

# PEACEWORKS



## The Religious Landscape in South Sudan CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

By Jacqueline Wilson



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RELIGION

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report showcases religious actors and institutions in South Sudan, highlights challenges impeding their peace work, and provides recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to better engage with religious actors for peace in South Sudan. The report was sponsored by the Religion and Inclusive Societies program at USIP.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Cover photo:** South Sudanese gather following Christmas services at Kator Cathedral in Juba. (Photo by Benedicte Desrus/Alamy Stock Photo)

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# Summary



This study, conducted in South Sudan in 2017 and 2018, draws on informant interviews, focus groups, and consultations to better understand and map the religious sector in South Sudan. Its primary finding is that religious actors and institutions are the most important peace actors in the country. However, due in part to efforts by the government to constrain their influence, religious actors are not using their legitimacy effectively to turn the tide from war and violence to peace and reconciliation.

Religious actors, unlike in previous negotiations, were asked to moderate discussions at the May 2018 peace talks in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Even though the most challenging issues were not resolved, the shift in status raises the possibility of new roles for religious actors in future peace processes.

Sources of legitimacy for religious actors include their willingness to conduct risky mediation efforts, travel to areas experiencing violence, and speak truth to power. Their acts or statements, though, risk being labeled political. Comments about atrocities by soldiers or visits to marginalized communities, sometimes in rebel-held territory, further close the space for religious peace work when deemed to be political acts. Meanwhile, threats facing religious actors in South Sudan have worsened since 2013, and range from restricted movement and resource shortages to detentions, torture, and killings.

Opportunities exist to improve engagement between international peace actors and religious actors, to expand peace roles for religious women, youth, and prophets, and to increase the impact of religious peace efforts. Religious actors have also indicated interest in learning about nonviolent action and other such opportunities, but do not well understand concepts of strategic nonviolent action.



Muslim women and girls pray during Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, in Juba's al-Zahara square. (Photo by Samir Bol/Reuters)

# Introduction: Why Map Religious Actors?

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Religious actors  
and institutions  
across South  
Sudan have  
worked feverishly  
to preach peace,  
yet the violence  
rages on in plain  
sight of their  
steeples and  
turrets.

Religious actors these days don't even say anything related to politics because politics of those days before 2013 was still fresh and people were living in a hope of unity and development. But suddenly things fell apart like leaves of a tree in a desert of dry season.  
—Wau nonreligious respondent

We pray so God intervenes. But we as human beings must act.  
—South Sudan Council of Churches senior staff member

Since Sudan's independence in 1956, the country has been plagued by internal conflict, a dynamic driven by a centuries-old ethnoreligious divide. In the colonial era, the Anglo-Egyptian government handled this conflict by administering the north and the south as separate entities. With independence came civil war. The first lasted sixteen years, ending in 1972 with the Addis Abba Accord, which established southern Sudan as an autonomous region. In September 1983, however, President Jafaar al-Nimieri declared the entire country an Islamic republic, implementing sharia nationwide and exacerbating long-standing tensions between the Arab and Islamic north and the primarily Christian,

animist, and African south. In response, an insurgency—which became known as the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM)—issued a manifesto. Its points were straightforward: underdevelopment of the south, desire for a nationalist southern identity, and objection to the Islamic intrusion. Civil war, reignited, continued over the two decades that followed.

The conflict ended in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which established a timeline for an independence referendum for South Sudan. This was not the first time that religion, religious actors, and religious institutions had an impact—either positive or negative—on what became the independent country of South Sudan in 2011. Some of these events were legendary and pivotal, both formative for the future and reflective of differences that predated the colonial era. One was the Wunlit Peace Agreement of 1998, when southern religious actors under the auspices of the New Sudan Council of Churches convened Dinka and Nuer chiefs and leaders to talk about peace. Earlier, the 1929 Southern Policy had authorized Christian missionaries to work across the south, establishing deep roots for Christian faith actors, and made English the official language for government and education across the region and “explicitly promoted the development of administration [in the south] based on non-Muslim, non-Arab customs.”<sup>1</sup>

South Sudan today presents a mystifying dichotomy of incompatible truths. It is both deeply infused with religion and savagely torn apart by war and violence, including intercommunal violence. The current government, led by the SPLM, claims to be fighting an illegitimate rebellion stemming from leading opposition figure Riek Machar’s dismissal in 2013 from the ruling party after indicating a desire to challenge the sitting president, Salva Kiir. The opposition, which began with Machar’s SPLM-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), has since fragmented, as some groups signed a new peace agreement in 2018 and others continued fighting.

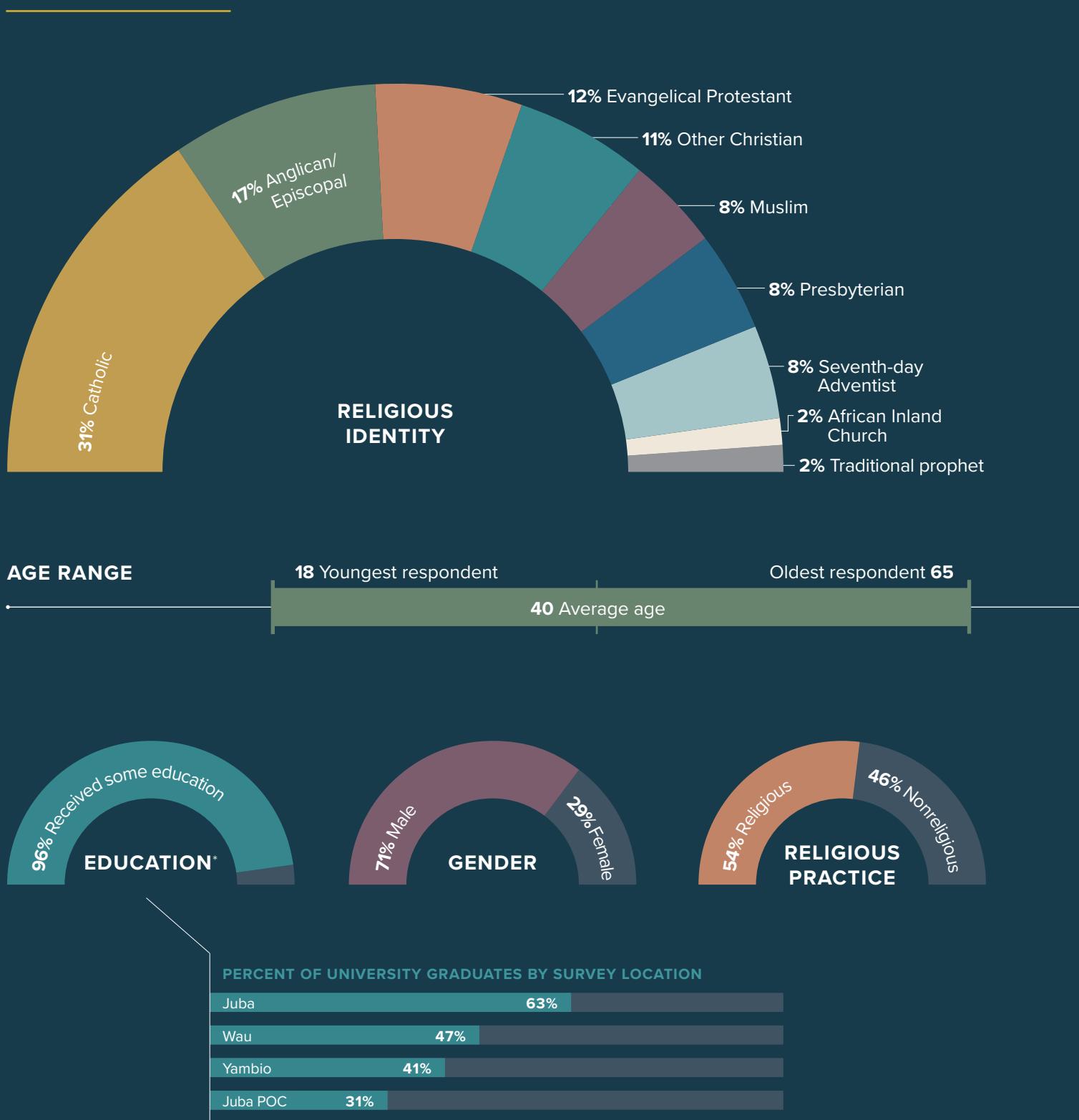
Throughout the turmoil since 2013, religious actors and institutions across South Sudan have worked feverishly to preach peace, counsel war victims, and deliver services despite seemingly insurmountable odds. Religious actors are time and again cited by knowledgeable observers as the most important actors for peace in the country, yet the violence rages on in plain sight of their steeples and turrets. A pastoral exhortation from the Catholic Bishops of Sudan and South Sudan after a ten-day meeting in January 2014 included a statement that captures the agonizing dynamic: “Our history is an open wound that desperately needs healing.”<sup>2</sup>

Although religious actors and institutions in South Sudan have played a constructive role in the midst of the conflict, questions remain as to why they have not been more effective. What are religious actors and institutions doing to bring peace? What is and is not working, and why? Do they have the resources and training they need? What obstacles are preventing them from greater success? How are they adapting to the challenges they face? Which religious actors and institutions have legitimacy for peace, and are they using that legitimacy to influence others toward peace? And how can international partners—faith-based, governmental, and nongovernmental—most effectively support a role for religious actors and institutions toward national and local peace and healing in South Sudan?

To answer these and other questions, the United States Institute of Peace launched a project to map the religious landscape of South Sudan. The overall goal is to better understand the religious sector’s role in peace efforts and to identify ways in which religious actors and institutions can influence conflict and peace dynamics. The project seeks to increase knowledge about South Sudanese peacebuilders, researchers, and partners so that peacebuilding practitioners, policymakers, and even religious actors themselves know how to better support religious actors and institutions in their efforts to create peace in South Sudan.

**Figure 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents**

Researchers conducted interviews and surveys with one hundred individuals who represent a variety of Christian denominations, as well as Islamic and traditional African faiths.



\*Note: These numbers differ significantly from the national average for educational attainment, in which South Sudan ranks among the lowest in the world. Religious actors in general receive education as part of their qualifications, and therefore the nature of the study skews the sample upward in this way.

The primary objectives of the study are to:

- identify legitimate and influential Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious actors and institutions, including religious women and youth, in South Sudan;
- understand how religious actors and institutions used their legitimacy and influence to prevent, mitigate, or respond to violence since 2013, and the impact of their actions on building peace and ending violence; and,
- understand their challenges and capacity gaps by analyzing lessons learned from their activities and strategies, and provide recommendations to improve the effectiveness of religious actors and institutions for peace and to inform future programming.

## METHODOLOGY

Drawing from twenty-five years working at the intersection of religion, violence, and peace, USIP has developed a methodological framework for mapping the religious sector's contribution to peace and conflict.<sup>3</sup> Data was gathered following a rigorous social science methodology, starting with background desk research and obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board to ensure academic rigor and integrity as well as adherence to Do No Harm principles. A South Sudan-based partner organization, Forcier Consulting, was selected to hire local researchers and oversee the field research.<sup>4</sup>

Criteria for research locations included the ability to interview people from a wide spectrum of ethnic and geographic backgrounds who have experienced South Sudan's conflict dynamics in various ways since 2013, as well as accessibility and security for the research team. Four locations were selected: Juba, the capital of South Sudan; the Juba Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites, where more than two hundred thousand internally displaced persons live under the protection of a United Nations peacekeeping mission; and the cities of Yambio and Wau. The author developed a question guide adapted to insights from the South Sudan desk research and vetted the questions with experts knowledgeable about the South Sudan context or the international religious landscape, and the research team that would conduct

the interviews. Researchers were selected based on their experience conducting research in the study's focus areas, local insight, and language skills. They were trained on the research tools and the specific nature of the study, protocols for data collection and protection of respondent identity, and respondent identification and selection using a purposive snowball sampling technique to identify potential research subjects.

The researchers conducted one hundred key informant interviews across the four research locations. Interviewees could stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any specific questions without consequence. After each interview, researchers administered a brief quantitative survey to all key informants covering a variety of relevant topics.

The demographic characteristics of the informants are presented in figure 1. The vast majority of respondents belong to one of the major Christian denominations, the highest percentage being Roman Catholic or Protestant. Most of the Catholic respondents live in Juba PoC (33 percent), most Protestants in Juba town (48 percent).

To a certain extent, religious affiliation correlates to ethnic identification and geographical roots, which is no surprise. On their nineteenth-century arrival in the region, Christian missionaries were assigned specific zones in southern Sudan to eliminate competition among the missionaries. Although historically the Catholic Church focused on Bahr el Ghazal, Presbyterians on Upper Nile, and Episcopal (Anglican) on Equatoria, because South Sudanese have experienced so much war and consequent displacement, faith communities are now more scattered.<sup>5</sup>

Juba town is now especially diverse, but few Nuer have returned to Juba town since the 2013 war began, instead living primarily in PoC sites. When asked to name the language spoken most at home, respondents collectively identified twenty-six. The majority of respondents speak Nuer (20 percent), Zande (15 percent), Dinka (13 percent), or Bari (8 percent).

In South Sudan, where religion is pervasive across society and where religious institutions—churches and mosques, schools and clinics, radio stations and more—are present in almost every village and town, the question of what constitutes a religious actor or institution merits discussion. A religious actor is one whose primary activity is religious. To clarify, one respondent, although quite religious, views himself primarily as a peacebuilder whose work is informed by his spirituality as well as his religious education, but his purpose is peacemaking, not saving souls. He was determined to be a nonreligious actor for research purposes. We debated the question of whether seminarians qualified as religious actors, and determined that their purpose is primarily religious. Throughout the project, this question arose time and again as it became increasingly evident that South Sudan is a country and society infused with religion.

## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are important to bear in mind. The locations selected were not experiencing violent conflict at the time and were chosen in part for safety concerns for the research team. In addition, resource constraints prevented research from being conducted among the South Sudanese refugee population in camps in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan, thus excluding the perspectives and experiences of that population. Data on migration status was collected to better understand how displacement may have affected respondents. Although the majority of respondents indicated that they had always lived in the area where they were interviewed, those seeking refuge in a PoC site described themselves as internally displaced, as did 6 percent of those from Juba. These differences could affect perceptions of the role of religious actors and institutions, which could differ greatly between the respondents' home area and their current location.

Respondents were selected through a purposive sampling technique drawing on personal relationships as well as recommendations from government officials, elite members of society such as elders or chiefs, and other referents. This technique could limit the

representativeness of the respondent pool. This analysis should thus be read as broadly indicative of trends in the population of religious and nonreligious actors in Juba, Juba PoC, Wau, and Yambio from the fall of 2017 through the summer of 2018 but not as statistically representative of all South Sudanese. Observed differences may be a result of real differences between locations, but also merely a result of how the sample was constructed. In addition, 84 percent of respondents reported that they have a family member who is a religious actor. This finding may reflect bias in that these respondents may not have felt comfortable being openly critical of religious actors or institutions. However, given that many respondents were critical in some way largely negates this possibility. Finally, because the vast majority of religious actors above the local level are male, religious actor interviews skewed stronger on male participation. Author interviews helped mitigate this limitation.

The focus of religious mapping is to understand the roles of religious actors and institutions in South Sudan related to violence, war, and peace, particularly since 2013. Religious actors respond to the impact of the extensive human suffering, widespread displacements, and deadly violence the war brings across South Sudan, but also to the increasing spread of gender-based violence and atrocities that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. Beneath the surface of this highly visible damage lie many deep scars that may take generations to heal, and that will require the work of religious actors and institutions as well.

It is not enough, however, to understand what religious actors are doing in response to the war's human destruction. Although the most influential religious actors appear to be actively engaged in peace efforts, the extent to which they engage in the heart of the matter, interact with political actors or armed actors to prevent violence, influence the ongoing conduct of war in more humane ways, or contribute to the formal peace process is unclear, as is the extent to which the shifting dynamics in South Sudan after 2013 affected the actions of religious actors.

# Current Dynamics

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Religious actors and institutions have retained a presence across South Sudan throughout the violence and turmoil since 2013. The civil war has led to the displacement of an estimated 4.2 million people—as of March 2019, 1.9 million are displaced internally and an estimated 2.3 million are refugees in neighboring countries including Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda.<sup>6</sup> The people of South Sudan have faced widespread human rights violations and abuses, including ethnically targeted violence, extrajudicial killings, sexual and gender-based violence, recruitment and use of children in armed groups, and attacks on hospitals, schools, patients, and hospital personnel, among other violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law.

Throughout both of Sudan's civil wars and the ongoing one in South Sudan, religious institutions and actors have played an important role as peacemakers. Yet to date they have struggled to translate their legitimacy and influence into broader peace. This struggle includes their inability to link local peace successes with national peace negotiations. More transformational processes—such as reconciliation, accountability, trauma healing, and the aspects critical to constructing (or reconstructing) a democratic and civil society, such as combating racism and ethnopolitical fear—remain largely elusive and aspirational. Sustainable peace in South Sudan requires a nuanced and current understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, successes, and challenges of religious actors and institutions if policymakers and practitioners are to engage with them more effectively.

In 2011, South Sudan gained its independence from Sudan, ending Africa's longest-running civil war and establishing the world's newest nation. However, any hopes

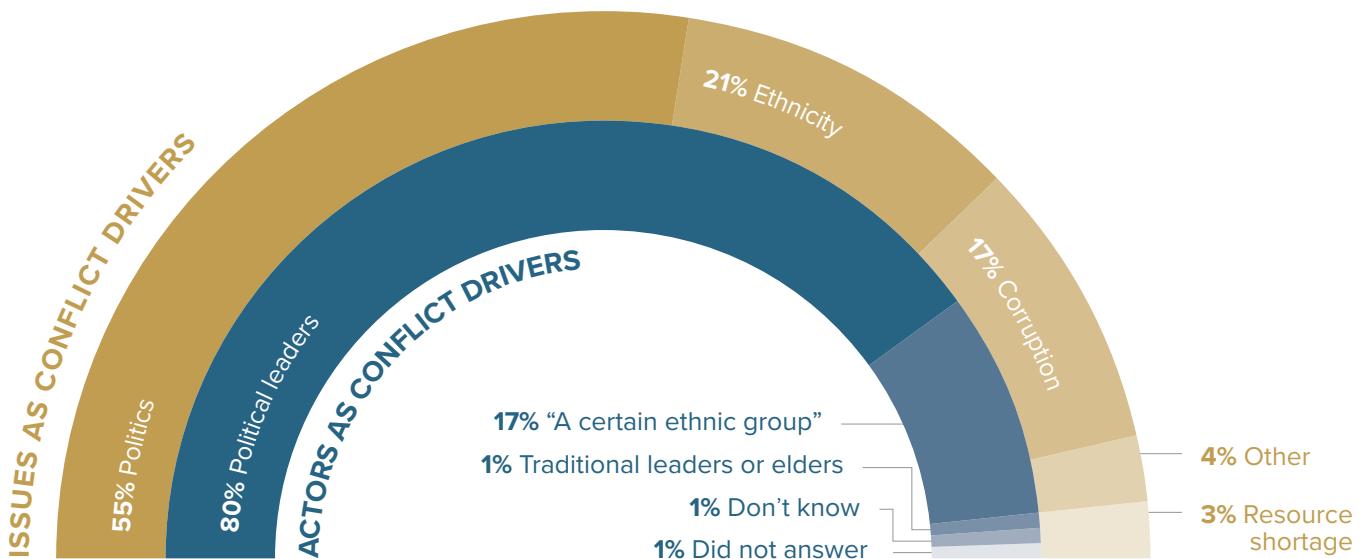
for peace and rebuilding were short lived. In December 2013, tensions within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement led to the outbreak of armed conflict between the SPLM and the opposition movement that became known as the SPLM-IO. What began as a somewhat spontaneous and haphazard opposition movement became more structured over time, and a conflict rooted in the Sudanese civil wars has since taken on new dimensions, drivers, and actors. Despite the signing of a peace deal in 2015 and again in 2018, and despite some hopeful signs, violent conflict continues in South Sudan.

Religious demographics in South Sudan are hard to pin down because reliable data are scarce. The majority of the 2015 estimated total population of twelve million are Christian. Statistics on the number of Muslims or other religious minorities are not reliable, and determining that data was beyond the scope of this research.<sup>7</sup> According to the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and the government's Bureau of Religious Affairs, the groups that make up the majority of Christians are Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Sudan Interior Church, Presbyterian Evangelical, and the African Inland Church. Smaller populations of Eritrean Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Bahai, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses are also present. A substantial part of the population in isolated parts of the country adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or combines Christian and indigenous practices.

An increasing number of alternative religious institutions are referred to as *prosperity churches*, particularly in Juba town. The pastors of these churches are generally Africans, most often Kenyan, Ugandan, Nigerian, and

**Figure 2. Drivers of Conflict**

A slight majority of respondents interviewed said politics was the primary source of conflict in South Sudan, and a strong majority pointed to political leaders as the actors primarily responsible for driving conflict.



Zimbabwean. These churches preach a gospel of piety resulting in prosperity as God bestows blessings (wealth) upon those who obey religious guidance. Some of the respondents described a model of *pay to pray*, a dynamic under which adherents pay the pastor to pray directly for the believer. These churches pay to register with South Sudan's Department of Religious Affairs as nongovernmental organizations rather than as religious institutions. Some interviewees saw this technique as a moneymaker for the government, but SSCC members indicated that the council does not recognize churches that do not refer to Jesus in their teaching and therefore are not considered to be churches. Observers indicated these alternative churches are increasing in popularity: unverified estimates suggest as many as several hundred in Juba town. Some worshippers attend both traditional and prosperity churches, adding complexity to the religious scene.

Respondents were asked about the drivers of conflict—both in terms of issues and actors. The majority (55 percent) identified politics, and after that ethnicity (21

percent) and corruption (17 percent). Figure 2 makes it clear that the vast majority (80 percent) consider political leaders to bear the most responsibility. Seventeen percent identified “a certain [unnamed] ethnic group” to be the biggest driver of violent conflict.

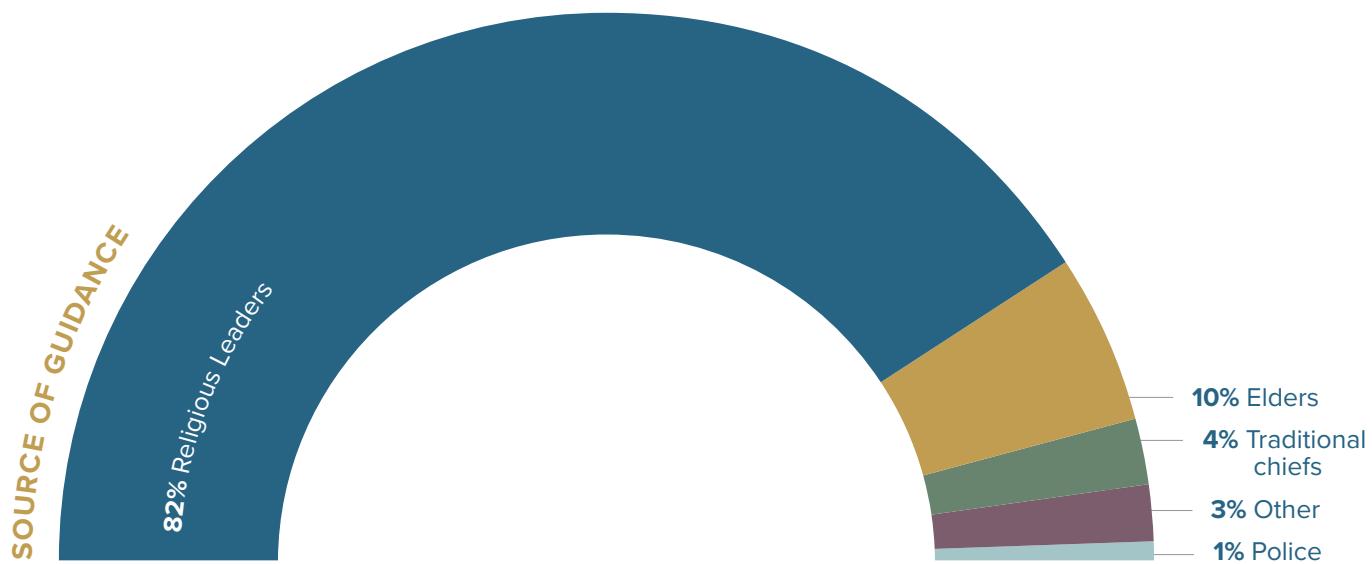
## LEGITIMACY AND INFLUENCE

Two factors, legitimacy and influence, were at the heart of interview questions. For legitimacy, the survey sought to understand whether South Sudanese look to religious actors for guidance and leadership for peace efforts. Beyond that, we wanted to understand what religious actors do to earn that legitimacy, as well as how they use their legitimacy to influence people toward peace.

When asked who, aside from friends and family, they turn to most for guidance when they have a problem, the vast majority of respondents (82 percent) reported that they turn to religious leaders (figure 3)—with an even greater percentage of nonreligious informants

### Figure 3. Sources of Guidance

Asked who they turned to most for guidance when they had a problem (aside from friends and family), four out of five people interviewed said they sought out a religious leader.



(85 percent) saying this than religious respondents (81 percent). Elders were the second most commonly mentioned source, but by far fewer respondents (10 percent). Wau had the lowest percentage of respondents who turn to religious leaders (58 percent) and the highest proportion who turn to elders (21 percent). One respondent chooses a religious actor for guidance because “he is a God-fearing man and doesn’t give advice that promotes violence. He used to advise youth in my area not to take revenge.”

Respondents indicated the types of guidance sought ranged from resolving family disputes, including marriage problems, to engaging on community concerns. These results seem to point toward religious actors having both legitimacy and influence on a broad range of matters to a wide spectrum of South Sudanese society.

### INFLUENTIAL ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS

Respondents almost unanimously (99 percent) feel that

religious actors or institutions are important or very important in bringing peace to South Sudan (see figure 4).

When asked to name the most influential and important religious actors and institutions for peace in South Sudan, respondents most frequently mentioned Christian institutions, starting with the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, both of which were mentioned by interviewees in all four locations. The Catholic Church was cited as the most important of these. Others cited as influential included the Presbyterian Church and Seventh-day Adventist Church, but not across all locations or with the same frequency.

The Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches were described as being influential because they have a significant following and play an important role in providing aid and relief to internally displaced persons and other citizens. One interviewee said, for example, “The most important institution in South Sudan is Catholic. . . All of them have been spreading the word of God during

#### Figure 4. Religious Actors and Institutions

Nearly every person surveyed agreed with the statement that religious actors and institutions are important or very important to South Sudan's prospects for peace.

