Songs of exile and faith: Dinka Christians in South Sudan

by Jesse Zink in the January 8, 2014 issue

PHOTO BY JESSE ZINK

At first glance the wooden benches in the front rows of St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral in Bor, South Sudan, are simple and unremarkable. But the black letters painted on the side of each bench tell a story: ECS Zone 1 Parish. ECS is the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, and Zone 1 refers to an area of Kakuma, the refugee camp in northwestern Kenya that became home for tens of thousands of southern Sudanese during the country's civil war (1983–2005).

The pews testify to a simple fact: the Dinka church is a church of exile. When the civil war began there were only five Dinka congregations stretched along 150 miles of the Nile's east bank. They were all that remained of the British Anglican missionary presence among the Dinka in the early and mid-1900s. Today that same 150-mile stretch is home to more than 300 Anglican congregations (and a handful of others in other denominations), not to mention innumerable preaching centers in cattle camps along the Nile. There are two dioceses in the area and plans to create more. Virtually every one of the villages on the roads leading out of Bor has a

church—often a mud-and-thatch building.

The Christianity of today's Dinka emerged out of the sorrow and deprivation of refugee life, a time of despair that led many refugees to turn to the church for support, nurture and growth. It's no accident that the wooden church pews came back with the refugees. Today the cathedral in Bor is a center of South Sudanese life. On Sunday mornings the building pulses and shakes with the energy of up to 1,500 worshipers. The same is true in the churches scattered throughout the region.

I spent several weeks at Bishop Gwynne College, ECS's leading seminary, and listened to students talk about the impact of the war on their church and faith. A student named Paul Wel Dut told of how he trekked across the country with other children to refugee camps in Ethiopia. With the possibility of being pressed into service in the rebel army at any time, and with family members missing and presumed dead, the children eagerly received the message of adoption by a heavenly Father and the promise of eternal life. The large number of converts overwhelmed the few pastors and lay evangelists who had come to the camps.

Then in 1991 Ethiopian refugee camps were abruptly closed. Paul eventually ended up in Kakuma, the Kenyan refugee camp, where he and others like him became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. They set about building the infrastructure of the church that they had joined in Ethiopia—establishing congregations in the camps, as well as small preaching and education centers. A small minority of the Lost Boys were resettled in the United States and elsewhere, but the majority eventually returned to southern Sudan. When they did, they brought the Christian message with them. Returning at last to the regions that they had left as children, Paul and his colleagues shared that message with their friends and relations, built churches and brought the energy of the displaced church home.

A major part of that evangelistic energy was expressed in music. Songs have always been the currency of Dinka daily life. Before the war a small book of Dinka choruses was available, but most of the music was not religious. Instead there were songs about cattle, songs for weddings and songs trumpeting personal exploits. But then came the war and the mass conversion of the people to Christianity. Suddenly there was an explosion of Christian song.

In hymn after hymn the new converts praised God and implored other Dinka to abandon the traditional religion and turn to Christ. The deities of the traditional

religion had shown their weakness by failing to protect the Dinka from the devastation of the war. Now Christ was the only way forward. In addition to being an expression of nascent faith, music became a major form of catechesis. In Kakuma a youth group collected the songs that were being written, taught them to people in the camp and ensured that they made it back to those Dinka who remained in southern Sudan.

These hymns formed the basis for a new hymnal that was published in the late 1990s; from some 2,000 hymns 500 were selected for inclusion. The hymnal became not only a worship and catechetical tool but also an educational one; Dinka refugees honed their reading skills by learning from the hymnal.

The Dinka hymnal is a rich repository of theological reflection on many subjects, including the relationship between war and faith. Over a third of the hymns were composed by women, a remarkable achievement in a culture that traditionally has not valued women's musical contributions. One of them, Mary Alueel Nongdit, began composing hymns shortly after her baptism in 1984. Her hymns are among the longest, most complex and most popular. They have a richness of expression and theological complexity that is unique.

In one hymn Alueel Nongdit writes that "the death that has come is revealing the faith"—an appropriate sentiment for a people who converted to Christianity during a war. She says that the hymn encourages the people to look to God. "When you are crying, instead of crying just divert that crying to prayers. Turn back to God and cry to him. He will see you. He will rescue you. You are not alone."

