

Singing the Lord's Song in a Foreign Land¹: A Look at Christianity's Importance For Sudanese
Refugees and Congregations in Memphis

Brendan Keegan

2009 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

Memphis has long been identified by its diversity of religious communities and organizations, of which Christianity is the most prominent. Recently, this diverse religious community has come to include an increasingly large amount of cultural diversity as well, specifically in regards to Memphis' growing African population. Although there are presently immigrants from countries such as Somalia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this focus of this research paper is on the interesting religious history of the relatively small but well-established Sudanese community.

After arriving in Memphis mostly during 2000 and early 2001, one of the central concerns of many Sudanese refugees was finding a Christian community in order to practice their faith. While the Christian churches of Memphis responded to the needs of the Sudanese in a variety of ways, sponsoring families, donating money, teaching ESL classes, welcoming members into their own congregations, one result of the Sudanese population's growth was the founding of primarily Sudanese churches. These Sudanese religious organizations have helped refugees find a common voice, practice their faith, and maintain their heritage despite the

¹ *"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" - Psalms 147:4*

challenges they face after having left behind lives, homes, and cultures. This paper will explore the influence that Sudanese religious organizations have had on the Sudanese community, and will argue that these organizations play important roles in uniting and strengthening the diverse refugee population, serving as places of spiritual comfort and rejuvenation after decades of religious persecution, and creating support groups for Sudanese adjusting to life in Memphis.

Background to the Conflict in Sudan²

The history of modern Sudan is strongly marked by divisions of geography, language, ethnicity, race, and religion between the Northern and Southern regions. While these regions are often discussed as if equally proportioned parts of the country, the North is actually representative of two-thirds of Sudan's landmass, and home to the majority of its population. The distinction between North and South is largely due to a natural boundary of marsh and swamp, known as the Sudd, which stretches across the lower third of the country and has in the past made travel between the two regions extremely difficult. As a result of this separation, North and South Sudan have developed along very different lines of political, economic, and cultural orientation. For example, because Northern Sudan has historically been in close contact with other major Middle Eastern territories, it developed similarly to other Arabized North African nations. Closely tied to the Arabian world, the North Sudanese population is mainly ethnic Arab, and Islam has been the dominant religion since at least 1505.

Protected from foreign penetration by the harsh environment of the Sudd, Southern Sudan has developed along various tribal lines. Unlike the North, the South's population is

² While this section will not attempt to cover the complete range of issues inherent in Sudan's history, it will hopefully provide insight into the lives of Sudanese refugees and why they have come to the United States.

almost entirely indigenous black African. This indigenous population is divided, though, into many tribes and over one hundred different languages (Deng, 62). Since the majority of these Southern tribes have historically been subsistence farmers or herdsman, there has been little major economic or cultural development in the region as a whole until the present time. When the North and South finally did meet in 1840 it was as a result of Northern Arab Muslims raiding Southern villages to capture slaves, a practice that devastated the Southern tribes until the British invaded in 1899, Sudan became a colony of the British Empire, and slavery was ended (Bixler, 40).

Though the British stopped the slave trade, which set up the identity of an oppressive North and oppressed South, British rule did more to define the divisions of the country than the natural barrier of the Sudd. Although North and South were united as a single colony, the British governed them as two distinctly different regions based on racial and cultural considerations at the time. As a result, the North continued to affirm its identity as an Arab Muslim region. Meanwhile, the South remained in fractured tribal units that were slowly being led to follow a Christian model propagated by mission schools that came with the British administrations (Deng, 73). Despite the missionaries' efforts, though, Christians remain a religious minority at only 5% of the total population, with Muslims comprising 70%, and followers of animist and indigenous religions at 25% ("Cultural Orientation Resource Center: Our Publications"). Even if the religious divisions alone were not great enough to create enmity between the two regions, the British policy of strictly separating the country's population along regional, racial, and religious lines created clear distinctions. This was mostly due to British policies banning Northerners from traveling to the South, coercing Northerners in the South to move North, banning the teaching of Arabic in the classroom (for fear that it would aid in the spread of Islam), declaring English the

principal language of the South (Bashir, 53), and training separate armed forces in each region (Bashir, 38).

When Great Britain began giving up its colonial possessions after World War II, all of these factors led to a shaky turnover of power to the new government of Sudan. Never before united, neither North nor South trusted the other (Bixler, 49). When 792 of 800 positions held by colonial authorities were filled by Northern Sudanese in the days leading up to the British withdrawal, Southerners protested that the North was trying to take control of the fledging union, while Northerners argued that Southerners were simply not prepared for the political roles that needed to be filled (Bixler, 49). Feeling disenfranchised by the governing body of their country, rebels in South Sudan began a low-level guerilla war that intensified following Sudan's independence on January 1, 1956. Faced with a newly united but quickly dissolving nation-state, the North responded with invasion, attacking Southern villages and imprisoning and killing the educated elite.