#### HOW IMPORTANT ARE RELIGIOUS ACTORS AND/OR INSTITUTIONS IN BRINGING PEACE TO SOUTH SUDAN?



the war up to now. . . . Catholic is the most important because it is the largest and oldest institution in South Sudan. It has opened many Catholic schools and health facilities in the country.” Another said, “The Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan is the most important religious institution in the country. It comprises about six million members across the whole of South Sudan as well as several parts of the north. It is represented at the grassroots level in the most remote rural areas as well as its base in Juba.”

Consensus was also broad across all four research locations and from religious and nonreligious actors about the most important individual religious actors for peace.<sup>8</sup> Respondents most frequently mentioned Bishop Paulino Lokudu Loro (thirty-three times), retired Bishop Paride Taban (twenty-seven), retired Bishop Daniel Deng Bul (twenty-four), Bishop Edward Hiiboro Kussala (seventeen), and retired Bishop Enoch Tombe (eleven). These men have each contributed to high-level peace processes and also have significant standing at the local level. The research and other sources help explain their sources of legitimacy.

**Archbishop Paulino Lokudu Loro (b. 1940)** of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Juba is affiliated with the Comboni missionary order, has been a bishop for more

than forty years. Religious and nonreligious respondents cited Loro for “suffering equally with citizens,” indicating legitimacy stemming from a continued presence in South Sudan during the decades of war, and for participating in negotiations between the government of Sudan and the SPLM to end the north-south civil war. He was cited for his contributions to help release prisoners, and for his participation in the National Dialogue process. Beyond these credentials, his legitimacy seems to stem from being the head of the Catholic Church in South Sudan and that “he talks about peace to his believers whenever he gets a chance. He always preaches a message of love, unity, and reconciliation.”

**Bishop Paride Taban (b. 1936)** is cited for being a persistent peace actor throughout decades of war. Respondents mentioned his involvement in a grassroots peace process between the Murle and Dinka Bor tribes engaged in cattle raiding and child abduction (a perennial challenge) and for his role as presiding mediator of the Church Leaders Mediation Initiative. The latter effort resulted in a cease-fire–peace agreement between the rebels led by David Yau Yau and the government of South Sudan in May 2014 after, as one respondent noted, “a difficult negotiation that lasted over a year.”<sup>9</sup> Another respondent said that Bishop Taban “is the only religious leader who goes to where



the rebels are.” A religious actor described him as “a man who can change South Sudan because of his great ability in peace locally and at the national level. He is respected by many people including government officials.” Although not mentioned by any respondents, Bishop Taban is also known in international circles for establishing (in 2000) and maintaining the Kuron Peace Village. His peace work was recognized internationally in 2013 when he was awarded the UN Sergio Vieira de Mello Peace Prize.<sup>10</sup>

**Bishop Daniel Deng Bul (b. 1950)** is the recently retired archbishop of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan. He was cited by respondents for working with another religious leader to bring Salva Kiir and Riek Machar together to pray in 2014. He was also cited for organizing a peace march “moving from state to state using torch lights [flashlights] saying, ‘we want to see where the peace is hiding.’” Respondents also cited his work with an interfaith peace group that ‘preaches the message of peace to communities in the rural areas.’ A nonreligious respondent in Juba said that Bul, along with Anglican Archbishop Paul Yugusuk, “doesn’t fear—if you are right they will tell you right in front of you and if you are wrong they will also tell you. That is what makes them important for peace in South Sudan.”

## Research Locations in South Sudan

Adapted from artwork by Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock

**Bishop Edward Hiiboro Kussala (b. 1964)**, the Catholic bishop of Yambio, was described as “one of the most important religious individuals responsible for peace in South Sudan.” One respondent cited his work to organize a peace conference at the Tourist Hotel in Yambio, which was attended by two groups of rebels, the government, SPLM-IO, the Arrow Boys militia, and government officials: “I was convinced by the way he talked, judging the warring parties seriously—the peace conference was successful.” Another said, “Hiiboro is very influential because he mediates between the community, rebels and government to bring peace in our community. Bishop Hiiboro encourages youth to go to school, to work hard to become the future leaders of tomorrow.” In his mid-fifties, Bishop Hiiboro is the youngest national-level religious actor identified as important for peace.

**Bishop Enoch Tombe (b. 1952)** recently retired as the Episcopal bishop of the Rajaf Diocese, and is primarily known for his work as team leader of the faith-based community in the peace talks leading up to the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, signed in Addis Ababa in 2015, as well as the revitalized agreement signed in 2018 to end the South Sudanese civil war. The church leadership has struggled to have an impact in the peace talks, choosing to accept observer status rather than be a party to the negotiations about the future of the country. Respondents actually cited few specifics about Bishop Tombe other than they had heard his name or seen him on television or that he is one of the several church leaders who are “responsible for peace in the country.”

**A number of local or less prominent bishops, pastors, priests, and reverends** were also mentioned as being important to peace efforts. Their sources of legitimacy as peace actors include convening local tribes in conflict, negotiating release of detained individuals, visiting sick people in their homes, and providing food or money to those in need.

A major challenge to understanding legitimacy in South Sudan is that sources of information are limited, particularly in rural areas and locations where the government seeks to control access (often citing security concerns). Local legitimacy, according to respondents, is linked to specific acts, such as a pastor who gave his own money to policemen who had not been paid or one who prayed for a church member traveling in insecure areas. National-level legitimacy seems to have two components. As seen with Bishops Taban and Hiiboro, participation in dangerous peace efforts and success mediating violent local disputes lend credibility and standing to a religious actor. However, participation in national-level peace efforts is a source of legitimacy not necessarily connected to local successes.

The **South Sudan Council of Churches** describes itself as “an ecumenical body comprised of seven member churches and associate churches in South Sudan with a strong legacy of peacebuilding, reconciliation and advocacy.”<sup>11</sup> It is widely regarded as the primary Christian authority in the country. Unexpectedly, though, in response to an open-ended question about the most important religious actors or institutions in South Sudan, few of the one hundred respondents named the SSCC as an influential religious institution. This requires some unpacking. First, respondents may have had in mind their own religious denominations when asked about religious “institutions.” Also, because the SSCC works in large part through the individual local churches at the grassroots level, SSCC initiatives are often not “branded” as SSCC-sponsored activities. For example, SSCC often accompanies religiously affiliated humanitarian organizations to conflict zones, where the initiative is associated with the NGO, not the SSCC. One senior religious actor, when asked about this finding, speculated that this is so because these members of the SSCC stay primarily in Juba or international destinations such as Addis Ababa or Nairobi.

Structural factors may also inhibit the visibility and standing of the SSCC. The council coordinates its

regional work through three regional interchurch committees (ICCs)—one each in Malakal, Wau, and Juba. Requests for support or peacebuilding initiatives often emanate from local churches through these ICCs to the council that then must request donor funding through a circuitous proposal process if using donor funds, or through its member churches. Through interviews and consultations, it is clear the SSCC remains the primary organizational body for international donors seeking to engage with the broader Christian infrastructure, so this lack of visibility may simply reflect what local respondents in South Sudan actually see and experience in terms of interaction with the religious sector.

The SSCC has undergone a reflective transformation over the past several years that is only now coming to fruition. After a spiritual retreat for church leaders in 2015 in Rwanda, where the impact of genocide continues to permeate society, the SSCC developed its Action Plan for Peace, the pillars of which include advocacy, neutral forums, reconciliation, and organizational strengthening, all incorporating a gender lens.<sup>12</sup> As evidence of their efforts, the SSCC has engaged in or directly supported local-level peace initiatives over the past several years in Wau, Pochalla, and Yambio, as well as with the Murle community, and more such initiatives are in the planning stages. Although laudable, these local successes are not enough to tip the balance more broadly toward peace. The council is also increasing its advocacy efforts through radio and other means, although the impact remains to be seen.

## RELIGIOUS WOMEN

Even though the question asking about influential and important religious actors and institutions was open-ended, all of the religious actors named by respondents were male. Yet responses to a question about the roles and importance of religious women in particular, unanimously, across all locations, described religious women as very important religious and peace actors. Despite this consensus, religious women in South Sudan largely remain untapped resources for

**Religious women have led protests in Juba to try to energize a constituency for peace. But, as one religious woman explained in an interview, “Women are overloaded with the war, children, displacements, and more.”**

national-level peace. Religious respondents most commonly mentioned that women should have more representation in national-level peace processes.<sup>13</sup> During a female-only focus group in Juba, the participants struggled to name the woman selected as a women’s religious representative for peace talks in Addis Ababa. That said, women from the South Sudan Council of Churches and civil society organizations have participated in this and other peace processes. Religious women have led protests in Juba to try to energize a constituency for peace. But, as one religious woman explained in an interview, “Women are overloaded with the war, children, displacements, and more.”

The Mother’s Union, an international charity affiliated with the Anglican community, was cited most frequently as being an important women’s institution. Numerous orders of Catholic sisters work together under the umbrella of Solidarity with South Sudan, yet few respondents named individual religious women as being important at the national level. Women named as being important (or influential) and the positions that contributed to their mentions include Agnes Wasuk, the national coordinator of the women’s desk for the South Sudan Council of Churches; Roda Yengi, also with the South Sudan Council of Churches; Natalina Mambo for her work with the National Dialogue; and Minister Awut Deng Acuil, who worked with the SSCC in the 1990s and 2000s and was involved in the landmark Wunlit peace process. Other women mentioned as influential are not religious actors per se but rather are spouses of important men or are women of faith who perform notable public acts and have therefore established their own legitimacy. These include Mama Kuron, who is said to be “always in charge of peace mediation”; the wife of President Salva Kiir, Mary Ayendit, who is said to interact with religious women across the country, and encourage women to

work for peace in the country; and Angelina Teny, wife of Riek Machar, who sends peace messages to South Sudanese women and who reportedly took a leading role in a recent reconciliation process.<sup>14</sup>

The vast majority of religious respondents (male and female) acknowledged that religious women have substantial influence in their communities by mediating domestic disputes, but also in their supporting roles within their institutions. As one respondent described it, “Some of these religious women advise the congregation; they advise young religious women to teach their children how to pray and how to grow up with religious values.” Despite their religious roles, respondents most commonly mentioned administrative or menial labor as roles that women play in the religious realm, such as arranging chairs, decorating the church, helping mothers with crying babies, cooking for religious men, cleaning pastors’ homes, and receiving visitors at the church. They also serve the vulnerable through counseling, conducting home visits, encouraging girls in the church not to leave school, caring for orphans, serving as nurses and midwives, and visiting prisons and hospitals.

In a few instances, religious respondents spoke about limits on roles for women. One Catholic respondent explained that women cannot be priests, and a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church stated that scripture forbids women from holding the same roles as men: “According to our doctrine in the Seventh-day congregation, we don’t support women to be in the roles that are done by men. The Bible says, let the woman know things quietly; let no woman stand in front of men by preaching to them the words of Yahweh. We do not engage women with doing things in the church, except in the community. They are just praying in church.”

Civilian women have suffered disproportionate harm from the violent conflict since 2013, and some respondents cited this impact to explain why religious women may have relinquished (or bypassed) opportunities for impact at a higher level, instead focusing on service to local women. Female respondents spoke about the abuse (including horrific gender-based violence) and oppression of women across South Sudan, yet few details of specific actions—on the part of either religious women or religious men—undertaken to address that suffering were gleaned from the interviews.

When asked whether religious women could or should do other things to further peace, male and female respondents alike seemed keen for women to raise their profile through civil resistance or nonviolent action.<sup>15</sup> Religious women have organized, led, and participated in numerous nonviolent action activities such as peace marches in Juba and other towns. South Sudanese women activists in 2014 proposed a sex strike to end the war.<sup>16</sup> Other ideas showcasing women's potential power have been proposed as well:

They [women] should be in the middle and tell the groups to kill them first if they want to fight. Maybe they [the fighters] will fear because I heard from mum that men always don't like women to suffer, so I am sure if they stand in the middle of them they will fear.

These actions have been visible, yet were not enough for tangible impact.<sup>17</sup> These efforts are not without risk, as shown in these examples:

Religious women at one time protested marching on streets along Ministries Road [in Juba]. Perhaps Mr. President found the demonstration group when he was heading to his office; many women were prophesying that the convoy of the president will crash them to death but with grace of God when the president came his convoy slowed with compassion in his face, then we noted he was interested to address the demonstration group.

Women can go for street strikes but it must be women from different regions in order to prevent bias, or else "inconveniences" may occur because of a strike. What I mean is that if soldiers are sent to control the crowd they will find that these are their mothers and sisters from their own [mixed] tribes, so this will prevent any gunfire because a soldier will have his mother-in-law, or a sister, a mother, wife's sister, and so on, which will be an advantage.

Responses to questions about the legitimacy and importance of religious women require interpretation and analysis. The majority of religious actors think that women should play a greater role in peace, although what exactly is meant by this remains unclear because respondents were referring to peace in different ways. As one respondent put it, "Women are good listeners—they forgive their wrongdoers easily, and women attract people's attention. So when a woman speaks, many listen, and that makes them more important to the society." However, the extent to which that legitimacy extends beyond the local level or to broader peacebuilding roles is unclear. Religious and nonreligious respondents indicated that social norms appear to significantly hinder women's larger contributions to peace. There are also cultural norms about what constitutes peace efforts: one respondent cited women's roles feeding soldiers during the north-south civil war as demonstrating their importance to peace.

