The traffic in a city like Juba, its chaos, its bota botas and taxi vans, but also its large number of new, expensive four-wheel-drive vehicles always reminds me of a short vignette I once read. A missionary in Kenya wrote of a moment when he was driving through Nairobi with his small son. He mentioned how blessed they were that they had their Land Rover. His son looked out the window at all the people walking by on the typical, crowded urban African street and asked “daddy, aren’t those people blessed?” I believe many of the people on the street, a large number of whom were perhaps poor, would have simply answered “yes.”

This story stays with me because it subtly questions the assumptions of our society and points to the power of the Christian church in many parts of Africa. South Sudan is a consciously Christian country. This comes from the fact that it is an African country and Christian roots in Africa tend to be expressed more vocally and forcefully in the public square than in the West. Perhaps more importantly, Christian persecution by the Muslim-led dictatorship in Khartoum contributed to the breakup of the former Sudan and the birth of South Sudan. Christianity, thus, as a part of self-identification and a salient element in history serves as a cornerstone and defining element of society.

I would imagine that because I consciously shared Christian beliefs with perhaps the majority of the South Sudanese and actually engaged in its practice in Juba, I could understand this part of their society well and meet many on their own terms. No one really knows the Christian percentage within South Sudan’s population; it varies between sets of statistics—some state less than 50 percent, some over 80 percent. In any case, with hundreds of thousands of deaths since 1983, the lack of a recent census, the continuing movement of the displaced, and many people returning home from the north and
abroad, no one really knows even how many people the country has. Despite numbers, though, this country definitely has a Christian spirit! In Juba and other cities, as well as spread across the countryside, churches thrive, representing many denominations. However, two big Christian churches dominate the country: Episcopal and Roman Catholic.

I came to South Sudan from northern Virginia where we belonged to Pohick Episcopal Church (once George Washington’s parish) and where I had learned how the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia had been heavily involved in missionary efforts in southern Sudan for many years. Before I left for South Sudan, our pastor put me in contact with several who have worked on various projects with the Episcopal Church of Sudan. From these contacts, I departed Virginia with a couple of letters of introduction and the email acquaintance of Missionary Paul, originally from Virginia but now in Juba.

The seat of the Episcopal Church of Sudan and South Sudan (shortened simply to ECS) lies in Juba and its cornerstone is All Saints Cathedral, proudly standing near the center of the oldest part of the city. Not long after I arrived in UNMISS, I attended my first service and then continued going, occasionally taking other UNMISS staff officers along. The variety of services on any given Sunday intrigued me: English, followed by Arabic, followed by a longer English family service at 1100, then Zande in the early afternoon. An English youth service at 1700 capped the day.

Attending a church service in Africa is always a unique experience, full of life and conviction. All Saints Cathedral itself was an impressive stone building, large and sturdy, built to last but showing the dustiness of time. The sanctuary had a simple layout with the altar in front on a raised dais and long wooden pews stretching in two sections all the way to the back. A small choir loft perched at the back above the main entrance. The windows stretched to the high ceiling as in a European cathedral and many sets of doors ran along either side of the sanctuary, standing open to cooler air outside. About 20 large fans hung from the ceiling, slowly stirring the air, while table fans quietly (mostly) reciprocated from their mounts on the walls, directed at the congregants along the outside of the pews. Their whoosh of air brought some relief from the heat to the congregation, even necessary during the first service. The bright colors on the altar, perhaps green, purple, or white based on the season, drew the congregation’s attention to the priest and the service.

If you arrived on time, you were early. When the service began, the church was usually less than half full, but as the service moved on people continued to arrive. By the end, it was standing-room-only. The service I usually attended began around 0745 in the morning and while subdued was alive. Children sat or moved about everywhere (something we missed living on the UN compound) and the congregants enthusiastically took part. Sometimes a