The North also took control of the mission schools, the only method of education in the South. Although the schools had been taught in English up until that point, the North declared Arabic as the standard language of instruction and encouraged the conversion of Southern Christians and animists to Islam. In order to put even more pressure on the religious beliefs of Southerners, the official day of rest was changed from the Christian Sunday to the Muslim Friday, while religious gatherings were banned outside of churches. This imposition of Islamic customs was further reinforced by the expulsion of Christian missionaries in 1964 (Bixler, 50).

The persecution of Christians in Southern Sudan had the unintended effect, though, of creating solidarity among the divided tribes and making religion a political issue in Sudan. Given the number of different tribes in South Sudan, the unity and resistance offered by the Christian

faith was important in drawing together the culturally diverse population. Christian churches came to be seen as allies against the oppressive Islamic invasion, and Christianity became a defining characteristic of what it meant to be “Southern.” In the words of Francis M. Deng, “Christian education...fostered a new sense of identity that transcended tribal loyalties and created a southern nationalist sentiment that was both intrinsic and anti-North” (210). As a result, more and more Southern tribes joined together in the fight against what they perceived as the renewed political and religious oppression of the North. While the war was prompted by many different influences, then, the conflict between Muslims and Christians quickly became a sounding note for both regions.³

A new era in Sudan’s history began on May 25, 1969 when Brigadier General Jaafar Muhammad Nimeiri seized control of the government in a military coup d’etat. Following his ascension, President Nimeiri took several steps towards developing a more sustainable relationship between North and South. Perhaps most importantly, Nimeiri pledged that while he

³ While the Sudanese refugees whose opinions and beliefs are shared in this paper are mainly Christians from South Sudan, it would be misleading to consider the fighting in Sudan as simply a war between Muslims and Christians, or even just between North and South. For example, some of the people represented in this paper are from the Nuba Mountains, a small Christian enclave in Northern Sudan where there is an almost entirely Muslim majority. A further reason for avoiding the Christian-Muslim generalization is the current conflict in the Darfur region of Western Sudan that has set Muslim Arabs against Muslim Black Africans. As a result, when discussing the causes of the conflict other factors should be considered, such as the colonial legacies and prejudices developed by the British in the years before independence, the strategic importance of the South’s resources to the North, and the huge amount of ethnic and lingual diversity in the country as a whole. Even if it is easy to understand the violence as based upon religious lines only, doing this without appreciating the multifaceted nature of the conflict runs the danger of over-simplifying a very complex issue.

With this said, and noting that many factors contributed to the outbreak of the second civil war, religious divisions often come to the forefront as a result of their importance to the personal, cultural, and political differences between Northerners and Southerners. Despite the fact that Christians are a religious minority in Sudan, Christianity is considered an important component of ‘Southern’ identity and an influential means for drawing together an ethnically diverse population into a single, united region.

would not allow Sudan to be split, he would grant official autonomy to the Southern administration. This pledge was affirmed at the Addis Ababa Agreement, a cease-fire signed on February 27, 1972, that brought an end to seventeen years of fighting (Bixler, 53).

While the years following the cease fire were notable for the optimism that North and South could work together as a single country, in 1976 a political group known as the United National Front—composed of the United Front Force and the Muslim Brothers (later renamed as the National Islamic Front)—stormed the government installations in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum (Taisier, Mathews, and Spears, 292). Caught by surprise, Nimeiri was only able to remain in power by minimizing his political threats through a series of compromises with his enemies, giving more government positions to Islamic nationalists (Taisier and Mathews, 209). With more of his support coming from Muslim organizations, though, Nimeiri gradually turned towards political Islam for backing (Deng, 76).

Following the attempted 1976 coup, Nimeiri intensified a program of Islamization in the government, enforcing policies making it harder for Christians of Southern Sudan to hold office. Though this movement back towards religious division began the murmurs of a new conflict, sowing seeds of suspicion in the Southern administration, it was not until 1983 that Nimeiri pushed policies that would ensure the continuation of war. In that year, Nimeiri attempted to split Southern Sudan into three separate provinces, weakening the South's governing ability as well as challenging its autonomy. Another change that Nimeiri sought to impose on the South was the acceptance of sharia law, law in accordance with precepts laid out in the Qur'an. As the majority of Southerners practiced either Christianity or animist religions, sharia law directly infringed upon the legitimacy of their religious beliefs and helped to create even sharper religious divisions between the North and South (Bixler, 53). Furthermore, the North's attempt to impose sharia law

on all of Sudan stretched the fragile peace holding the two regions together, as the decree of its national authority effectively denied the autonomy of South Sudan as agreed upon in the Addis Ababa Agreement.

As a result of these policy changes and threats to Southern autonomy, rebels again took up arms against the Northern army, asserting that the North's actions abrogated the terms of the cease fire (Bixler, 53). Meanwhile, Southern revolt, as well as the mutiny of several Southern Army garrisons due to be transferred to Northern bases, provided a reason for the North to respond militarily, which it had been moving towards in any case (Taisier, Mathews, and Spears, 294). With conflict between the two regions on the rise, the end result of Nimeiri's 1983 policies was the ushering in of another civil war.