## MUSLIM LEADERS AND ISLAM

Near the end of the interim period of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, tensions arose among the Islamic community within South Sudan, when it was unclear how citizenship for northerners in the south or southerners in the north would play out. Because the vast majority of northerners in the south were assumed to be Muslim, there were rumblings of fear of backlash against Muslims in South Sudan. However what may have been missed is that many South Sudanese citizens are also Muslim. Reportedly a number of Muslims, particularly those with ties primarily to Sudan, left the new country, returning to the north until the situation clarified. Some Muslim properties in Juba were seized

(by the government) and looted, but twice (in 2014 and 2018), President Kiir has ordered officials to release the seized properties.<sup>18</sup> Despite these provocations, South Sudanese Muslims have maintained a quiet presence throughout the country. Our research sought to better understand the legitimacy and influence of Islamic religious actors as well as how they are perceived as members of the broader society in South Sudan.

The majority of respondents who did so commented positively about the relationship between Muslims and others in South Sudan more broadly: “Treatment [of Muslims in South Sudan] has changed on both sides because Muslims are treated fairly by Christians and Muslims are treating Christians in respect, which has never happened in the history of this country. Muslims and Christians are brothers in faith, the two sons of Abraham.”

Influential Islamic actors included Juma Said Ali, South Sudan’s presidential adviser on Islamic Affairs, who was mentioned the most frequently, five times in Juba and once in Yambio. Respondents highlighted Juma Ali’s participation in the Addis Ababa peace process as well as his services to the needy. Some respondents lauded peace efforts through interfaith institutions or entities that included Muslim groups, such as the interfaith committees that operate in many of the larger towns: “When we went to the grassroots in Duk, Maridi, and Yambio, we involved Muslim brothers in peace mediation because at the end war doesn’t know Muslims or Catholics.” One respondent stated that “in the past they [Muslims] were hated,” but then echoed the view of the majority of respondents: “but now they are friends.”

## PROPHETS AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Discussions of religion in South Sudan frequently reference indigenous, animist, or traditional beliefs, often referred to as African traditional religions (ATR). This research sought to understand the role or potential role for prophets or traditional religion practitioners relative to peace in South Sudan, but did not delve into the impact on peace of broader traditional religious practices,

which reside deep within the culture and intersect with other religious practices in unique ways. An excerpt from a book by Bishop Paride Taban showcases well the relationship between the ATR and burgeoning beliefs in Christianity and other Western or imported faith systems in South Sudan:

In Ma’di households there used to be a place near the door for a small clay pot. This particular spot was called *kidori*, a sacred place where food would be presented to the spirits. The food contained in that pot would be sacred food, which nobody was allowed to take or touch. . . . Sometimes the elders would consume the consecrated food on behalf of the whole family. . . . Years later, I found the paradoxical fact that . . . there was still no proper word to translate “tabernacle” of the Eucharist into Ma’di language. In the end, after some thought about the origin and meaning of that item in the local culture, *kidori* was justifiably chosen as the most meaningful word for it.<sup>19</sup>

According to our research, African traditional religions, the roles of prophets and prophecy in South Sudan, and the intersections of the ATR and other faith traditions are not well understood. Anthropologists Sharon Hutchinson and Naomi Pendle state that “their activities remain largely invisible to external observers.” These prophets, referred to as “owner-masters of divinity . . . claim the ability to channel divine powers over life and death, health and illness, fertility and infertility through his or her blessings and curses.”<sup>20</sup> The first Nuer prophets appeared in southern Sudan during the mid-1800s, but the origins of Dinka masters of the fishing spear, also part of a “hereditary priesthood,” are less certain.<sup>21</sup> However, their roles are similar in terms of lending divine guidance on matters related to life, death, and social relations here on earth. According to Hutchinson and Pendle, prophets play important roles in community actions related to peace and violence. A controversial use of prophecy relates to Riek Machar’s claim that his political ascendancy would fulfill a prophecy from Ngundeng, the Nuer prophet.<sup>22</sup>

Research on the roles of prophets in contemporary

South Sudan, particularly since 2013, generated a fairly polarized set of responses. We asked respondents to name a traditional prophet if they could, but did not ask whether the respondent follows the prophet or has simply heard the name. The majority of those who responded mentioned (twenty-two times) Ngundeng, the Nuer prophet (who died in 1906). Ngundeng was mentioned most frequently in Juba PoC (sixteen times), but was also mentioned across all other locations.<sup>23</sup> A prophet called Nyikang was mentioned four times, but only in Juba PoC and Wau. Nyikang is a Shilluk prophet, known as “the founder of the nation, the first king, the culture hero and at the center of religious activities.” Nyikang “is thought to have ‘disappeared’ [rather than died], and to be immortal.”<sup>24</sup>

While a sizable number of respondents claimed not to know much about prophets, many had opinions about them whether they followed one or not. These responses ranged from believing that prophets can be key actors for peace in their local area to describing prophets as evil charlatans who manipulate simple people for their own profit or interests. Excerpts of interviews show the disparate views of prophets’ roles or potential roles in peace and conflict:

They encourage conflict with their work by giving their medicine and telling you [if you use it] you will be strong and able to fight. They don’t have a role [in peace] because they talk with the voice of Satan.

They [prophets] are so influential on conflict by telling people wrong things, for example when someone lost his or her cow. When you go to the prophet to ask who took your cows, they will point you to the wrong person. You will go and attack that person or family and that person will start to revenge. Or if a sickness is disturbing you, he will say someone has cursed you, and he will mention any person that maybe he doesn’t like or someone who doesn’t like him, so that brings conflict between people.

A small number of respondents viewed the role of at least some prophets in a positive light:

Some prophets in South Sudan have a positive role. Some of them slaughter or offer animals for peace and say “God accept this offer in exchange of bringing peace to this lovable country and to my people.”

In summary, it seems the importance of prophets for peace or mobilization to violence relates to the belief system of their followers as well as the legitimacy of the prophet in their eyes. Given that the prophets cited in our research are no longer “alive” (but live on through their prophecies), it is unclear how they continue to influence peace or conflict in their communities.<sup>25</sup>

## RELIGIOUS YOUTH

Respondents also appear to have mixed views on the role of religious youth in South Sudan. The majority of nonreligious respondents across all locations said that youth involved in the church play an important role, describing them as “pillars of the church,” “the backbone of society,” and “the future.” However, the only young religious leader highlighted in the interviews was Makal Ter Goach, mentioned six times in Juba PoC but not elsewhere, indicating perhaps legitimacy only within the camp. In one of two focus group discussions, several “young,” rising leaders were mentioned (though several of them are fifty years old or more):

There are young religious actors who are rising, brave, intelligent, and strong. We have Bishop Santo Laku Pio of Catholic, Joso Kijjo, James Nyiro, Nicolas Abdalah, Justine Badi [the new Episcopal Church archbishop], Edward Hiiboro from Tambura-Yambio Catholic Diocese, Juma Said of Islamic Council, Antony Poggo, Moses Deng Bol, Abraham Yel, and finally we have Bishop of Lainya. All these religious actors are young and currently influential at national and state levels.

This relative lack of young religious leaders (under forty) who transcend local visibility and reach national visibility (and legitimacy) may indicate a number of dynamics, including perhaps a lack of opportunities within the religious hierarchy for religious youth. One religious actor explained that more senior religious actors will “test”

**Respondents contrasted religious youth with youth who are not active in religious affairs, explaining that poverty, conflict, and lack of opportunity have made religion less attractive to young people in their communities.**

religious youth, looking for humility among those who may be rising leaders. Yet while humility is a desirable trait in many respects, humble youth may not be able to “make waves” (and therefore become more visible or well known) in the same way that more assertive youth might. This dynamic could reflect a generation gap within South Sudanese society, particularly pronounced between the generation that fought the north-south civil war and those who may have been displaced youth during that time. Several respondents did mention dynamic, evangelical leaders who are establishing their own churches, a development that could be a reaction to or rejection of the more hierarchical and traditional structures of the major Christian denominations.

Both religious and nonreligious respondents said that religiously engaged youth are respected for their energy, devotion, and the unique roles they play in the church. Religious respondents provided insights into how religious youth are trained to become future religious leaders in South Sudan. Religious youth (males) are trained as altar boys, encouraged to attend Sunday school, and encouraged to participate in community activities. During their formative years with churches or mosques, young religious leaders are coached, mentored, and provided with real-time feedback. They also undertake a number of tasks within their church: singing in the choir; cleaning the church; organizing Bible study, Sunday school, prayers, meetings, conferences, and workshops; helping conduct trainings on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, leadership skills, agricultural skills; raising money for the church; and leading sports events. Youth who excel are sponsored by churches and sent to school (often abroad) for theology, Bible studies, and training. Additionally, rising

religious youth are given opportunities that test their abilities, such as the opportunity to travel and spread the word of God as evangelists, as well as practical duties within the church to test whether they are “qualified” for more demanding roles.

Respondents also contrasted religious youth with youth who are not active in religious affairs, explaining that poverty, conflict, and lack of opportunity have made religion less attractive to young people in their communities. In Yambio in particular, respondents repeatedly emphasized that young people steal, do drugs, rape, and fight. As one respondent in Wau explained, “They can develop the country, but they can destroy the country as well.” Responses suggest that religious institutions and international development organizations can counteract the lure of these activities by offering employment opportunities through the church, encouraging youth to launch income-generating activities, providing direct support and training, and providing enjoyable activities for youth such as community sport teams or music groups.

During numerous consultations, the research team endeavored to discover mechanisms for religiously engaged youth to interact with or try to influence youth engaged in militias or war-related activities, yet it discovered no specific set of activities with the intention of influencing armed youth to end their role in the war. In addition, the South Sudan Council of Churches has no staff member dedicated to youth. (The author was told that “when budget cuts come, the youth desk and the women’s desk are the first to be cut.”) Whether or not this is true, this vacancy means a gap in terms of focused outreach to influence armed youth.



Members of the Catholic community in Yei, in southern South Sudan, celebrate the Feast of Saint Joseph. (Photo by Sean Sprague/Alamy Stock)

## Peace Efforts

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One of the primary reasons to map the religious landscape in South Sudan is to understand who the legitimate religious actors are and to make recommendations to policymakers and practitioners about how to engage with and support those actors to more effectively build peace and to prevent, manage, or mitigate violent conflict, as well as to build foundations toward future reconciliation and societal peace. Before making those recommendations, it is important to understand what religious actors and institutions are already doing to try to bring peace to South Sudan, and to understand in what ways they are succeeding, or falling short, and why.

### TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Although respondents provided insights about specific acts that lend credibility to individual religious actors, this survey sought to understand what religious actors and

institutions are doing generally with respect to peace by asking about the peace tools and techniques used by religious actors. The majority of respondents indicated that sermons or prayers are the most important peace techniques religious actors use, followed by peace conferences and peace and reconciliation initiatives (see figure 5 on page 23). Yet despite listing sermons and prayers as the most important peace techniques religious actors use, the vast majority of respondents agreed that praying alone is not enough, and that action needs to be taken.<sup>26</sup> However, while the most commonly suggested form of action was to convene peace conferences (65 percent), exactly half of respondents cited religious sermons as ways of taking action beyond praying.

This information presents an obvious conundrum: if the most common peace actions are prayers and sermons,

**Religious actors run schools and clinics, provide trauma counseling, feed the hungry, pray and care for the sick, elderly and orphans, and conduct efforts to mitigate violence and mediate disputes ranging from marriage quarrels to violent attacks.**

yet the majority of respondents do not believe that praying is enough (to turn the tide toward peace), something must be missing. To better understand, we debriefed the research team, who clarified that their perception of what respondents felt was that the greatest power of religious actors is through their spirituality to influence people to be better peace actors, while others recognized the reality that peace was not forthcoming despite the extensive efforts of religious actors and institutions to translate spirituality into reduced violence.

Analysis of this dynamic raises several possibilities. First, prayers and sermons have multiple purposes—to glorify God (or whatever deity they are intending to glorify), to ask for help or support via the power of prayer, or to thank the deity for a blessing. According to the American pastor and author Mark Batterson, the “primary purpose of prayer is not to change circumstances; the primary purpose of prayer is to change us!”<sup>27</sup> In that light, prayers and sermons are tools clergy use to influence their followers, as in this response: “Religious leaders normally use sermons or prayers when preaching about peace, and sometimes they use very important quotes from the Bible. For example, God said if you kill someone, then God will punish you. So those quotes from the Bible make warring parties come together and make peace.” In this case, the hope may be that people who hear these sermons and prayers will become committed peace actors, a hope that somewhat assumes the individual has the power, will, or ability to become a peace actor. In the words of one senior religious leader, “We pray so God intervenes. But we as human beings must act.”<sup>28</sup> But an individuals’ ability to build peace beyond their circle of family and friends would take planning, skills, and strategy. In other words, the respondents who indicated prayer is not enough may inherently understand the potential gap between inner peace and societal peace.

The researchers across all four research locations indicated that religious actors were very busy, meaning that in some cases the researchers had to wait days or reschedule interviews several times. Religious institutions provide services of all kinds, and respondents reported that religious actors not only run schools and clinics, preside at funeral services and burials, provide trauma counseling, feed the hungry, and pray and care for the sick, elderly, and orphans, they also conduct efforts to mitigate violence and mediate disputes ranging from marriage quarrels to violent attacks. Because much of the country is beyond the effective control of state institutions, the religious sector has taken on roles throughout South Sudan traditionally performed by state actors that keep them acting—and praying—at a rapid pace.

