

U.S. allies keep close watch on Sudan independence vote

by [Tim Townsend](#)

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ST. LOUIS (RNS) The people of south Sudan are voting this week on whether to split Africa's largest country in two and form the world's newest nation, or to reunite with their neighbors in the north.

The seven-day referendum, which started Sunday (Jan. 9), was part of the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended 22 years of civil war between the largely Muslim north and Christian south, and gave the south autonomy leading up to the election.

Monitoring the referendum closely, from 7,000 miles away, are members of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, who have had a "companion relationship" with the Episcopal Diocese of Lufu in southern Sudan since 2006.

"The main point, theologically, is the relationship itself," said Debra Smith, the Missouri diocese's representative of the American Friends of the Episcopal Church of Sudan and wife of Missouri Bishop George Wayne Smith.

"The church is the body of Christ, and each church is part of that body. To get to know someone from a different culture who shares the same beliefs and liturgical practices is mind-broadening and spiritually invigorating."

Southern Sudan is one of the poorest, most isolated places on the planet. The civil war cost more than 2 million lives, and today millions more are dependent on food aid, according to the International Rescue Committee. Decades of war and violence have left the region's economic and social infrastructure in ruins.

Muslims, mostly in the north, make up 70 percent of the country's religious population, compared with Christians, who make up about 5 percent of the population and live mostly in the south and in Khartoum, the capital.

In September, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori called for "A Season of Prayer for Sudan" in preparation for the independence referendum.

When the first group from the Missouri diocese made a trip to Lui in 2003, before a formal relationship was ironed out, its members consulted with an Episcopal priest familiar with Sudan's politics, former Sen. John Danforth.

Danforth, a former U.S. special envoy to Sudan, was one of the architects of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Since then, Danforth has kept tabs on the progress in Sudan. He said the country "geographically straddles the fault line between Arab Africa and black Africa."

"Arab Africa has been the dominant political force in the country, and non-Arabs have felt they've been oppressed," Danforth said.

According to The New York Times, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir recently offered "a conciliatory message," saying he would be "sad" if

Sudanese in the south voted to secede. The International Criminal Court has charged al-Bashir with war crimes and genocide for unleashing the Arab militia known as the janjaweed in the country's Darfur region.

"But at the same time, I will be happy if we have peace in Sudan between the two sides," he continued. "We cannot deny the desire and the choice of the people of the south. This is their right."

Danforth called al-Bashir's comments "very good news."

The Rev. Emily Bloemker, chairwoman of the Missouri diocese's Lui committee, returned from her third visit to Lui in November, and said priests were preaching separation, with one comparing the oppression of the south by Khartoum to the enslavement of the Hebrew people by Pharaoh.

"But privately, people are expressing a great deal of fear," Bloemker said. "War was not so long ago, and they know what's coming if war takes place. They do not trust the northern government will not respond with force."

According to the International Monetary Fund, oil accounted for 93 percent of Sudan's exports and 50 percent of domestic revenue in 2009. About 98 percent of southern Sudan's budget comes from oil revenue, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

"There's no possibility of the country staying together," Danforth said. "That's not the real question. The question is whether there can be a detente between what will now be two countries, so they can agree on a way of both developing oil resources, and transporting it out of country."

The real danger, he said, is that the government in the north may not recognize the results of the referendum, and could therefore return to violence in the south as a way of controlling the independence movement and flow of oil.

For the Missouri Episcopalians, the people of Lui who are no longer just a faceless group of Africans 7,000 miles away, but friends. The vote half a world away is about "individual lives and relationships as opposed to a geopolitical game," Bloemker said.

"I have to think that's what Jesus wants from us," Bloemker said. "To not allow violence to become a personless force. In that sense, the relationship we have with Lui is very effective in transforming our lives in Missouri."