During the ensuing twenty-two years of the second civil war, over two million civilians were killed—one fifth of the South Sudanese population—while over 80% of South Sudanese, or an estimated four million, were internally displaced. During this time, 500,000 Sudanese became refugees, “someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (“UNHCR - Definitions and Obligations - Basic Definitions”). Many of these refugees spent years in United Nations refugee camps in countries such as Egypt, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Kenya while thousands more were relocated to the United States. The fighting in South Sudan came to an end with the signing of the Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 (Williams).

The Sudanese currently living in Memphis are the victims of the second civil war. While Sudanese refugees were entering the United States throughout the 1990s, most of the refugees

relocated to Memphis arrived during 2000 and early 2001. As of the 2006 census, there were approximately two hundred Sudanese families living in Memphis. These refugees were welcomed by many religious organizations, such as the First Evangelical, Cumberland Presbyterian, and Second Presbyterian Churches. In 2000, Sudanese families at First Evangelical started their own church, called the River Nile Church, which grew to more than one hundred members by 2001. Around this same time the church split, with many congregants moving the River Nile Church to Leawood Baptist while those who remained at First Evangelical changed their name to the New Kush Church. This paper will primarily focus on these two Sudanese congregations, although Sudanese attend many other Memphis churches as well⁴.

The Uniting Role of Sudanese Christianity

Bridging Divides

While it is easy to simplify the conflict in Sudan as Christian against Muslim—North against South—these generalizations do not bring to light the enormous diversity that is inherent in these groupings. An example of this diversity is reflected in a Sudanese saying about the Nuba tribes of the Nuba mountains in North Sudan, of which it is said, “there are ninety-nine languages for the ninety-nine mountains” (Deng⁵). In Sudan as a whole though, this is hardly an exaggeration. There are over four hundred different tribes and ethnic groups within the country, with at least one hundred different languages spoken just within the South (Voll, 6). As a result, despite the fact that the refugees share a “common point of reference [in]...the past and ...a sense

⁴ While this paper focuses on the Sudanese Christian community, Christianity is a religious minority among Sudanese. The numbers of Christian Sudanese in the United States, though, is disproportionately high compared to Sudanese refugees of other religious beliefs.

⁵ The names and other personal information of all interviewees involved in this paper have been altered.

of belonging to, the physical and social space of Southern Sudan” (Idris, 70), the refugees themselves are representative of various tribes and regions within Sudan. Even with their differences, though, the people of South Sudan have found an encompassing, if thin, unity through the Christian faith.

In Sudan, Christianity has helped to unify the population partly as a result of the North’s efforts to impose Islam upon the Southerners and partly due to the needs that the rural people of South Sudan had during the times of war. According to Pastor David Nhial, one reason the people in Sudan were united by Christianity during the wars was that, “we was poor, we don’t have anything, we have a lot of needs... But we don’t focus on the situation we have, but we trust God even though tomorrow we don’t know what we eat... We have peace of God; we was very happy, and then we was very good relationship with God” (Nhial). In times of suffering and trial Christianity offered a comforting security that many refugees needed in order to have hope and to keep going through the challenges they faced. As a result, even though many lived in horrible conditions, it was possible to be happy knowing that although the country may be descending into violence and the next day was uncertain, what was certain was the peace and truth that God provided.

Agreeing with Pastor David’s observations that poverty and suffering can strengthen faith, trust, and dependence on God, is Pastor Francis Misago’s summation that “Where Christianity is persecuted it is stronger. And so Christianity means that we stick close to the Lord, we stand firm to the Lord” (Misago). For Jacob Deng, a spiritual leader of one of the Sudanese congregations in Memphis, this persecution helped to unite the Southern population in resistance against the North. When asked about the divisions between Northerners and Southerners, he recounted a time when Muslim soldiers approached Christians wearing the

crucifix, ordering them to wear it on their backs instead of on their chests. Instead of denying their faith, he remembers the Christian response “I’m never going to turn my cross around, I’m never going to turn it” (Jacob Deng). While Jacob described the burning of churches in his village and around the country, he also remembered the people standing up to protect their churches, and passionately maintains that while persecution and suffering accompanied his own Christian faith in Sudan, “it is very hard to burn what is in your heart” (Deng).

Josephine Achol, a mother of five from South Sudan and an in-training minister in the United States, has an account similar to Jacob’s. Just as Jacob vividly remembers the strength of Sudanese Christians, Josephine described a time when North Sudanese Muslims “were trying to destroy the churches...but the time I left...when they heard that they were going to destroy the churches people would...sleep there, and look after the church, because they don’t want nobody to come there” (Achol). Despite the threats to their lives, Josephine remembers that people would “stand about that church and they will not hide there” (Achol). As expressed through the actions of the South Sudanese Christians, they “like to stand up, they don’t like to keep quiet. They don’t afraid, especially Southerners...they like to speak for Christianity” (Achol).