Peace conferences were cited as an important form of action, and certainly religious actors and institutions in South Sudan have historically been active in peace conferences from the 1998 Wunlit conference, to challenging efforts like the Jonglei Peace Initiative of 2012. A report published by the United States Institute of Peace in 2014 included insights into why peace conferences seldom produce sustainable impact in Sudan and South Sudan.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to get the “right” people in the room, and peace agreements are often actually just sets of recommendations. In addition, peace conferences are primarily focused on stopping subregional conflicts at the clan or tribal level, and are not enough to bring about national-level conflict resolution and change (which is not to say the method does not have value).

It is important to consider what the SSCC actually does and how it operates. As mentioned, the SSCC’s Action Plan for Peace (APP) serves to focus the organization’s peacebuilding efforts. Formally launched in August 2015, the APP has four pillars that together aim to channel the



South Sudanese Bishop Emmanuel Muryi conducts a prayer service with refugees of South Sudan's civil war in the Palorinya settlement camp in northern Uganda in 2017. (Photo by James Akena/Reuters)

religious sectors' grassroots engagement and decades of experience into impact on today's dynamic:

- **Advocacy** provides a way to influence opinions and policies toward peacefully resolving conflict, changing the narrative from one of conflict to one of peace.
- **Neutral forums** are intended to provide a safe space for stakeholders to discuss root causes of conflict and envision a peaceful future through dialogue.
- **Reconciliation** aims to heal relationships within the nation with the thought that only through forgiveness and reconciliation can South Sudanese live as one nation.
- **Organization strengthening** is for the SSCC itself, to strengthen its organizational capacity and structures to manage large-scale and long-lasting processes with professionalism and accountability. It enables the mapping and enhancing of national capacity, strengths, and opportunities within the SSCC.<sup>30</sup>

Closer examination showcases how each pillar translates into action. A primary focus of the advocacy pillar is peace messages and statements. These statements and messages are posted on the SSCC website, but with internet access so limited in South Sudan, one wonders whether these messages reach the grassroots. As mentioned, the SSCC recently launched a radio outreach campaign to raise awareness of its activities. However, one respondent indicated that government sometimes restricts access to radio, another dynamic of war that may inhibit the ability of the religious sector to be more effective. Beyond their peace messages, most of the SSCC's advocacy appears directed at external actors, with recent efforts in Ethiopia and Uganda, Finland, Canada, the United States, and a retreat in Zambia. This observation may highlight an opportunity for the SSCC to refocus its advocacy efforts internally, using messaging more directed at stopping violence within and between communities.

Neutral forums seem more directly focused on stopping violence, and the SSCC has had some major successes. An interviewee engaged with the Pochalla peace process described close collaboration between the SSCC and local actors, resulting in positive outcomes and continued follow-up activities. The Wau neutral forum may have coincided with concerted and successful efforts by security actors to bring stability to the area. Also, the SSCC supported the work of the Yambio Interfaith Council in a multistate effort in 2017, demonstrating that SSCC engagement may be effective in augmenting local efforts and convening actors in ways that local actors alone cannot do. Despite these successes and plans for additional neutral forums, it is unlikely such efforts will be sufficient in and of themselves to curb the level of violence witnessed in South Sudan.

The third pillar, reconciliation, must be responsive to a “ripeness” that will ebb when fighting is widespread and potentially spread when peace returns. South Sudanese observers recognize that these processes are sensitive and the timing of them is critical. The SSCC, with its regional hubs and local relationships, may be the best-placed entity within South Sudan to tackle an initiative of such scale. To maintain trust in the process, previous attempts at reconciliation remind that a truly neutral process design is key to maintaining the legitimacy and neutrality of religious actors and institutions who participate.

Finally, organizational capacity building may be the most important of the four. That SSCC was not named as a most important religious institution for peace should bring reflection but also offers opportunity. Some respondents described the SSCC as bureaucratic and said its initiatives move very slowly, a dynamic that should be addressed. In at least two cases described in the interviews, requests by local churches or dioceses for services by religious-affiliated NGOs needed to first be approved by the SSCC, a control mechanism that may seem prudent but which could also be delaying much-needed assistance.

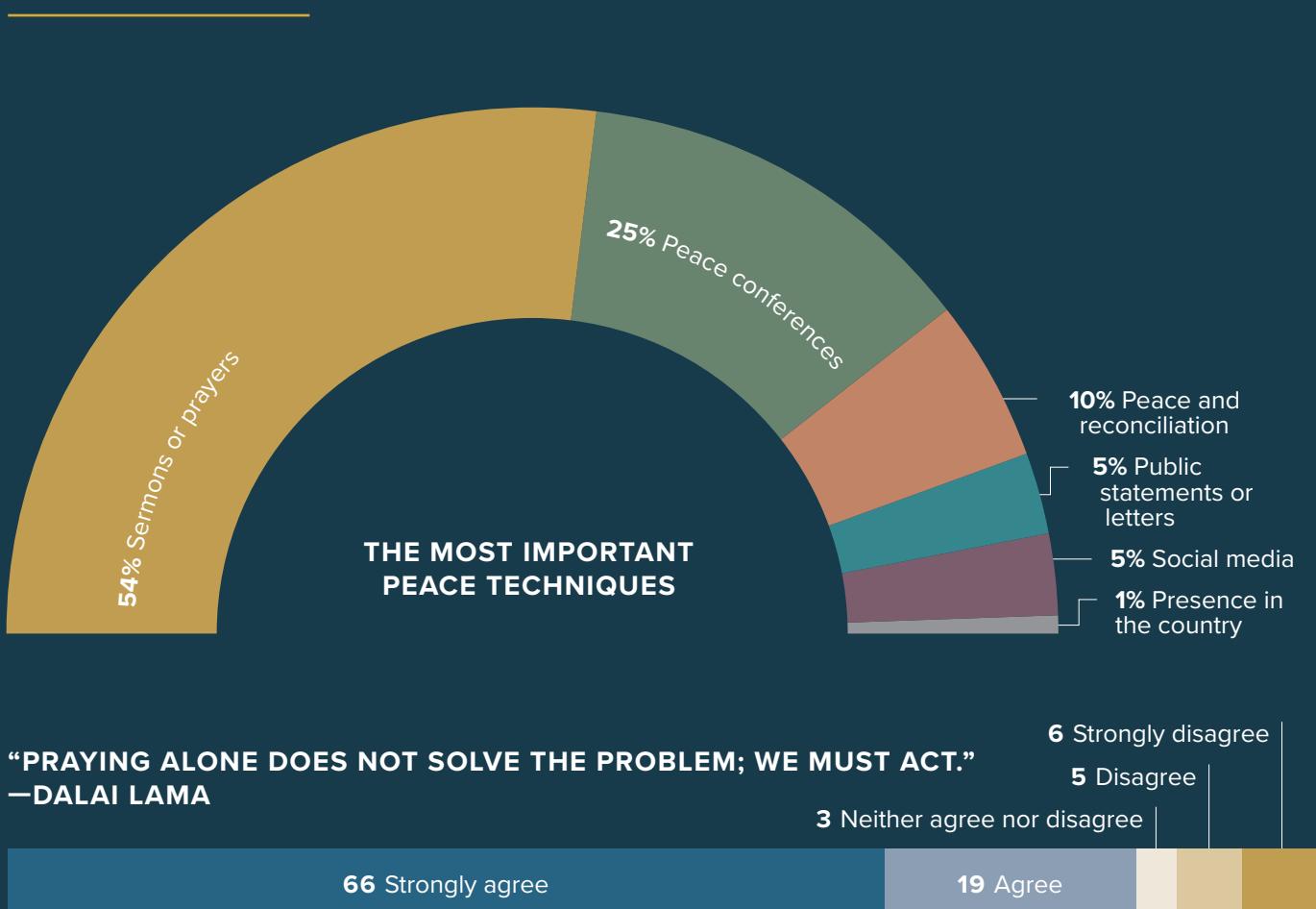
## RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND PEACE PROCESSES

Because of the nature of violent conflict in South Sudan, there is not just one peace process, but instead many processes at many levels. Fighting related to cattle raids and retaliation, as well as clan and subclan struggles related to power, resources, or allegiances, have worsened since the civil war started in 2013. The ebb and flow of local to subregional violent conflicts that displace people and result in turmoil and death was seemingly constant and has not ended despite the revitalized peace agreement. In these and similar cases, religious actors were cited in the research for numerous courageous peace efforts, from the landmark efforts of Bishop Paride Taban to negotiate peace with David Yau Yau in 2014 to efforts to negotiate with rebel groups ravaging Eastern Equatoria in 2016.

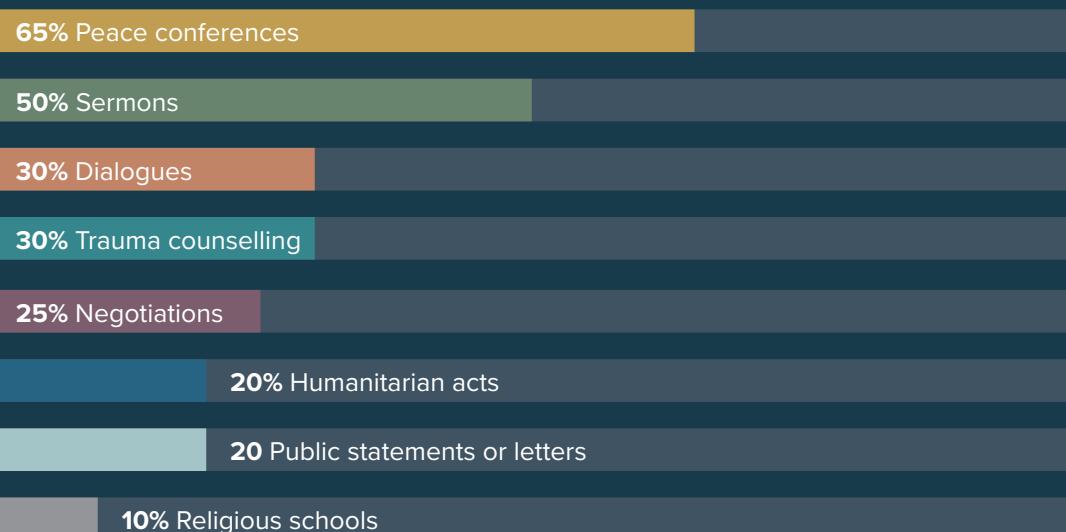
In addition to numerous local peace efforts, religious actors have had a continuous presence in peace efforts led by Africa’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development since they were launched in response to the 2013 crisis. The religious delegation served in observer status for most of that time. Consultations on this process produced varying views on the role of the religious delegation at the talks. Some said that observer status protects the religious actors from being tainted as political and therefore preserves their neutrality; others believe they could better use their legitimacy and standing as negotiators at the table as leverage to more effectively pressure political actors. Some respondents questioned the legitimacy and role of peace actors participating in the peace process in general; several claimed that the religious representatives themselves are not legitimate because they have been appointed by or needed to be approved by the government, an allegation clearly meant to undermine their legitimacy as independent peace actors. As a participant in a focus group described the dynamic,

**Figure 5. Peace Techniques—Prayers or Action?**

A majority of respondents indicated that sermons or prayers are the most important peace techniques available to a religious actor in South Sudan, yet a majority also believe that prayers alone are not sufficient.



#### WHAT DOES TAKING ACTION MEAN TO YOU?



## **Whether the religious actors are approved by the government or not, the allegations that they are beholden to the government undermine their ability to play the role they are meant to play as impartial civil society actors.**

In the current peace process political leaders do not emphasize how to restore security and stability to the country and its civilians, but instead they are focusing on power sharing rather than recognizing the suffering of their citizens. Neither religious leaders nor women are given top priority to present their views in the talks. Those representing these groups are not given [a] full role to play in Addis Ababa . . . because they are appointed and selected by government to go and enjoy hotels and per diem.

Other focus group participants were gentler in their perceptions of religious actors in peace processes: “Religious leaders are struggling to participate in this peace process despite being ignored by the government, despite allegations said against church leaders that they are partisan to government. Church leaders are facing it rough but still continuing to pass the message of peace to the leadership.”

Whether the religious actors are approved by the government or not, the allegations that they are beholden to the government undermine their ability to play the role they are meant to play as impartial civil society actors. In an interview in February 2018, lead religious negotiator Bishop Enoch Tombe indicated that religious leaders must maintain a critical distance—close to power, but not too close. He said, “Our role is faith, and you cannot order faith. Religious leaders are answerable to a higher authority, so they are actually above the government.”<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, although some women from the South Sudan Council of Churches have attended sessions of the peace process, the presence of religious women as representatives of the religious actors has been uneven, a point not missed by our respondents:

Women are not participating in the peace initiative because men believe they are superior and women are nothing. There is this structural discrimination whether in the

government or church which always isolates women from involvement in some activities. When they were selecting people who are going to Addis Ababa for talks, the men selected themselves solely without proper women representation.

These insights were augmented by additional consultations that helped clarify that in some cases women religious representatives have been requested by the mediation team, were selected, and even had travel arranged before having their participation canceled by unknown authorities.

The SSCC leadership seems keen to tap the legitimacy and standing of the religious leadership in South Sudan to influence peace efforts and is willing to try new approaches. A group of twenty religious actors underwent a two-day mediation training in December 2017. Within months, their skills were put to the test when the religious representatives were asked to mediate or facilitate conversations for the High Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF). Although they were unable to achieve significant agreements on issues, senior SSCC secretariat members described a new sense of openness and shifts in parties’ willingness to talk and listen as a result of the religious leadership’s role.

