

Loving Mercy and Doing Justice in South Sudan and Ethiopia

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The Evangelical Covenant Church of South Sudan and Ethiopia (ECCSSE) is a denomination established in 1996.¹ True to its nature as “a free church,” it stands independently of any other national Covenant church in the world. However, it was through the partnership between the Sudanese American diaspora community (mostly located in the ECC’s Northwest Conference) and Covenant missionary personnel that the ECCSSE was formed. We held our first annual meeting at Pugnido Refugee Camp in Gambella, Ethiopia, as part of the Akobo Conference of South Sudan. There we recognized before God the official standing of the ECCSSE as a denomination. We were grateful that members of ECC’s Northwest Conference and Covenant World Mission (Serve Globally) were present. We have enjoyed our partnership with the ECC primarily through Serve Globally, in the years that followed up to the present day.

The ECCSSE currently has twelve regional conferences, six centers, 425 congregations, and 50,121 members across the Malakal Upper Nile, Jonglei, Bentiu, and Central Equatorial states in South Sudan and the western Gambella Regional State of Ethiopia. The ECCSSE has fifty-eight ministers ordained to word and sacrament and 3,500 volunteer preachers and evangelists. The ECCSSE serves South Sudan and western Ethiopia, with additional churches in refugee camps in Kenya and

¹ For more information on the Evangelical Covenant Church of South Sudan and Ethiopia, see www.eccsse.org.

Ethiopia. Its vision is “to reach all people of South Sudan and beyond with the gospel of salvation and be able to meet their spiritual, physical, social and psychological needs in their respective places.”

The Ravages of War

The nation of Sudan was in full-scale civil war for nearly four decades, leading to the death of more than two million people and the displacement of five million more. This longest and most devastating civil war on the African continent was caused by multiple factors, including the imposition of Islamic Sharia Law on South Sudanese who were mainly Christians and animists; the lack of equitable development in the southern part of the country that is rich in natural resources such as arable soil, oil (the third largest oil reserve on the African continent), and other vital minerals; and the classification of South Sudanese as third class citizens, following Arab Muslims and African Muslims. This war has caused serious damage to South Sudanese living in neighboring countries as refugees for several decades. Many perished as the result of civil war through disease, hunger, violence, and other related hazards. In 2005 South Sudan and Sudan signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) through the support of the United States and other Western countries under the auspice of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), the bloc of East African countries in which Sudan is a full member. In January 2011, South Sudan ceded from Sudan through the decisive referendum won by the overwhelming votes of the South Sudanese people. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan became the 194th and youngest sovereign nation in the world.

Subsequently, South Sudan was soon plagued by frequent border wars and ethnic violence that killed thousands and displaced hundreds of innocent people. When President Salva Kiir falsely accused his former vice president, Dr. Riek Machar Teny Dhurgon, of staging a coup d’etat, presidential guards killed over twenty thousand members of the ethnic Nuer Community. On December 15, 2013, tensions between factions loyal to the president and those aligned with Dr. Machar exploded into full fighting in the South Sudan capital city of Juba. The conflict spread to other parts of the country, creating devastation to the people of the Upper Nile region. As a result of the ongoing Civil War of South Sudan, 400,000 people are estimated to have been killed, and more than 4.6 million people have been displaced in a country of about 12 million. Of these 4.6 million, over 2.1 million are displaced internally and over 2.5 million have fled to neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan,

Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. With this large-scale displacement, South Sudan is now Africa's largest refugee crisis and the world's third largest after Syria and Afghanistan, receiving less attention and chronic underfunding.

The United Nations Mission to the Republic of South Sudan has documented mass killings, sexual violence, and other war crimes that have been committed in the new country.² Women and girls are at increased risk of sexual violence because of cramped conditions and the breakdown in social and cultural norms as a result of the violence. Government forces and allied militias have burned villages and killed and raped civilians with impunity. Cases where young girls were raped and thrown alive into burning fire while young boys were violently castrated present horrific human rights violations. The UN estimates that at least nine thousand child soldiers have been pulled out of schools to be recruited in the armed forces.

The ravages of war on the agricultural heart in the south of the country has caused the number of people facing starvation to soar to six million, with famine breaking out in some areas. The country's economy has also been devastated. According to the International Monetary Fund, real income has been reduced by half since 2013, and inflation exceeds 300 percent per annum.

Loving Mercy and Doing Justice in South Sudan

The ECCSSE was established during the Sudan Civil War, and the church seeks ways to safeguard the spiritual, physical, social, and psychological needs of the poorest and most helpless people in this desperate community, in partnership with the ECC primarily through Covenant World Relief, a ministry of Serve Globally.

Spiritual needs. The ECCSSE has been engaged in planting churches and equipping Christlike servants in South Sudan and beyond. In the past twenty-three years, the ECCSSE has established 415 congregations in South Sudan and outside South Sudan. It has trained more than eighty leaders in Bible, theology, reconciliation, and justice. Currently the ECCSSE has one educational institution, the Jerry Rice Covenant Bible School, named after Covenanter Jerry Rice (1939–2020).