Connecting all of these claims is the strength of Sudanese Christians’ faith in the face of adversity, holding to their religious beliefs and standing up for Christianity against the oppressiveness of Northern domination. Resisting the imposition of Sharia law and of Islamic authority in the South is also tied to Francis Deng’s description of how Christianity helped to transcend tribe and create a united anti-Northern ideology. In spite of the persecution that many Southern Sudanese Christians faced, their commitment to Christianity was as unwavering as their opposition to the Northern oppression. Even for members of the population who were not Christian, which includes the majority of Southerners who still practiced indigenous religions,

Christianity became part of the “Southern” identity. As a result of the conflict with the Muslim North, Southerners in general tended to associate themselves with Christianity as a way to distinguish themselves from the Muslim majority. While Christianity was, and still is, a religious minority within Sudan, it has become a symbolic part of being a “Southerner,” and a label of resistance against the North. Consequently, “Christians” encompass much of the population while not in fact being representative of the majority’s actual beliefs (Voll, 22). The unity among tribes in Southern Sudan, then, is shown through acts of Christian identity, united in opposition to the persecution and oppression of the North.

Religious Unity among Refugees in Memphis

Just as there are many different tribes in Sudan, each with different languages and customs, there exist ethnic and tribal diversity within the Memphis Sudanese community. Describing the differences of the Sudanese refugees in Memphis, one Sudanese pastor said how even in the same church some members of the congregation “don’t understand one another...some tribes are very different, and some people they don’t know English, they come from [refugee camps in] Uganda, they come from Kenya...come from North Sudan and come from Syria and Egypt” (Nhial). The cultural diversity within the Sudanese community was also described by Myatta Wek, who arrived in Memphis in 2000. According to Myatta, people in the same congregations have “different cultures...when it comes to marriage, when it comes to naming children, in so many stuff, even dancing and all that, its all different, so we don’t even understand some of the dialects” (Wek). She remembered the fear of being a refugee in a new city and realizing that she could be the only person from her tribe and region, and that perhaps few others shared her culture or spoke her language. At the same time, Myatta experienced the different people united under a single faith. Dispelling her fears of being alone, “when I came

from Africa in 2001, the Sudanese who already go to First Evan[gelical], they came and took me to First Evan[gelical] then we start worshiping together. So although I came here in a strange place, but still I found people from my own country, that made it a lot more easier for me” (Wek).

As a result, while outsiders may generalize about a Sudanese congregation and assume them to be from similar regions or to share languages, this is not the case. There are more than ten different Sudanese tribes in Memphis, each of who have their own specifically tribal dialects and cultures⁶, but who gather together to worship. The churches adjust to meet the needs of diverse congregations by holding services in the most common language, usually Arabic, or by holding multiple services in different languages, but all under the same pastor and religious organization. Despite their tribal diversity, then, Sudanese churches in Memphis offer refugees a comfort of religious unity, of being together with people from common backgrounds and suffering through similar struggles, despite the fact that they are representative of many peoples within Sudan.

The differences in tribe, language, and culture have also been helpfully bridged by an overlapping desire to share in the worship of God, bringing together members of a diverse refugee community much as they brought together the diversity of people still in Sudan. Just as in Sudan the people were united in the face of persecution, coming together in order to form a

⁶ The differences between tribal dialects and traditions vary. In some cases, members of different tribes can understand the language of the others even if they do not speak it—in other instances the language cannot be understood at all. Most all of the tribes speak Arabic as a common language.

Also, many tribes in Sudan live, work, and marry with each other. As are result, while there have been major divisions and tensions between groups such as the Nuer and the Dinka of Southern Sudan, the differences between them are not un-crossable as many share major commonalities in language, religion, and lifestyle. Tribal differences have been especially loosened by the relocation to the United States.

stronger front against the imposition of Islam, refugees in Memphis have come together for solidarity in the face of the struggles present in a new life. Instead of being separated and alone in a new world, Sudanese refugees unite to face the new trials present in their lives. The ways that Sudanese churches in Sudan and in the United States have been set up further strengthens this unity.

For example, one of the most distinctive differences between Sudanese churches, both in Sudan and Memphis, and American religious organizations is the unity between religious denominations on the one side when compared to the extreme diversity that characterizes Christianity as a whole in the United States. This difference is mostly due to the development of Christianity within Sudan. When the British allowed missionaries to enter South Sudan shortly after Sudan became part of the British Empire, the main missionary groups were Italian Roman Catholic Verona Fathers, the Anglican Missionary Society, and the American United Mission (Beshir, 31). While Christianity was met with skepticism by most all of the tribes in South Sudan, those who were converted were for the most part either Roman Catholic or Anglican, depending on which type of Christian school they attended. Denomination hardly mattered as people went to whichever church or school was closest to their home.

Although in Sudan there were too few Christians and Christian churches for divisions to be desirable, the exact opposite is true in the United States with its abundance and competitiveness of Christian denominations. For Pastor Francis Misago, leader of a Sudanese church in Memphis, this has been one of the biggest differences between Christianity in the two countries. Talking about his churches in South Sudan, Pastor Francis explained, “we don’t have that wide spectrum of denominations as here in the United States” (Misago). Instead, he described how in Sudan you could attend any church, as “Sudanese see the church and they say

yes, this is a church of God, this is the body of Christ, and one says I am happy to worship with the body of Christ and not with the Baptist or Catholics. This is our right, this is our mode” (Misago). Pastor David Nhial, another Sudanese church leader, echoed this sentiment.