The request for religious representatives to facilitate or mediate part of the process for the May 2018 HLRF indicates a trust in their ability to lead and their legitimacy as leaders that cross the ethnic and political divides. However, the religious actors participating in the HLRF may have been asked to do things they were not well prepared to do. Some skeptics considered that the religious actors may actually have been set up to fail in an effort to undermine their legitimacy. This skepticism showcases a desperate need for South Sudan to move beyond signing agreements to building a society of trust that holds its politicians accountable, a



South Sudan's President Salva Kiir (left) and opposition leader Riek Machar (right) pray before signing a peace agreement in Addis Ababa in May 2014.  
(Photo by Goran Tomasevic/Reuters)

role religious actors may be well suited to play. "While in Addis Ababa earlier this year, the UN Secretary-General lamented that he had 'never seen a political elite with so little interest in the well-being of its own people,'" a dynamic that begs for an entity to be "the voice of the voiceless."<sup>32</sup>

Another initiative that may have benefited from religious engagement is the National Dialogue. This process was intended to be a forum contributing to an eventual transition or societal change; however, due to links with the government, it was tainted as political almost as soon as it began. Still, some religious leaders joined the effort, reasoning that if the National Dialogue were going to happen it would be best for religious actors to help guide it toward improved engagement and outcomes and to share their experience with dialogue. One focus group participant, however, indicated that religious leaders lost respect by participating in it, one

said it was a waste of time, and still others suggested that, like the peace processes, the National Dialogue merely provided participants with an opportunity to travel abroad.

As this report was being written, yet another power-sharing deal among elites was signed, this time in Khartoum.<sup>33</sup> Observers and critics questioned the value of the massive bureaucracy, the power-sharing nature of the agreement, and speculated about the potential impact of a Hybrid Court for South Sudan when so many atrocities and crimes have been committed. The knowledgeable religious actor John Ashworth perhaps captured the current dynamic best: "Perhaps the most pertinent question would be: does this agreement address in any way at all the root causes of the conflicts in South Sudan? It would appear that the South Sudan Council of Churches' Action Plan for Peace (APP) is the only current process which attempts to do so."<sup>34</sup>

## NONVIOLENT ACTION

For a number of observers of the churches and religious sector in South Sudan, the question arises as to why the religious community cannot coalesce around a common strategy for bringing about peace. There are myriad examples—from Martin Luther King Jr. to Mohandas Gandhi—for inspiration about how religious actors using the right framework of nonviolent civil resistance at the right time have been able to “move mountains.” Yet to date organized civil resistance in South Sudan has been limited and fairly muted.

Religious women have held monthly peace marches in Juba, and other women’s protests have proceeded in several locations, but these peaceful marches have failed to reach critical mass. Despite this lack of impact to date, female respondents were keen to share ideas that indicate they are thinking about, and are at least somewhat aware of, their potential for power through nonviolent action:

“I think women should make a strike by going to the street.”

“They should go sing with a loud voice up to the office of the president so the leaders will hear them.”

“They should go tell our leaders that they are tired since their children and their husbands are the ones who have been killed.”

“They should go to the front line and call for peace since men are not able to.”

Interestingly, none of the respondents suggested that religious men should participate in or initiate nonviolent

action activities. In fact, during numerous conversations with religious actors and SSCC members, they responded that everything they do is nonviolent action and displayed a general lack of nuanced understanding of strategic nonviolence.

In response to these observations, our research team added a question to the two focus groups conducted after the end of the key informant interviews: “Are you aware of whether South Sudanese religious actors have ever attempted a larger effort to organize nonviolent campaigns or create a nonviolent movement to end the violence in South Sudan? If so, can you describe this effort? If not, why do you think they have not?” The following responses provide clarification and insight:

Religious leaders in South Sudan don’t have that freedom of creating a movement against political leaders. They can get arrested immediately because this government is dictating every idea that comes from the religious leaders or institutions.

From my understanding, when a man raped a young girl of ten years, women came out to strike [in protest], and then armed soldiers were sent to obstruct the strike.

These responses reflect a lack of understanding about the principles and strategies of nonviolent action tactics and approaches, presenting both challenges—in terms of helping religious actors think differently about strategic action—and opportunities—for building the capacity to learn about and use techniques for building peace beyond formal peace processes, peace conferences, and local peace efforts.



A simple brick-and-mortar church in South Sudan. (Photo by By John Wollwerth/Shutterstock)

## Challenges

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Religious actors have generations of presence in South Sudan, legitimacy, and access at the grassroots level, from churches and mosques in the smallest villages to cathedrals in many of the larger cities. Religious actors are present at all major life events, from births—where religious women frequently serve as midwives—to death—where religious actors perform rituals that console the survivors. They interact directly with a sizable percentage of schoolchildren throughout their educational journey, and they work with religiously affiliated institutions such as Catholic Relief Services, Norwegian Church Aid, and World Vision International, to name a few, that provide humanitarian aid across the country, including in the most volatile and fragile conflict zones. Yet given their legitimacy, access, and standing, what is preventing the religious sector from turning its legitimacy into influence to end violent conflict? It is important

to explore the challenges facing religious actors and institutions that impede their impact.

### RELIGION AND POLITICS

Because politics are considered a key source of conflict, and political leaders are widely seen as driving that conflict (see figure 2), any action or statement deemed political presents great challenges for religious actors. It is clear that the use of the term *politics* itself presents great potential for misunderstanding, and if our research team is any indication, also generates anxiety. What is it about politics in South Sudan that causes these concerns? To paraphrase the famous quote from Carl von Clausewitz's *On the Nature of War*, if war is politics by other means, then accusations of religious actors participating in politics is accusing them of participating in the war effort. In other words,

There are myriad examples—from Martin Luther King Jr. to Mohandas Gandhi—for inspiration about how religious actors have been able to “move mountains.” Yet to date organized civil resistance in South Sudan has been limited and fairly muted.

speaking truth to power on either side of the war effort is not necessarily seen as influencing people toward peace. In a direct example of this dynamic, South Sudan’s vice president, James Wani Igga, in May 2018 made public statements in Juba accusing unnamed religious actors of promoting violence through their statements: “Some clergymen have resorted to preaching against personalities in this country. They are misinforming believers that President Salva Kiir and the government are bad. . . . They [clergy] should not mix politics with religion.”<sup>35</sup> One respondent said, “Religious leaders are sometime involved in political issues. For example, I heard that Archbishop of Episcopal Church of South Sudan Daniel Deng Bul wants to be president of South Sudan in the future, which is weird for a religious leader to be involved in politics.”

Clearly, religious actors and institutions in South Sudan must navigate a fine line when it comes to engagement in peace efforts because any criticism of the government can be construed as a sign of anti-government bias. While preparing for key informant interviews, some of our researchers became uncomfortable even discussing the subject of politics. According to the researchers, the topic also made some interviewees uncomfortable. In the South Sudanese context, rather than politics being war by other (nonviolent) methods, politics has been conducted through war. It makes sense then that this subject presents research challenges and produces mixed signals about how religious actors should intersect (or not) with topics deemed political.

Our research tried to dig deeper to understand what it is about politics that presents such challenges. For one, politics is associated with dishonesty, and religious actors are not supposed to lie. According to

one respondent, “If you are in the politics you need to learn how to lie. Religious leaders need to be the ‘amen’ of truth and transparency.” A religious actor respondent highlighted the risks to religious actors if they venture too far into that realm: “We’re guided by principles of the church, so we’re not allowed to talk about or get involved in political matters because politics is a dirty game. In the current situation, a brother can kill a brother for politics and thus our church [prohibits] politics from the church.”

Although they abhor politics in the church, respondents do expect religious actors to “speak truth to power” with courage: “In each diocese there is a bishop in a particular diocese, within those bishops there are strong ones who call a spade a spade, and there are those who are afraid or cowards who cannot call a spoon by its name.” Other respondents showcased the fine line religious leaders walk in terms of navigating interactions with politics and political leaders. If the religious actor indicates bias toward one tribe or one politician, they have stepped out of bounds, and they have been called out in some cases at the highest level:

One time the president tried to call all bishops to his office. He told them to advise some priests to preach the word of God, and . . . they should stop attacking [him] directly: “It is due of my respect to the church I am calling you in order to take this message to your colleagues in various parishes to amend their ways of preaching the word of God rather than attacking politicians.”

Clearly views on this topic are mixed. About half of respondents believe religious actors should try to influence political actors.<sup>36</sup> Nonreligious respondents expect religious leaders to play a central role in building peace but expect them to remain politically

neutral while doing so. Respondents overwhelmingly blame the latest civil war on politicians, and the qualitative interviews suggest that politics is largely viewed in a negative light. When debriefing the research team, comments reflected the need for religious actors to distinguish between participation in “good” politics (perhaps dialogue and negotiation) and “bad” politics (such as hate speech and inciting violence), as highlighted in this interview:

Politics to me means thinking about how to win the bigger population in order to be their leader, uniting them, leading them in an appropriate manner. What people currently do in South Sudan, dividing people, that is not politics—that is filthy or dirty politics. Politics is where someone thinks on behalf of voiceless ones, making them comfortable, delivering good services to them, providing security to their living environment, and having a good system of justice and accountability, putting laws in order and in practice.

Yet religious leaders report difficulties with remaining politically neutral no matter what they do. It is unclear whether religious actors are perceived as political when they say positive things about peace actions or reflect on the suffering of vulnerable populations such as displacements or gender-based violence. It was clear that efforts to denounce violence are often taken as a biased attack against one side of the conflict. This concern with the perceived bias of religious actors when they call out behaviors they believe are counter to peace presents tremendous challenges for them.

The research team discussed this dichotomy during debriefs. The researchers’ interpretation was that the vast majority of the respondents want religious leaders to speak truth to power and to guide politicians to be moral and compassionate leaders, but to avoid the “bad” politics that divides people and perpetuates violence. The view of religious respondents is that they seem unable to navigate this chasm because any statement can be construed (or misconstrued) as an indication of bias.

## RELIGION AND TRIBALISM

Respondents were asked about the role of religious actors relative to tribalism, a complex concept in South Sudan. Although South Sudan is home to some sixty-four tribes, tribalism generally refers to political divides related to larger ethnopolitical blocks as well as political favoritism on the part of those in positions of power and authority. The research sought to understand the role of religious actors and institutions in either exacerbating tribal or ethnic cleavages as well as their potential to play a longer-term role in healing relationships and bringing about reconciliation. It also sought to understand whether churches or religious entities were divided by tribe or ethnic group—in essence, whether denominations serve primarily one ethnic group or serve diverse communities. In general, respondents felt that religious institutions play a positive role in countering negative tribal animosity:

Peaceful coexistence motivates the religious actors because all the religious actors bring people together from different tribes and make them one tribe in the name of one God. There is no tribalism in the church.

In our church we have people from different tribes and we pray in the same place. I never heard someone saying that the church belongs to specific tribes, so according to me I can say all religions serve all the tribes equally.

Yet while debriefing the researchers and in several of the interviews, the phrase “the church is divided” arose. Some explained that the phrase relates to the competition for adherents, which historically speaking is true. During the Anglo-Egyptian administration of the mid-nineteenth century, southern Sudan was divided into zones to limit the competition among missionary groups flooding into the region for converts. But in Juba town and Juba PoC, respondents referred to the division of Christians into small churches established along ethnic lines, or ethnic-line voting in the election of bishops, as sources of division. According to one focus group participant,

There is definitely division in the church. Even within one church, people fight over the congregation. For example, as a pastor, when I don't get the chance of becoming head of a certain church, I begin to form my own church. This in itself is a division. Additionally, the fact that someone says, that church is Catholic so I don't pray there, this one is a Pentecostal church and that one is Presbyterian, leads to a lot of division and confuses people for no reason. Even the same churches within the same denomination are not saying the same thing. We all have different voices in terms of how we try to bring peace in South Sudan. This is one of the things that is spoiling what churches want to do. So if the churches are divided and the church seems to be something that should show people the way, how will people get united?

But the divisions among churches can have other meanings as well. According to the researchers, Catholic Mass, at least in Juba town, is conducted in English, Arabic, or Bari, the language of the ethnic group from the area where Juba town sits. Because mass is conducted in the languages spoken by greater numbers of people, the researchers felt the Catholic services were inclusive of all tribes and therefore do not promote tribalism. Services of Protestant denominations, however, are normally conducted in any number of local languages or mother tongues. The researchers said that people from specific tribes were likely to attend services in their own language or a service in a closely related language they can understand well, and therefore Protestant services tend not to be as ethnically diverse as Catholic services.<sup>37</sup>

The phrase about division among the churches was interpreted by some interviewees as meaning that the churches are divided at the leadership level, in essence, from the level of the South Sudan Council of Churches on down. Indeed, in private interviews with the research team as well as other interviews, divisions within the SSCC seem clear. What remains unclear is the root causes of these divisions. Some informed observers traced the divisions to the presence of strong

and divisive personalities; others described legacy divisions related to disagreements over management issues and mismanagement of resources in the past.

Yet another description of what is driving division in the churches relates to a new trend in worship options involving significant numbers of smaller churches (one number given was 380) that do not qualify as churches in the eyes of the government, and therefore need to register as nongovernmental organizations. During an interview in the Juba PoC site 3, interviewees spoke of fragmentation of the churches and a rising presence of alternatives (some used the words Pentecostal or Evangelical) to mainstream churches. Respondents from Juba town talked of for-profit churches that functioned much like membership organizations, service organizations, or quasi-medical clinics:

The variety of churches is another factor contributing to the lack of cooperation among religious actors and that is what is meant by the above statement because there are also privatized churches and they have different goals or roles to play, to the extent where some are doing business admitting "patients" [for healing] and charging them money for being prayed for.

