

Walk with me

Robyn Kuchel

Over many years I have witnessed ministry within the LCANZ. As a child my father was a pastor active in the LCANZ. My husband was also a pastor and together we hosted two Indigenous girls so they could attend school in Cairns. As a secondary teacher, I taught a unit trying to get students to appreciate and understand Australia's First Peoples' history and culture. In my work with young adults, I visited First Nations communities in Central Australia, and have been involved in teaching *All Together* songs to Sudanese young people in Dandenong. I have also taught Sudanese refugees to drive, to speak English and am currently helping Afghani, Haitian, and Sri Lankan families navigate issues in Australian life. I also lived in a remote First Nations community for three and a half years. In this time I have seen some good examples of cross-cultural ministry. However, I have also witnessed times when Indigenous and other cultures were expected to 'fit in' to the dominant culture.

In Geelong, my home congregation, a Sudanese community shares the facilities with a traditional congregation. Once a month there is a combined worship service. While it is good to see the two groups coming together, there is still a sense that the traditional format is dominant. Responses appear on the overhead screen in both languages. Pastoral introductory bits are said in both languages as are the gospel and prayers. There is an attempt to choose hymns known to both groups although they are always presented only in English. The Sudanese come to the front, face the congregation and sing the final hymn. We need to really examine whether we are valuing the other and making a meaningful connection with them.

We expect the Sudanese to come our way. The structure is very different to that used by the Sudanese in their worship. It is our structure, not theirs. The Sudanese do not respond with the responses that are in both languages and I suspect they do not sing the hymns in Nuer. If we reduced our liturgy to the most basic bits, only the gospel is in Nuer.

A few people speak to the Sudanese after worship and a few have very helpful relationships with them, but generally there is very little interaction between the two groups, especially away from fourth Sunday worship. When asked to help Sudanese women with English conversation, six volunteers quickly dwindled to one for various reasons. The last two who dropped out wanted the women to conform to our ways and overestimated the women's understanding of English.

I observed similar dynamics in a First Nations community where I worked as a care worker in the Anangu school and lay worker for the congregation from 2014 to 2017.

The congregation used the Modern Worship liturgy and *All Together* CDs for the songs. They did not engage with the liturgy or the songs. Occasionally the pastor played his guitar for songs in language. They sang a few well but, even then, he chose some the congregation did not know. No attempt was made to use local talent or adapt to local

conditions. It was as if they felt obliged to use this form of worship. Sermon preparation began on Sunday morning. Despite this the pastor spoke freely (in contrast to the delivery of the liturgy) in the local language, the occasional English thrown in, without notes, regardless of the number or status of white visitors in the congregation.

In contrast to this was a special service in 2018. The order of service was standard with more than usual formal liturgical words as suited the occasion. The sermon was delivered in a vastly different manner to usual. It was read from a text, spoken in English and used extensive bible quotes. The pastor appeared ill at ease, spoke with a stilted voice and was difficult to hear. A visitor had expressed concern about the lack of preparation earlier in the day. I wondered if he had influenced the pastor.

The white visitors were at the front of the church, the locals at the back and spread outside so it was unlikely that the locals heard much. The sermon was probably the one spot where the locals might have engaged but all of the above meant that it wasn't likely. Although preaching is a strength for this pastor, somehow it wasn't that night. What was the point? Who was this service really serving?

Both of these situations demonstrate a lack of real connection with those whose first language is not English. The liturgy, even a simple version, alienates them. Good cross-cultural connection needs to be wider than a bilingual worship service.

A very different attempt to create cross-cultural connection occurred in 2015 when the Lutheran Women of Victoria Retreat Committee had eight Sudanese women attend its retreat at Araluen. At the time I was secretary of this committee. Two women at District office had done a power of work helping the women complete forms, organise transport, reminding the women etc. I was a bit worried about how the women would be accepted. I needn't have worried. There were welcoming women there such that on Saturday night when we held a high tea the Sudanese women were spread amongst the women at different tables and they hijacked our program telling us about themselves. We were thrilled.

The following year the Sudanese women invited us to a return visit joining them at their patch. A number of us joined them. We were asked to share with the group. We did, telling about ourselves. Then the Sudanese women shared, telling us about their faith. I was embarrassed. Here were these women, who we might consider needy, giving us a lesson in sharing faith. And we enjoyed their food.

In succeeding years I sent emails to the Sudanese pastors, contacted District office, asked committee members who lived closer than I did to visit them, all without success. Eventually I asked a woman to raise the issue with the District administrator. The response came back, 'Don't give the women a free camp.' I had no intention of giving them a free camp. I found the response totally discouraging. The District had supported us in starting a wonderful connection, but that has been lost and there appears to be no understanding of the support that is needed to help these women to maintain that connection.

Many Lutherans give money and goods generously, but it takes more than money or goods to bring love to life. One congregation knows that.¹

We have many people involved with helping our asylum seeker community. Taking people to appointments, helping them deal with government forms, visa applications, integrating them into society (even taking them to the footy) and getting work. The relationships...with the asylum seekers keeps going beyond our initial contact and support for them.

We have helped people (well, actually God did it)...to find new accommodation under very difficult circumstances and then move them.

Our people are almost family to people who have no family, connections or support in Australia.

The most important ingredient in cross-cultural ministry needs to be the development of relationship. Relationship that listens, relationship that seeks to understand the other, relationship that gets involved beyond worshipping together, relationship that gives up doing things our way with a sprinkling of another language.

Robyn Kuchel is a retired teacher, who has served various Lutheran congregations in roles including children and youth ministry, music and worship. She has also served as Tertiary Ministry Coordinator VIC/TAS, editor of Lutheran Women and LWV newsletter, secretary of LWV retreat committee and a field worker in a First Nations community and now assists a few asylum seeker and refugee families in Lovely Banks (Geelong).

¹ The following is a small selection of the time given by Grovedale members, provided by Pastor Colin Simpkin in a personal email to the author, 9 September 2020, reproduced with permission.