Describing the strength of Sudanese faith, he told how the people “love to come to church, we love to be in the presence of God, we love to worship God twenty-four hours. We have overnight prayer worship, we love to be with one another, go to group of prayer in different houses, bible study, go out with gospel, watch a movie of Jesus Christ” (Nhial). Backing up Pastor Francis’ claim, he asserted that while “we...do different group like example Baptist, Evangelical, and this...in Sudan they come all them together one day in any church, they come and they stand and worship and share the gospel,” while in the United States “it’s very hard and then everybody asks and say ‘what’s going on?’ we don’t know why we don’t come together and then to worship God” (Nhial).

The emphasis that Sudanese place on unity both in Sudan and in the United States, then, shows the importance of having a solid faith community in the face of persecution and struggles. On the one hand having fewer denominations, or less distinction between them, helps the refugee communities to remain strong as a group. Instead of breaking into smaller and smaller factions and losing the community as a whole, having a couple of broadly encompassing organizations gathers together the full range of voices and concerns as the refugees work to adjust to life in the United States. On the other hand, having more than one Sudanese church for a single Sudanese refugee community is also simply impractical due to the small numbers of Sudanese Christians in the first place.

Religious Unity across the Sudanese Diaspora

A broader national and international feeling of Sudanese Christian unity complements the social unity that spans individual churches. For example, the religious unity of the Sudanese in Memphis, which started in Sudan and is slowly gaining strength in the United States, is an ideology that transcends city, country, and continent as well as tribe and culture. This can be seen in the arrangement and relationship between Sudanese faith groups. On the state level, Sudanese religious communities have common ties with each other, which is especially true of the Sudanese churches established in Tennessee. For example, Brother Jean Claude who was one of the founders of the River Nile Church at First Evangelical also helped establish churches among Sudanese communities in Nashville and Knoxville. This commitment led him to driving between the three cities every weekend for four years, leading services and helping in the formation of churches in each city. Similarly, Pastor Francis of the New Kush Church arrived in Memphis after living two years in Oklahoma City, where he was contacted by multiple Sudanese congregations around the Southeast who found him through connections with other friends, families, and other Sudanese congregations. The same is true of Pastor Moko of Nashville, who helped to start a Sudanese church in Atlanta before aiding in Brother Jean Claude's efforts in Nashville, and eventually moving there permanently.

The lives of these pastors reflect that despite the diversity of congregants, the call for a unity through faith is strong even among communities separated by state boundaries. This same message can be said of the religious unity that Sudanese in the United States feel for their counterparts still in Sudan. When asked about the religious unity of Sudanese in Memphis, Pastor David commented that "there is a united Sudanese community...but the reason is... to finish our goal to do something...back home. That is the thing we need to do, we need to keep

the culture together, keep one another to focus to do something in our back home and then to free our eyes to focus our children they don't change and go to another culture" (Nhial).

The youth in Pastor David's church, as well as the church as whole, are encouraged in this way to remember their heritage, and ultimately to return to Sudan in order to rebuild and reunite with the Christian heritage that they have left.

This focus on education of the youth, being connected by culture and religion, and making plans to eventual return to Sudan is also shared by Pastor Moko. In his church, not only are there programs to help the refugees assimilate to life in the United States, but there are also services intended to help congregants return. Describing the need to give back to the people of Sudan, Pastor Moko said "we [are] training our children so that they can catch up. Because they are the next generation of Sudan...So 100 years from now if the Lord doesn't come those are the Sudan, new Sudan people. So we train them and some of them they are now in college, so when they graduate they go back home as a missionary" (Akol).

Perhaps similar to the Jewish desire to return to Promised Land, many Sudanese Christians in the United States feel this connection to their country and countrymen, despite the religious persecution they faced, the tribal diversity and existing tribal tensions, and the conditions which they left. Although there seems to be little uniting the country of Sudan—divided in so many ways and on so many issues even now—the idea of creating a New Sudan, re-establishing Sudan as a Christian state, seems a uniting goal of the Sudanese diasporas. For example, in the United States the New Sudan is not talked of as being a divided territory but rather as country united through a Christian history. Although today Christians represent a very small minority in the country when compared to the Muslim majority, the Sudanese in the United States "say New Sudan because it's Sudan that's writ in the Bible, Kush, we encourage even the

government-we go and preach to them and say that Bible promise that Kush shall raise her hand and give her praises to God” (Akol). According to Pastor Francis, Sudanese Christians are proud that not only is Kush mentioned in the Bible, but also since “the prophet Moses married a Kushite, yes he married a Sudanese, we are proud to have Moses marry one of our daughters” (Deng). As a result, despite divisions in religion, tribe, race, and culture there is still a perception that through affirming a historical connection to Christianity the Sudanese can finally be united. In the words of Pastor Moko, “we are a people, we are a bible people and we encourage [the government] to do what God wants them to do while God gives the opportunity to be a Christian country not an unknown religion. We are Christian” (Akol).