Researchers, as mentioned earlier, described these churches as prosperity churches that follow a doctrine known as prosperity theology.<sup>38</sup> Some said these worship services are more exciting than traditional services. Some observers see this trend as harmful (perhaps because it may be drawing worshippers away from traditional services), but also because these churches can be considered exploitative, whereas others see it as a natural draw for war-ravaged South Sudanese. The South Sudan Council of Churches secretariat indicated in an interview that the council does not recognize as churches entities that do not (accurately) preach the gospel of Jesus.



A cross dangles from the barrel of a gun belonging to a soldier in a camp on the outskirts of Juba. (Photo by Anna Mayuni Kerber/DPA/Alamy Live News)

## Potential Risks of Religious Engagement

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Despite the fact that nonreligious actors have high expectations for religious actors to remain neutral, promote unity, and put an end to tribalism, the researchers asked questions to determine whether and, if so, how, religious actors might intentionally or unintentionally encourage violence. To this end, interviewers asked respondents whether they were aware of situations in which religious actors encouraged people to fight or that generated hatred between groups. Overall, the vast majority of nonreligious actors said they were not aware of any situations in which religious actors encouraged fighting or hatred; the vast majority of respondents indicated that religious actors do not think violence is acceptable in any situation. Higher

proportions of respondents from Juba PoC and Juba town responded that religious actors sometimes think violence is acceptable than in Yambio, but no respondents from Wau reported that religious actors sometimes think violence is acceptable.

The responses also indicated that the legitimacy of religious actors is closely tied to their role as advocates for peace and their responsibility not to exacerbate ethnic divisions. Numerous respondents insisted that any religious actor who encourages violence is not a real religious actor, or that the label of religious actor would not be suitable for an individual who encourages violence. Some who reported situations in which

**Figure 6. Negative Influence Techniques**

While many people surveyed for this report cited prayers and sermons as positive techniques for fostering peace, an even greater percentage cited the potential for religious actors to use prayers and sermons to disseminate negative views.



## **Religious actors have paid a high price for their peace efforts. Research conducted in 2017 by Radio Tamazuj found that (at least) forty church leaders had been killed between 2013 and 2017.**

religious actors have encouraged fighting or hatred were able to provide first- or secondhand accounts of religious actors doing so; others had general impressions or gave examples such as religious actors encouraging communal fighting over land, employing hate speech against other ethnic groups, and becoming politicized, which respondents consider to be equivalent to encouraging violence. Respondents also discussed situations in which religious actors feel violence is acceptable. In addition to politicization and communal fighting, respondents discussed how self-defense, either in the case of personal defense or defense against invasion, could be considered by some religious actors to be an exception to the rule of avoiding violence.

A sizable number of respondents feel that religious actors sometimes disseminate negative views. When asked whether religious leaders ever try to negatively influence their followers, 27 percent of respondents responded with yes (22 percent among religious respondents and 32.6 percent among nonreligious). These respondents were then asked to list the techniques religious leaders use to negatively influence their followers. As shown in figure 6, ironically, respondents most commonly mentioned sermons or prayers, followed by provision of services and peace conferences as means used by religious actors to negatively influence followers.

The idea that religious leaders might be inciting violence unintentionally was mentioned across multiple interviews. Many respondents said that religious leaders need to be more careful with their speech and mindful of the ways in which their words are interpreted by others. As one respondent from Juba explained,

Yes, there are religious actors who encourage violence through their words, and I don't really know whether they

do it intentionally or without knowing. For example, in 2011, I was traveling to Bor with government officials. When we were eating lunch, one of the pastors made a kind of joke about another ethnic group, and both the pastors and government officials were laughing. I felt sorry and told them not to do that. Speaking like that against another ethnic group is a form of violence. It is like a circle; it would not surprise me if the pastor participates in physical violence.

A religious respondent from Wau explained that sometimes even scripture can be misinterpreted:

If a priest tries to link some existing situations to the Bible's readings, they [the government] misinterpret the readings by saying that priests are criticizing the government. That's a major problem between us and the government.

Strikingly, many respondents indicated that they themselves sometimes, often, or always feel hatred toward people from other ethnic groups. Religious actors have an important opportunity to help address ethnic animosity and hatred in South Sudan, a change that will be essential to long-term peace.

### **ATTACKS**

Both religious and nonreligious actors spoke about the risks and outright dangers faced by religious leaders amid the dynamics of violence and peace efforts. Religious actors have paid a high price for their peace efforts. Radio Tamazuj, an independent radio broadcaster in South Sudan, conducted research in 2017 and found that (at least) forty church leaders had been killed between 2013 and 2017. According to the report,

The investigations found that 32 of the 40 church leaders killed were ordained priests, mostly of South Sudan's Episcopal Church, while others were from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and Catholic Church. . . . The other seven church leaders included evangelists and lay readers who were also brutally killed in different churches in Western Equatoria in 2016.<sup>39</sup>

Some respondents reported rebels and other armed groups have (intentionally) attacked religious leaders. One respondent alleged that the South Sudanese government may have launched a coordinated campaign to silence religious actors, and Catholic religious actors in particular, using a variety of intimidation tactics including, potentially, sending government officials to listen to sermons, keeping a roster of religious actors who are perceived to be speaking out against the government, refusing religious actors access to areas outside government control, and at its extreme end, kidnapping and killing religious actors:

Government for a long time has viewed the Catholic Church as an opposition wing against its system to the extent that there is a journal in the national security office that contains the names of our priests. And every Sunday they send their personnel to Catholic churches to get the contents of our preaching and the names of those who were preaching on politics topics.<sup>40</sup>

Supplemental interviews reveal that religious actors in positions of authority do not believe (or are unwilling to say) that there is a coordinated campaign against them. However, other respondents described efforts to infiltrate, manipulate, and intimidate leadership within religious institutions:

When we have an election to elect new members for the top positions, a few days after the selection process, security personnel arrive with a vehicle to arrest the elected person. Sometimes the elected person will be taken to a security house and told, "If you don't surrender that seat you will die." That person may end up resigning without describing what has happened to him during his detention. This causes division and confusion among the leaders and followers because those who have been selected by government have a different view of their position and role from those who pursued their roles legitimately.

Sometimes when we schedule a meeting you find security people are already at the venue informing the members "your meeting was postponed and the date for a meeting will be announced soon."<sup>41</sup>

Most of our respondents said that, in most cases, religious actors were not attacked because they were

religious actors, but rather for other reasons. Religious actors may have been caught in the crossfire due to their presence in or proximity to parties to the conflict, although proximity is sometimes attributed to affiliation or association with groups who are perceived as armed actors, rebels, or opposition forces:

The challenge we face is inaccessibility to those who are outside of town, which is a challenge because anyone who visits nongovernment-controlled areas is considered in opposition against government and will be "complicated" or arrested. This became a challenge because we can't really gather enough information in order to facilitate peace for our people who are outside [the town] and really in need of our help. We have no means or alternatives of reaching them without approval from the government. And even if the church goes to the government, the government will never grant permission to deliver assistance to those who are vulnerable in the bush.

In Bentiu, Unity State, Muslims were attacked by the rebels. It was actually the worst massacre. Muslims were locked inside the mosque and burned inside—none of them survived. They were attacked by rebels under Dr. Riek Machar. According to the rumors, the Muslims were accused of helping the government to fight the rebels, so they attacked the Muslims (although most of them were Sudanese who were in Bentiu for business).

Several respondents believe that religious actors were attacked or targeted because they spoke out against powerful actors:

In Malakal in 2014, people were murdered in the church and there was one religious leader among the victims. Why? They were attacked because they are condemning those who [are] carrying out the killing. They are spreading the truth to people to stand with peace and to stop fighting . . . so they find a way of attacking religious leaders.

This priest used to talk on radio of how the [government's] soldiers are looting civilian's property and how the government is handling activities in Yei. Some unknown gunmen heard him reporting such things to the public on radio and at night some guys kidnapped him—up to now we don't know his whereabouts.

**Across the spectrum, religious actors seem to respond to the violence with both traditional methods and techniques adapted to the new dynamics, including sermons and prayers, calls for disarmament, messages broadcast on radio, workshops and conferences, meetings with government officials, and meeting rebel groups to convince them to stop fighting.**

He was killed because he told the truth about the government's evil acts in former Central Equatoria State. For example, the religious leader talked against the government and appreciated the rebel side coming to power because there is no development in South Sudan and no peace of mind for people. He says the current government leader is weak, so because of what he said, that he was killed by unknown government [actors] in Yei County.

In some cases the primary goal of an attack was access to resources. The perception was that religious actors may have resources in the form of money, supplies, or equipment, as one respondent indicated: "They were attacked because they expect the members of the church to have money. . . . [The attackers] need money from people, nothing else."

Other respondents cited situations where religious actors were attacked because of their ethnicity:

There was an attack in Bor in 2013 or 2014 where women, children, and girls ran to the Episcopal church to seek shelter. But when the opposition came, they raped women and girls and then killed them. I don't remember the number of persons killed, but some described the killing as genocide. These women were killed based on their ethnic identity. The attack was carried out by Nuer who attacked Dinka women in the church. They were not attacked because of being religious actors but because of their ethnic identity.

Some attacks defy explanation:

There are just over four hundred missionaries in South Sudan. One of these generous women was Sister Veronica Rackova, a medical doctor and hospital administrator. She was shot on 16 May 2016 in the southern town

of Yei as she drove a patient to a nearby hospital from St. Bakhita's Medical Centre in Yei. Sister Veronica wrote earlier, "Jesus would not abandon people. He was even ready to accept death because he loved them. Recently somebody asked me why I am staying here under such circumstances. Why? Jesus continued on his way and did not give up when things got difficult."<sup>42</sup>

## **RESPONSES TO ATTACKS**

When asked how religious leaders responded to these attacks, religious respondents described different approaches they use to help their communities heal from the violence and trauma. Across the spectrum, religious actors seem to respond to the violence with both traditional methods and techniques adapted to the new dynamics, including sermons and prayers, calls for disarmament, messages broadcast on radio, workshops and conferences, meetings with government officials, and meeting rebel groups to convince them to stop fighting. Other respondents suggested that religious leaders felt powerless to respond in any way other than prayers. For example, one nonreligious actor in Juba town said that "nothing has been done to respond to any attack in South Sudan because there is no law, and that is why people take laws in to their hands." A religious actor in Wau said that "the biggest challenge that religious actors face in responding to violence are not encouraging because some religious actors can be beaten or put at gun point."

The lack of coordinated or robust responses to attacks on religious actors highlights one of the many challenges of the dynamics in South Sudan today in the lack of mechanisms for accountability. Religious actors could play a role in addressing this gap.



Internally displaced people sit outside a church at the Protection of Civilians site in the UN base in Bentiu. (Photo by Andreea Campeanu/Reuters)

## Observations and Recommendations

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What can a reader take away from these insights? Broadly, South Sudanese religious actors and institutions have legitimacy but limited influence. Or perhaps they are only coming to grips with the realization that turning their legitimacy into influence requires tremendous (physical) risk and also presents the possibility that the religious sector will lose its legitimacy if its efforts are labeled as political rather than focused on societal peace. To gain influence, they must examine the tools they use and the purpose and focus with which they are applied. It makes sense that sermons and prayers are the most important peace tools, given that these put religious actors in front of their parishioners and followers regularly and allow religious actors to interpret

the events of the day in terms of moral teachings and scripture. Yet these are tools intended to influence an individual's spirituality, and broadening these to focus on societal change presents its own set of challenges. The extent to which religious actors are using sermons to influence individuals to take public actions rather than seek inner peace and solace is unclear.

This research also shows that “speaking truth to power” is a source of legitimacy. However, respondents tell us that this brings religious actors into the realm of political influence, which many respondents viewed either negatively or with mixed views. Yet religious actors should be able to distinguish between blatantly political views and

statements and moral guidance and teachings. Religious actors could rely on externally validated (and impartial) standards of behavior—such as just war theory—in addition to biblical or other ecclesiastical teachings.

This observation is not unrelated to earlier observations about shortcomings in religious advocacy. Although the SSCC was described by one respondent as a very “active” organization, it has fallen short of its own goals for peace. A new, more focused, more targeted form of advocacy, particularly focused on key constituencies, could enhance existing efforts to inform and persuade groups and individuals to take specific actions for peace. Part of this effort could be coordinated strategies informed by principles and tactics of nonviolent action. In interview after interview, religious actors said that everything they do is nonviolent action. However, these responses indicate a lack of understanding about the difference between nonviolent actions in general and strategic nonviolent action such as the civil resistance campaigns led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

Religious actors and the SSCC’s Action Plan for Peace hold promise as they build momentum and garner successes, particularly at the local level. As the broader peace process continues to ebb and flow, sustaining peace from local agreements is an important role for religious actors. Techniques such as peace conferences are used at the community level, often to stop cycles of violence between clans experiencing cattle raids (as well as between armed groups aligned behind opposing political factions). Because of the rural nature of much of South Sudan, it may be that the individuals participating in cattle raids are not the same individuals exposed to the prayers and sermons on a regular basis. In addition, the inability to definitively end broader conflicts at the national level likely prevents reconciliation initiatives from taking root, given that such efforts require security and stability to have the desired impact. Another disconnect relates to linkages between religious actors and individuals or groups who are leading or perpetrating violence. This disconnect

can be resolved by religious leaders’ reframing those narratives to help perpetrators find pride and meaning in nonviolent (that is, political) solutions and to create a sweeping national narrative that there are no military solutions to South Sudan’s current problems.