² United Nations Mission to the Republic of South Sudan, "Human Rights Violations and Abuses in Yei, July 2016—January 2017," https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/report_human_rights_violations_and_abuses_in_yei_july_2016_to_january_2017_0.pdf, accessed July 27, 2020.

Physical needs. Since it began, the ECCSSE has been caring for the physical needs of desperate communities. We offer food and other relief items, supported through donations from Covenant World Relief. Through coalitions with other sister churches and local NGOs, we work to alleviate suffering of communities tormented by war. Additionally, the ECCSSE supports the needs of vulnerable widows and their children through the Vulnerable and Orphan Children (VOC) project. The concept of home-based support is superior to the orphanage concept that confines children and keeps them hostage against their will. By contrast, the home-based concept has a wider scope to reach siblings as well as widowed mothers or the children's guardians. This life-saving project is now entering its eleventh year of serving marginalized communities. The VOC project also trains widows in tailoring, business management, financial management, food processing, plumbing, weaving, and other relevant skills that allow them to stand on their own feet and support their households.

The ECCSSE is working tirelessly to equip widows with agricultural knowledge that enables them to support their households in the refugee camps. Four Refugees Widows Garden Projects currently serve 1020 widows and 275 orphans living in refugee and internally displaced person camps around South Sudan and Gambella, Ethiopia. The project trains widows in agricultural skills, as they tend the gardens, and provides nourishment through the produce yielded. This vital project is preventing children from falling under acute malnourish in the camps. The ECCSSE also supports the physical needs of the community through water and livestock projects. We offered water by drilling wells through the Deep and Shallow Wells Projects in South Sudan and Ethiopia and by providing cow's milk to acutely malnourished refugee children in Ethiopia.

Social needs. The ECCSSE provides educational training that sustains community welfare. We offer education to over one thousand children in South Sudan and neighboring countries where South Sudanese reside as refugees. The ECCSSE is a pre-accredited member of the South Sudan Council of Churches, a Christian body tasked with disseminating peace messages across a nation that is rent by a colonial legacy and ongoing ethnic division.

Psychological needs. Millions of people in South Sudan are living in despair due to the traumas of decades of civil war. Many have lost loved ones and livelihoods. Others have witnessed horrible atrocities that will remain in their minds for the rest of their lives. Some are victims of rape, torture, and other serious crimes. There are some who saw their

relatives burnt alive and were forced to eat their flesh. Such crimes have remained engraved in the minds of the people and are deepening tribal hatreds and a desire for vengeance.

Social needs. In 2014, one year after the outbreak of violence, the ECCSSE formed Peace, Reconciliation, and Healing (PRH), a program focused on reconciling the antagonistic South Sudanese tribes within the refugee camps of neighbouring countries. The main objective of the PRH program is to find ways to bring peace and stability in South Sudan and to disseminate the messages of peace that will curb ongoing hatreds and deepest stress among the divided communities of South Sudanese in the refugee and internally displaced person camps. The PRH program seeks to relieve the psychological burdens of those who have suffered the deepest traumas of war. It promotes peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness among the divided communities of South Sudan. Through the PRH program, 5330 Peace Ambassadors have been trained and are disseminating peace messages in South Sudan and its neighboring East African countries.

Intercultural and International Partnerships

Intercultural partnerships are marked by the people of different cultures working together in mutual relationship and vision. They are also marked by mutual respect for each other in the ministry. Though we continue to grow in our partnership, we thank God for bringing the ECC and ECCSSE together to engage in God's mission through mercy and justice ministries. We have learned many things from the ECC, and we believe that they have learned many things from the ECCSSE's local ministry. We have demonstrated that the church should understand mercy, love, and justice as the main pillars of the Lord's ministry while serving people in need. The love of Christ is a central element of Christian theology. This encompasses the love of Jesus Christ for humanity, the love of Christians for Christ, and the love of Christians for others. These aspects are distinct in Christian teachings. The love for Christ reflects his love for his followers. The love of Christ is deep. Our deepest need is to know that love, and our mission is to share it with others. The love of Christ is shown through acts of justice and mercy. Some believe that these are incompatible, since justice involves the dispensing of deserved punishment for wrongdoing and mercy shows compassion and pardon to the offender. However, these two attributes of God do in fact form a unity that reflects his character.

Since the Lord came to the world to care for the needy and helpless

people, the universal church should double their efforts by caring for people in need and stand firm with those who are facing injustice across the globe. Many are facing injustice and persecution as the result of their faith in Jesus Christ. The universal church should stand firm in solidarity with those who suffer from many different needs. The ECCSSE is grateful to be used by God in partnership with the ECC. When we serve the needs of the people, our hope and prayer is that they will become the Lord's followers and accept Christlike discipleship.