

# Sudan churches stay united after political division of country

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Despite this year's vote by South Sudan for independence, churches in Sudan and South Sudan have decided to remain united, mainly to help denominations in Muslim-majority Sudan.

Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church on October 28 decided to maintain one conference covering the two states, alluding to shared history and existing "very real practical human links." In July, the Episcopal Church decided to remain one body for the next two years, and the Sudan Council of Churches has also said it will not split.

"It's more about solidarity," observed John Ashworth, an advisor with the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, which enhances churches' work for peace in Sudan, in an e-mail on November 3.

"They feel they are still united despite the political boundaries," said Ashworth. Noting that Christianity is stronger in South Sudan, he commented that "the church in South Sudan will be much stronger and so in practice the church in Sudan will be supported by the South."

Most Christians in the north are from the south, including most priests and 50 percent of the bishops, according to church officials. Two Roman Catholic dioceses are served by a cardinal and three bishops. "The north church is a 'minority church' that would very much need the South to remain intact," explained Don Bosco Ochieng, a priest from Rumbek diocese in South Sudan.

"There are concerns about [the northern church's] unknown future, given the north's declaration as an Islamic state," he said, referring to a statement made by Sudan president Omar al-Bashir on October 13.

Sudanese churches' diocesan boundaries have not followed those of the political administration as is the case in many other African countries. The dioceses on the

border between the two nations continue to include large areas on both sides, making it important for the churches to maintain unity, according to officials.

In October, Episcopal Bishop of Khartoum Ezekiel Kondo visited the U.S. and said that times are tense for Sudan's Christians. Kondo met with the State Department and major nongovernmental organizations and spoke on a panel at an antigencide conference, according to Episcopal News Service.

"As far as the north goes, the independence has brought a difference," he said. Christian government officials and private sector workers have been laid off; the government is introducing full Islamic Shari'a law, and South Sudanese are not being given citizenship. People are leaving or being forced out, and the church in Khartoum has been diminished.

Additionally, there has been an influx of refugees from South Kordofan, an oil-producing state under northern control in central Sudan, where southern sympathizers have been under attack.

Though the United Nations has a presence in Khartoum, Sudan's capital city, the government has declined to open camps for refugees, so people are staying with relatives, Kondo said.

"We were able to accommodate some [refugees] but not all," he said. "We have organized special prayer for South Kordofan; collected food and clothes, because people just came—ran with their bodies but they got nothing out." —ENInews