants make peaceful co-existence unlikely.

South Sudan—the size of Texas—immediately became Africa's poorest nation. Eighty percent of basic services are being provided by nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies. Other obvious obstacles to building a functioning nation-state include:

- Illiteracy — 90 percent of its women can't read or write
- Poor health care — it is likely that 80 percent will never be treated at a clinic or hospital
- Lack of infrastructure — the grand total of paved roads? 35 miles! So farmers can't get their crops to market
- Human rights abuses — committed by the former guerrilla movement now turned national army
- Corruption and nepotism — already rife in the new government
- Tribalism — muted during the civil war with the north, has re-emerged. Last June, in a society that esteems its cattle, the Nuer tribe (with connivance of the majority Dinka) launched a cattle raid on the Merle tribe, resulting in some 400 deaths. In August, a retaliatory attack by the Merle resulted in at least 600 deaths.

So how should our church family be engaged with a very different society on the other side of the globe? *Pray for internal peace for this tribally splintered new republic and for external peace in spite of Sudan's belligerent stance. Pray for President Salva Kiir and his government to deal wisely and fairly with their overwhelming challenges.*

Is our congregation already connecting with the new South Sudan? Yes. And in more ways than you might have guessed:

- Roger Sandberg Jr. grew up in College Church (the son of the current Council of Elders chair). His intense involvement with Sudan began in 1999 when he spent a year there in the village of Akot in Western Equatoria state. He witnessed the suffering and injustice the southerners endured close-up as Akot was bombed. Back in the U.S., Roger married Rebecca and earned a degree from Wheaton College in business-economics and Bible theology and then an MBA in international business, keeping his sights on a return to Sudan. In 2002 he was named Samaritan's Purse Sudan country director. His young family settled in Nairobi since foreign organizations were excluded from southern Sudan, and because Nairobi is the regional hub for meeting and transport. Over the next three years, Roger traveled extensively in several Sudanese states. Then in 2005 Roger shifted to become the Sudan country director of Medair, a Swiss-based entity launched jointly by Youth With a Mission (YWAM) and Missionary Aviation Fellowship. He oversaw primary health care to villages along the Nile, accessed only by boat, and dispatched mobile teams to deal with outbreaks of cholera, yellow fever, and meningitis. In 2007, a severe eye injury sustained by the Sandbergs' middle child, Andrew, dictated a return to the States. Medair, which lacked a U.S. office, decided to establish one in Wheaton, naming Roger its national director. That brought the Sandbergs back to College Church. Since then, Rebecca has launched the Renew Project, teaching sewing skills to immigrant women in our communities. It works out of the former Scripture Press building on the Wheaton-Glen Ellyn border. Its learners include Teresa, a woman from Abeyei, a town along the contested border between the two Sudans, which both claim. *Pray for Medair to be able to overcome the absence of transport channels and be able to deliver desperately needed supplies into South Sudan. And pray for women like Teresa to become literate and acquire skills that will benefit their families and infant nation.*
- Missionary Emmanuel Tahear, who attends College Church with his wife Adugna, and their four children, encourages and coordinates a cluster of ethnic congregations in Chicago's western suburbs (such as the Liberian fellowship that worships Sunday evening in our Commons). A native of Ethiopia, Emmanuel's initial encounter with Sudan was not a happy one. A Marxist military junta deposed the Ethiopian emperor in 1974 and launched the Red Terror, using

hunger as a weapon and killing and forcibly deporting hundreds of thousands. Emmanuel fled across the border into Sudan, but was incarcerated for half of his year there for lack of identity papers. Seven years ago, Emmanuel and his SIM Culture ConneXions colleague Doug Jackson helped Sudanese-background believers in our area start a church. About three years ago, the Sudanese family of Gary Dermomo arrived here from Egypt. Observing his heart for ministry, Emmanuel and Doug invited him to pastor the fledgling congregation of 30-plus, which meets on the Wheaton Evangelical Free Church premises. Most are from what has become South Sudan (including one who fought with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, the forerunner of the Republic's ruling party). On the new nation's July 9 independence day, the congregation held a celebration party. A couple of families, however, are from the South Kordufan and Blue Nile states, still part of the "old" Sudan. With the exception of one family, those motivated to return have so far been thwarted by the expense involved or by reluctance to disrupt their children's education. *Pray that believers here will know how to reach out to relatives in their homeland, and that some will be equipped to return and provide Christian leadership.*

- Todd Kelly, who attends College Church with his wife, Sue, and their three children, directs Leadership Resources International (LRI), an organization that trains pastors unable to attend traditional Bible colleges or seminaries. Sudan's churches are almost universally pastored by men who, while dedicated, lack any training. Consequently, a basically sound theology has started to get skewed in some aspects. An already-registered Christian community development agency in South Sudan has invited LRI to partner with it to address this need. LRI's area director for Africa will visit Juba, South Sudan's capital, in mid-October, meeting church leaders, dialoging with them about how best to proceed, and conducting a demonstration day of training on how to study and proclaim God's Word. *Pray for a quick start-up for this ministry and that it will lead to increased depth of faith for a population Christian in the sense of being neither animistic nor Muslim, but weak on informed faith and committed discipleship.*