Alueel Nongdit also wrote about the love of God and the ways that love can be expressed. In the book of Hosea, she says, God's love is shown in ways that might not at first seem loving. The Dinka had a similar experience: it was only in the destruction of war that God's love was revealed to her people. The Dinka were "a stiff-necked people," she says, but "God cannot get tired. If there is somebody whom he likes, even if the darkness buries you, if God loves you, he can dig you out!"

In 1992, not long after a battle that became known as the Bor Massacre, she composed one of her best-known songs:

> Let us give thanks;
> Let us give thanks to the Lord

in the day of devastation
and in the day of contentment.
Jesus has bound the world round
with the pure light of the word of his father.
When we beseech the Lord
and unite our hearts and have hope
then the *jok* has no power.
Nhialic has not forgotten us.
Evil is departing and holiness is advancing,
these are the things that shake the earth.

Chorus:

Do not look back; we are the people
who have received the life of Christ.
Let us show forth the light
of the Son of Nhialic.
Do what you are able to do
according to the gift
which has been given you.

The hymn repudiates traditional religion, which honored minor deities (known as the *jak* or, in the singular form, *jok*) as a means of accessing Nhialic, the creator God. But the song does not deny that the *jak* exist. Instead it insists that the *jak* are powerless to stop the war. Dinka no longer trust the efficacy of the *jak*. Their trust is placed in Nhialic alone.

In an earlier hymn Alueel Nongdit wrote:

Evil and good are competing
the earth will stand still
and the blood of mankind will cry out,
“O Lord, Lord!”
People are crying out all over the earth:
“Nhialic, do not make us orphans
of the earth.
Look back upon us,
O Creator of humankind.

Evil is in conflict with us
tying heavy burdens upon our necks
which no person can bear.

The hymn expresses the pleas of a people trapped in a war zone. Many Dinka felt that their situation was not noticed by other Christians around the world. Here the words are a plea to Nhialic not to leave the people alone, as well as an affirmation that Nhialic is with them in their suffering. The phrase “look back upon us” became a repeated prayer for many Dinka; Nhialic was “looking back” on the Dinka and bringing them to greater knowledge of their faith.

In a 2011 referendum, southerners voted overwhelmingly for secession from the North and greeted the birth of South Sudan with joy and hope. But the challenges facing the new nation are steep. Lacking critical infrastructure like paved roads, it also lacks adequate health care and education resources. Ongoing disputes with the North threaten to send the two countries back to war.

In this context the church has emerged as a major actor in the new country. In 2012, President Salva Kiir turned to Anglican archbishop Daniel Deng Bul, a Dinka from the east bank of the Nile, to negotiate a peace agreement. In April 2013 Kiir asked Deng Bul to chair a new, nationwide reconciliation commission on which many people are pinning their hopes for peace and stability.

But the church’s activity is most noteworthy on a local level. As the largest nongovernmental organization in the country, it has a presence even in communities where the government has little reach. Not far from the cathedral in Bor, for example, new classrooms for a church-run school are being built from logs and tin sheets. The reputation of the church school is so impressive that demand for its services far outstrips the available room.

Outside of Bor the problems are even steeper. David Magot Ngong is a young archdeacon of several rural villages. He spent the entire civil war inside Sudan, repeatedly displaced by the violence. He was baptized after hearing the Christian message from his brother, who had first heard it in a refugee camp. Although Magot Ngong was able to complete only four years of primary education, his congregation still recognized him as a natural leader and implored the bishop to ordain him. But Magot Ngong’s congregations are unable to pay him. So two years ago Magot Ngong sold his herd of cattle to raise the necessary bus fares to move his wife and five

children to Kakuma. In South Sudan, primary education costs money; in Kakuma, it’s free. “I don’t want them to be like me,” he tells me. “They need education for the future, and I can’t give it to them here.”

It is challenges like these that dominate the day-to-day existence of many Dinka and serve as reminders that though the period of exile may be over, return poses its own problems. For these reasons Stephen Mathiang Kuc, who was ordained during the war, founded Church and Development, a Sudanese nongovernmental organization that runs a number of projects around Bor. Mathiang Kuc sees the ongoing impact of the war around him in the low-level violence that still plagues many communities and in people who have been cut free from their cultural moorings but are not yet deep in their Christian faith. The challenge is one of discipleship: “A church that is evangelized but not discipled is not a church. But if you ground them deeply in the faith, then they can be able to stand themselves.” It is a tall order, and Mathiang Kuc knows it. But he takes a long view. “For the Dinka, this is not the end. It is only the beginning of Christianity.”