Fulfilling the Spiritual Needs of Refugees

Although the overlapping presence of Sudanese religious unity flows into many different aspects of Sudanese religion, religious communities play many other roles in helping refugees adjust to life in the United States. Perhaps the most basic, and most important, service that Sudanese churches in Memphis provide for their diverse membership is the fulfillment of individuals’ spiritual needs. The hand-in-hand nature of providing unity with an important religious experience is well noted by Attah Agbali, who writes that “Some African immigrants...make enormous sacrifices, and at times reach breaking points, stressed financially and mentally, as they are pressured to engage in longer work hours and additional jobs toward making ends meet. Religion and various spiritual practices offer succor and solace in the face of such circumstances” (91). While Agbali was referencing an African immigrant community in St. Louis, his quote reflects on the position of Sudanese refugees in Memphis as well. When their federal sponsorship runs out, the refugees are on their own. Along with work, they must also be

concerned about attaining a proper education for their children, providing food for the family, finding safe neighborhoods in which to live, and paying the various bills to which they are also unaccustomed.

Moko Ibrahim, a Sudanese pastor from Nashville, sums up the troubles in this new life, as well as the importance of religion for overcoming them. Describing the refugee experience, Pastor Moko said that “when you really leave your country and go to where you don’t know, you like the children of Israel [who] say ‘how can we sing prayers in the land of refuge?’ where the things are not the same. It is hard when you come to a country with different culture, different society, different community, you know it’s beyond the way we lived our life.” This saying ‘how can we sing prayers in the land of refuge,’ offers much insight into the dilemma of refugees and the comfort of their churches. Similar to the exiled Israelites that Pastor Moko references, the Sudanese have been forced from their homes, from their friends and families, from their traditional ways of worship, and as a result many come to the United States searching for places where they can comfortably worship a familiar God. Recognizing that these stresses inevitably follow the relocation experience, Pastor Moko asserts that “to be a refugee is something that needs a lot of comfort and a lot of anchor, you need more anchor, and that’s the Lord himself.” In light of the challenges and the pressures of making a life in a brand new world, many refugees turn to the church for strength.

One of the ways that religious communities are helpful in addressing the stress of a new life is simply by providing a place for refugees to worship. For refugees living in a new culture, “beyond the way we have lived our life,” religion is often a stable foundation which to fall upon, and as such is often an immediate concern. This came through very clearly when talking with Josephine Achol, a mother of five from South Sudan who arrived in 2001. Before arriving in the

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United States, Josephine admitted to being worried about her faith, since in her refugee camp in Egypt “people used to say that America [was] not good religious, people there they don’t go to church, they are just thinking about money.” Once she came to Memphis, though, she was surprised by the religious experience that awaited her. Instead of finding no place to worship, she joined the Sudanese Fellowship Church that had formed just before her arrival. She recounts that “when we came we got a Sudanese group...they started preaching in Arabic and I was very happy and I told them when I was coming I was thinking about that, that I don’t want to be in a place with no churches and no worship God, and I want my children also to do the same thing” (Josephine). The fact that there were multiple places to worship, as well as groups that spoke her language, recognized her customs, and worked with her to adjust to her new life, was an experience Josephine initially did not expect. A similar experience occurred for Myatta Wek. For her, “the first thing when I came here, there were Sudanese who already go to church...and then straight away when you come, the community come and visit” (Myatta).

In both cases, the anchor of the Lord that Pastor Moko suggested is a pivotal foundation for refugees starting a new life. While everything else may be different, the faith that they practice is a stable similarity. Churches provide a place of rest and rejuvenation from the stresses of the outside world, giving refugees a chance to fulfill their spiritual needs during a time when their material needs are often hard to come by. Through sermons and contact with other refugee members, churches are a place of calm and for strengthening one’s faith in the midst of the trials and stresses of adjusting to life in the United States. Ultimately, in giving refugees safe, spiritually nurturing places to worship, churches help refugees in simple but important ways—providing places to practice faith and to be strengthened by the anchor that religion provides.

At the same time, the move to the United States has challenged the Christian faith of the Sudanese. Along with the presence of many different Christian denominations and the stark divisions that separate them from each other, the lifestyle of the United States has in some cases weakened the faith of refugees. Pastor David pointed out one of these lifestyle changes when he observed that in Sudan, unlike in the United States, “you don’t have income, money like we have here.” Instead of living in total dependence on God, united with each other in faith and in trust in the Lord, Sudanese here “are busy, you pay the bill, how you work, you find your needs” with the result that when “you put them together you got something that is very, very different...life here...its not like we are back home. That’s why we miss back home” (Nhial).

Brother Jean Claude, a refugee who was once stoned and then imprisoned on four different occasions for preaching the gospel in Sudan, further expounded on this difference and the lack of faith in some Sudanese communities. According to Jean Claude, the Sudanese struggle with faith, again, mirrors that of the Israelites. When asked why he thought Sudanese in the U.S. were losing their faith, he responded:

People have no need here. They have food, they have job, they have money, they have cars, and even if they didn’t have that the government can take care of them. That mean when people, when their stomach is full, they forget God...That is why Jacob told the Jewish when they get out from Egypt, that the Lord is going to give you to the land that is going to have grape and melon and all that and very good food. But when you eat this and fill your stomach, don’t forget about your God. And that is what is happened. As soon as they find all this food and they eat, they forget about God and worship something else...When the need is covered they don’t need God in their life. When they have peace in their community, they don’t need God in their life. But if they get in a strange and difficult issue that is where you find everybody they want to come closer to God (Dimo).