In general, religious actors and institutions have the legitimacy, access, and standing to bring transformative change to South Sudan. Religious actors could help connect the dots between local peace initiatives and assist in stabilizing an area through focused peacebuilding initiatives. Given additional support and technical expertise, they can better use the tools and platforms they already have to inform the greater good and tip the scales toward peace by linking individual transformation through prayers and sermons to build peace at the subnational and national levels. The following sets of recommendations are intended to help operationalize these conclusions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

This research presents numerous opportunities for international and domestic policymakers to better utilize the access and standing of South Sudanese religious actors and institutions. Policymakers should implement policies to solidify religious actors’ local peace successes by linking these to broader subregional, regional, and national stability and peace efforts and by bolstering the capacity of the South Sudan Council of Churches to cement these successes.

Such policy options might include redeploying peacekeepers, targeting development programs toward local zones ripe for stabilization, and by supporting community dialogue efforts. Policymakers can build on the clear legitimacy of religious actors and institutions by supporting capacity building for them on topics such as advocacy, mediation, and nonviolent action. Finally, policymakers should consider policies to incorporate religious women and youth into leadership positions for national dialogue and reconciliation processes as well as policy discussions on gender-based violence initiatives.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS ACTORS**

South Sudanese religious actors have opportunities to build on their strengths of legitimacy and trust in numerous ways. One recommendation is for religious actors to pursue training to more effectively discuss topics and advocate for policies that could be labeled as political. Topics could include the idea that religious teachings and morals apply to society beyond the church or mosque, how to mitigate the impact of trauma and understanding how trauma's effects are felt throughout society, the idea that healing is both personal and communal, and the idea that youth are the future of the country and should be treasured and mentored, not mobilized to fight.

The “bully pulpit” offers the opportunity to make explicit the path from individual transformation to broader societal and communal change, but religious actors must use due caution not to step over the line into overt political engagement. Additionally, religious actors can work collaboratively across denominations to address perceptions of divisions between religious communities. One such approach is to conduct multiethnic and multilingual services, including among displaced persons in camps, to break down tribal dynamics. Religious actors and institutions should publicize their peace success stories and ask partners for support to solidify these successes by linking grassroots initiatives

to national-level peace efforts. This includes drawing lessons from religious actors’ experience with reconciliation processes and practice. Finally, religious actors and institutions should explicitly broaden the opportunities for religious women and youth to participate in and contribute to local and national-level peace efforts.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEACE PRACTITIONERS**

Peace practitioners interact on a regular basis with religious actors and institutions. However, these interactions can be made more impactful through a few adjustments. One such effort is to train religious leaders in apolitical vocabulary, using international human rights norms, just-war and just-peace theories, humanitarian law, and non-violent action as frameworks. Additional training could include conflict management and resolution skills such as active listening, dialogue, facilitation, negotiation, and mediation as well as mentoring to apply these tools in new ways (linked to and supported by the Action Plan for Peace) to help create a truly civil society. Peace practitioners can more purposefully support religious women to take on more visible roles in areas within their scope of influence, such as trauma healing, preventing gender-based violence, and building resilience to influence youth against mobilization and find nonviolent solutions to South Sudan’s vexing challenges.

# Notes

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1. Douglas H. Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders: The Impact of Boundary-Making in Southern Sudan's Frontier Zones* (Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2010), 23.
2. "A Pastoral Exhortation from the meeting in Juba between Catholic Bishops of Sudan and South Sudan, 21-31 January 2014," [www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News/2014/January-March/South-Sudan/Pastoral-Exhortation-Sudan-s-Bishops](http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News/2014/January-March/South-Sudan/Pastoral-Exhortation-Sudan-s-Bishops).
3. United States Institute of Peace, "Religious Landscape Mapping in Conflict-Affected States," [www.usip.org/programs/religious-landscape-mapping-conflict-affected-states](http://www.usip.org/programs/religious-landscape-mapping-conflict-affected-states). Other places where USIP is applying this framework include Libya, Iraq, and Rakhine State in Burma.
4. Forcier Consulting is a locally registered, South Sudanese company that has been offering research services in South Sudan for more than six years. To date, Forcier has successfully executed more than 250 qualitative and quantitative research projects in the country and has performed data collection in all of its counties. Forcier's international experts and experienced national South Sudanese research staff enable it to access the most remote areas and conduct research across the country without translators.
5. Alberto J. Eisman, *Peace Deserves a Chance: Bishop Paride Taban, A Sudanese Shepherd*, 1st reprint (Nairobi City, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015).
6. UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, *Humanitarian Bulletin South Sudan*, no. 6, July 16, 2018, [www.reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-bulletin-issue-6-16-july-2018](http://www.reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-bulletin-issue-6-16-july-2018); African Development Bank Group, "South Sudan Economic Outlook," [www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/south-sudan/south-sudan-economic-outlook](http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/south-sudan/south-sudan-economic-outlook); and US Agency for International Development, "South Sudan Crisis," Fact Sheet no. 3, February 8, 2019, [www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/south\\_sudan\\_ce\\_fs03\\_02-08-2019.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/south_sudan_ce_fs03_02-08-2019.pdf).
7. Studies from the early 2000s estimated Muslims constituted between 18 and 35 percent of the population, but many believe the number of Muslims declined through migration to Sudan after South Sudan's independence.
8. Despite broad consensus across these four research locations, we do not know whether these findings are more broadly representative. What may be more important is the sources of legitimacy for religious actors and institutions.
9. Comboni Missionaries, "Juba signs peace deal with Yau Yau rebels," May 10, 2014, [www.comboni.org/contenuti/106939](http://www.comboni.org/contenuti/106939).
10. Sergio Vlierira de Mello Foundation, "2013 laureate: Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban," [www.sergiovdmfoundation.org/activities/award/2013-laureate-bishop-emeritus-paride-taban](http://www.sergiovdmfoundation.org/activities/award/2013-laureate-bishop-emeritus-paride-taban).
11. South Sudan Council of Churches, "About Us," [www.sscchurches.com](http://www.sscchurches.com).
12. South Sudan Council of Churches, "Action Plan for Peace," [www.sscchurches.com/action-plan-for-peace](http://www.sscchurches.com/action-plan-for-peace).
13. It is unclear whether these comments refer to women in general or religious women in particular. As detailed in a Sudd Institute report, the challenges facing greater engagement of women in peace processes are daunting (Nyathon James Hoth Mai, "The Role of Women in Peace-Building in South Sudan," Policy Brief, January 12, 2016, [www.suddinstitute.org/publications/show/the-role-of-women-in-peace-building-in-south-sudan](http://www.suddinstitute.org/publications/show/the-role-of-women-in-peace-building-in-south-sudan)).
14. These women were mentioned by only one respondent, who seemed especially in tune with acts of high-profile women. None of the local women were named with any frequency. This paragraph highlights sources of (religious) legitimacy for national-profile women.
15. According to the Albert Einstein Institution, "Nonviolent action (also sometimes referred to as people power, political defiance, and nonviolent struggle) is a technique of action for applying power in a conflict by using symbolic protests, noncooperation, and defiance, but not physical violence" ([www.aeinsteinstein.org/nonviolentaction/what-is-nonviolent-action](http://www.aeinsteinstein.org/nonviolentaction/what-is-nonviolent-action)).
16. BBC News, "South Sudan: Women propose sex strike for peace," October 24, 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-29754506](http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-29754506).
17. Al Jazeera, "Women take to streets to demand end to South Sudan war," December 9, 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/women-mouths-taped-shut-demand-sudan-war-171209214901540.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/women-mouths-taped-shut-demand-sudan-war-171209214901540.html).
18. *Sudan Tribune*, "South Sudan's Kiir orders return of Muslim properties," June 13, 2018, [www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65641](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65641).
19. Eisman, *Peace Deserves a Chance*, 16.
20. Sharon Hutchinson and Naomi Pendle, "Violence, legitimacy, and prophecy: Nuer struggles with uncertainty in South Sudan," *American Ethnologist* 42 (2015): 415, 416.

21. Lauren Axelrod, "The Spear Masters of the Dinka Tribe," February 1, 2010, <https://learning.knoji.com/the-spear-masters-of-the-dinka-tribe>.
22. Ter Manynag Gatwech, "The Nuer Prophet Ngundeng Bong on Dr. Riek Machar Teny's Predicament Victory in South Sudan," Nyamilepedia, July 25, 2016, [www.nyamile.com/2016/07/25/the-nuer-prophet-ngundeng-bong-on-dr-riek-machar-tenys-predicament-victory-in-south-sudan](http://www.nyamile.com/2016/07/25/the-nuer-prophet-ngundeng-bong-on-dr-riek-machar-tenys-predicament-victory-in-south-sudan).
23. This result is likely because the majority of residents in the Juba PoC sites are Nuer and Shilluk-Ngundeng is a Nuer prophet and Nyikang is a Shilluk prophet. This finding may also be a result of recent news coverage about Ngundeng when the British historian Douglas Johnson returned Ngundeng's rod, or dang, to South Sudan in 2009 (Douglas H. Johnson, "The Fate of Ngundeng's Dang," Rift Valley Institute, August 29, 2014, [www.riftvalley.net/news/fate-ngundeng%20%99s-dang](http://www.riftvalley.net/news/fate-ngundeng%20%99s-dang)).
24. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Publishing, 1989), 186.
25. For information on the role of prophets in peace and conflict today, see Hutchinson and Pendle, "Violence, legitimacy, and prophecy"; for information on the nexus of prophets and Christianity, see Augustine Deke, "The Politics of Prophets and Profits in African Christianity," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 12 (2015): 11–24.
26. This question was added to the flash survey once data collection was underway to determine what constitutes taking action; responses to this question were therefore collected from only twenty individuals.
27. Mark Batterson, "What Is the Purpose of Prayer?," August 10, 2018, [www.faithgateway.com/what-is-the-purpose-of-prayer](http://www.faithgateway.com/what-is-the-purpose-of-prayer).
28. Author interview, Juba, July 2018.
29. Jacqueline H. Wilson, "Local Peace Processes in Sudan and South Sudan," Peaceworks no. 97 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, May 2014), [www.usip.org/publications/2014/05/local-peace-processes-sudan-and-south-sudan](http://www.usip.org/publications/2014/05/local-peace-processes-sudan-and-south-sudan).
30. South Sudan Council of Churches, "Action Plan for Peace."
31. Author interview, Juba, February 2018.
32. Joyce Bukuru, "Pressure Mounts on Abusers in South Sudan," Human Rights Watch, March 26, 2018, [www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/26/pressure-mounts-abusers-south-sudan](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/26/pressure-mounts-abusers-south-sudan). See also United Nations, "Secretary-General Hails Efforts by Intergovernmental Authority for Development to Achieve Peace in South Sudan, Urges National Leaders to Assume Responsibility," press release, January 27, 2018, [www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm18872.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm18872.doc.htm); UN General Assembly, "Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan," A/HRC/37/71, February 23, 2018, [www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A\\_HRC\\_37\\_71\\_0.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A_HRC_37_71_0.pdf); and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Human Rights Commission collects evidence to hold more than 40 South Sudanese officials accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity," February 23, 2018, [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22691&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22691&LangID=E). See also John Ashworth, *Voice of the Voiceless* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2014).
33. Intergovernmental Authority on Development, "Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan," September 12, 2018, [www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/21604/categoryId/127/Revitalised-Agreement-On-The--Resolution-Of-The-Conflict-in-The-Republic-of-South-Sudan-R-ARCSS.aspx](http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/21604/categoryId/127/Revitalised-Agreement-On-The--Resolution-Of-The-Conflict-in-The-Republic-of-South-Sudan-R-ARCSS.aspx).
34. John Ashworth, email to the author, August 14, 2018.
35. *Sudan Tribune*, "Clerics promoting violence in South Sudan, says VP," April 22, 2018, [www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65249](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65249).
36. Unfortunately, the data on this topic were mixed because the questions were ambiguous in terms of exactly how religious leaders should be influencing political leaders and armed actors.
37. The author was told, for example, Anyuak language is related to Shilluk language, therefore people of both ethnicities might worship together.
38. Prosperity theology is a religious belief among some Christians, who hold that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth.
39. Radio Tamazuj, "Updated: Special investigation: 40 church leaders killed in South Sudan since 2013," April 16, 2017, [www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/special-investigation-39-church-leaders-killed-in-south-sudan-since-2013](http://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/special-investigation-39-church-leaders-killed-in-south-sudan-since-2013).
40. Despite this respondent's perspective that Catholic institutions and actors are targeted more so than others, the Radio Tamazuj investigative report indicated that their research shows that thirty-two of forty religious leaders killed were ordained priests, and the majority of those were from the Episcopal Church.
41. This type of activity is not unusual in South Sudan, whether related to religious meetings or meetings in general.
42. Brigidine Sisters, "Important Update: Solidarity with South Sudan: July-August 2016," [www.brigidine.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Solidarity-With-South-Sudan-Update.pdf](http://www.brigidine.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Solidarity-With-South-Sudan-Update.pdf)

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Since Sudan's independence in 1956, the country has been plagued by internal conflict, a dynamic driven primarily by a centuries-old ethnoreligious divide. The colonial era Anglo-Egyptian government administered the north and the south as separate entities, a root cause of two protracted civil wars lasting several decades. In 2011, South Sudan became an independent state but by 2013 faced its own civil war, which religious actors have actively sought to help end. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and consultations, this report maps the religious landscape of South Sudan, showcasing the legitimate and influential religious actors and institutions, highlighting challenges impeding their peace work, and providing recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to better engage with religious actors for peace.

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