As a result, while some members of the Sudanese refugee community are united by their Christian faith that bridges tribal, lingual, and cultural divisions, others have experienced challenges to unity, with the move to the United States disrupting the refugees’ reliance upon

God and upon each other. While in Sudan religious division along denominational lines would have hindered the ability of the people to come together in solidarity against the Northern Islamic oppression, in the United States the refugees are finding easier and more frequent opportunities to divide themselves. Consequently, if trials, persecution, poverty, and the needs of others in the community are the ingredients for a strong, dependent, and united faith in God, then becoming relatively affluent, independent of one's family and friends, having an abundance of food and clothing, and living without fear of being killed for one's belief can cause refugees to lose the need for faith and religious unity entirely.

Supporting Social and Material Needs

As a result of uniting the diverse Sudanese community around a common faith and providing a place for refugees to go and comfortably fulfill their spiritual needs, the Sudanese religious organizations of Memphis have also become important centers of support for the new refugee populations. The support that the churches offer comes in many different, yet important, forms. For example, churches such as New Kush and the River Nile help to organize “adherents as a community of faith, but also of persons who share their deepest issues with their ministers and fellow adherents” (Agbali, 85). They provide a place where Sudanese “share information on parentage, seek spiritual and pastoral counseling from their spiritual and religious leaders, and also offer opportunities such as formal and informal support groups” (85). As a result, Sudanese go to churches and in turn receive a double benefit—having a comfortable place to worship and a community of other refugees going through similar difficulties.

For people who, in many cases, grew up surrounded by close relatives, who lived in refugee camps for years on end depending on the same friends and connections, and who share

tribal identities with common customs and traditions, finding a supporting community is very important. In the words of Myatta Wek, “In Sudan you are staying among your people, among your relatives, among your sisters and brothers...the difference here is that you came alone, you left all your relatives alone, so...the people that you meet here will basically be friends” (Wek). Instead of having a family, village, and tribe, then, refugees are forced to connect with strangers who may be hostile to foreigners or without the ability to meet the complex needs that refugees have. The established communities and organization of churches, though, have helpfully stepped in to fill this gap. Despite her observation that moving to the Memphis was a trip made alone, Myatta also remarked that “what is amazing here is just the people do not know you, they just befriend you and love you...here it is strangers that embrace you and they love you anyways” (Wek).

The support offered by the refugee community is extremely comforting for those just arriving in the United States. Especially in the churches, where refugees turn to fulfill their spiritual needs, having pastors and congregants who look the same and share the same language offers similarity in a completely unfamiliar world. A pastor of one of the Memphis Sudanese congregations, Pastor Moko, remembers the impact of this commonality when he first arrived in the United States. Instead of having to worship at an American church and feel the strangeness of being alone even more strongly, he asserts that “the church really help when they find, ‘oh he’s a Sudanese like me, he speak the same language and it is our church, wow’” (Akol). For those coming to the United States without knowing where they will live or what kind of friends they will make, the Church is a “really...big help, like when we first come here we see the first Sudanese communities we got impressed because we were thinking ‘wow, how we going to make it.’ So really churches...help life of refugees” (Akol).

The strength of this religious foundation is furthered by the sense of community that having specifically Sudanese churches allows. While the refugees were welcomed by many different religious organizations in Memphis, having their own services has made it possible to stay connected with their own religious traditions and practices. The Sudanese churches, then, provide an added benefit to the already important role of providing a place for refugees to practice religion. They offer refugees the place and opportunity to come and meet with people from similar backgrounds and experiences, and worship not only in the same faith, but also in much the same ways as they did back in Sudan.

This is a very striking characteristic of the Sudanese churches. While U.S. churches host both the New Kush Church and The Rive Nile Church (First Evangelical and Leawood Baptist), they remain distinct from their sponsors in regards to how they choose to worship. Each congregation has its own worship room and conducts services with primarily Sudanese congregants, although other refugees, such as Burundians and Tanzanians, have attended as well. While English is the dominant language of most religious services in the United States, the Sudanese services are offered entirely in Arabic, with Arabic Bibles for reading and Sudanese Christian hymns for music. As a result, church services not only provide refugees a religiously comforting experience, but go further in being able to provide a religious experience that retains the religious flavor and styles practiced in Sudan. Consequently, coming together to worship—united in faith if not in tribe or ethnicity—strengthens the Sudanese refugee community and provides support for the members through the common cause of retaining a shared culture and identity. Although they are in a foreign place, apart from the land and communities in which they were born, the Sudanese in Memphis “like the Israel people, they keep their culture strong.

Because that is very important to many where you are...you don't lose you culture because culture is a gift from God...[and] it's very important to worship God in our culture" (Nhial).

Sharing a language and worshiping together also helps as it "builds the community to be together...because for somebody who knows English it's easy, but if you don't know English it's hard for you to go and interact with other people...you not hear anything, even the message" (Wek). Accordingly, having their own congregations is very beneficial for Sudanese trying to strengthen their community and support themselves by coming together around similar cultural beliefs. Instead of following the religious practices of U.S. churches then, the Sudanese have found a much more comfortable arrangement in partnering with churches while retaining their own cultural and religious traditions.

One Sudanese pastor built on this strength of having Sudanese religious congregations and communities by saying that everybody has "a different [way] to worship a God of his culture...there is a God for culture, yeah, but if we are together...with Arabic or tribe language, we are unite as a culture how we worship God...and then the children will learn a lot" (Nhial). According to the Pastor of the New Kush Church, Pastor Francis, this is just the way that the community prefers. Describing worship as one of the differences between Memphis and Sudanese churches, Pastor Francis noted how Sudanese:

Even Episcopalian and Presbyterian we love to worship by singing, drums, we are like Pentecostals...this is the nature of African worship. Even if you are from high church, it's still you want to sing, to hit drums, to sing hallelujah, praise the Lord, we like. But when we came here in the United States, this way of worship is not practiced. They prefer to lead the worship in the Baptist Church or Presbyterian and sing those songs slowly, so we do not find it interesting. So this is why everywhere, every town in the United States, Sudanese who love to meet together and sing in their own way and praise the Lord in their own way (Misago).

While U.S. churches have been instrumental in providing help for the refugees—sponsoring families, giving donations, holding seminars on adjustment to life in the United States—they cannot, at least initially, match the comfort of a congregation filled with other Sudanese. Especially when refugees first arrive, with difficulties in speaking English and having to face the stresses of working and finding places to stay, the comfort of religion might have been lost without their ability to truly participate in a religious experience that they understood and felt a part of. This tendency to draw towards familiar congregations and practices has been noticed across the board with African refugees, as they “seek out religious institutions, denominations, or congregations that foster their sense of community, validate their social identity, and affirm their sense of selves, especially those either founded or populated by other African immigrants, or people of similar backgrounds” (Agbali, 92). As a result, when the Sudanese churches were founded they offered places for Sudanese to come and worship in their own language, with people from similar backgrounds and going through the same transitional difficulties.

Many leaders involved in organizing the Sudanese churches in Memphis note these benefits. For example, Pastor Francis affirms that having Sudanese congregations is very helpful for bringing together the community of refugees and assisting the newly arrived. In his words, “if they go to church, to the Sudanese church, they will not find religion only, but they will also in one way or another be oriented to the Western life. So we will always try also to teach them [what] is unlawful, do not do this, do not do this, so while they are in church they are also learning American culture. So it is useful...to start in the Sudanese churches, it is better” (Misago). Pastor David also describes reaching out to the newly arrived members in the community. When the Sudanese arrive in Memphis from other cities or countries, the first thing

his church does is “go to welcome them and then to teach them about life in America, what the bad is, what the good is...to help them to find the need, go to school, driver’s license, and any support” (Nhial).

Both congregations, then, are committed to helping refugees in spiritual, social, and material ways once they arrive. As a result, aside from providing the fundamental spiritual support, they also reach out to guide other refugees through the new culture and values of the United States. According to Pastor David, though, this care for the well being of the congregants is how it was in Sudan as well. While it was poverty and war in Sudan that brought the people closer in faith and in their solidarity with each other, in the United States the struggles of adjusting to a completely new life helps the community to become “united because we...go to help one another, somebody have a need we will come together and we will find the need. We will feel like this, back home is not far away” (Nhial).

Conclusion

Although Sudanese have made many adjustments upon arriving in Memphis with regards to the social, cultural, and economic standards of the city, they have gone to their Christian faith as a center of stability. Just as Christianity helped to unite members of a diverse Sudanese population during the hardships of the civil war, so it has served to unite a diverse refugee population facing the struggles of life in the United States. In a new religious landscape dominated by distinctive denominations, the Sudanese Christian organizations have offered comfort as familiar places to worship as well as places of religious unity. When refugees have struggled to understand and adjust to different lives, the churches have opened up the chance for

discourse in a fledging community, bringing members together to help and to warn each other about the difficulties of life in a new country.

Despite these important influences of Sudanese Christian organizations on Memphis' Sudanese population, the changes in social, cultural, and religious values will surely cause much adjustment within the Sudanese religious community as well. Although the transition to the United States has in many cases strengthened the faith of Sudanese—uniting a diverse population under a single belief—relocation has led others to drop their religious convictions due to the busyness of their lives and the lessened necessity of relying upon God to supply one's needs. Furthermore, as children grow up out of the cultures of their parents and into the lifestyles and values of the United States, the strength and cohesiveness of a Sudanese religious identity seems more likely to be altered. These changes, already happening as the Sudanese become more comfortable with the language, cultures, and communities of Memphis, are not necessarily negative though. United in diversity by an enveloping faith, the Sudanese religious communities have grown and become more prominent parts of the Christian communities in Memphis. While their churches will change as they continue to take root in a new country—as they have changed already through their relocation—the Sudanese refugee population seems most likely to stay united despite their differences in culture, language, tribe, and faith.

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