

# South Sudanese Nuer Lutherans in Melbourne

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How do we develop a multicultural mindset in the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand? No doubt that question has many answers, but I'm happy to contribute what I've learnt in a particular setting with South Sudanese Nuer people in Melbourne.

After serving twelve years as Vic/Tas District bishop, with exposure to a range of people and communities of different culture, I took up Transitional Ministry (also called Intentional Interim Ministry) for the purpose of assisting particular parishes understand and respond to changes they're experiencing. A Transitional Ministry pastor fills a vacancy for around two years, helping the community to clarify and focus on its calling as God's people. I'm currently in the third and final year of a Transitional Ministry with the Moorabbin-Dandenong congregation (extended because of Melbourne's long shutdown last year), consisting of the English-language St James Moorabbin and Holy Trinity Dandenong worshipping communities, and the Dandenong Lutheran South Sudanese Fellowship which worships in the Nuer language. While I had engagement with this three-in-one community as District bishop, serving with all three worshipping communities as the local pastor has brought much more personal growth in the cross-cultural space—especially seeing that Transitional Ministry begins by asking '*Who are we now and how did we get this way?*'

So here is the story of the Dandenong South Sudanese Lutherans, in words we crafted together and which they are happy to share...

The Dandenong Lutheran Sudanese Fellowship is a Nuer-language worshipping fellowship of the Moorabbin-Dandenong Lutheran congregation, which itself is a member congregation of the Lutheran Church of Australia. We have been strongly supported by the Holy Trinity, Dandenong and St James, Moorabbin churches (combined into a single multi-site congregation in 2018) since we began.

We were formed in 2002 by Nuer-speaking migrants settling in Melbourne, centred around Dandenong. Our homeland is the Upper Nile region of the Republic of South Sudan which gained its independence in 2011 after decades of war; in particular we come from Bentiu, Malakal and Jonglei. Many of us fled to neighbouring countries when we were young, with early adult years away from home and in refugee camps. We came from these places to Australia with our young families but are still connected to our people back home.

Some of us became Christians in Africa, mostly as Presbyterians. When we came here our leader, Michael Jang, who had become a Lutheran, helped us learn about the free grace of God won for us by Jesus. The Holy Trinity Dandenong pastors taught us more,

and we were received into the Lutheran church by baptism or confirmation, becoming members of the congregation.

Our Dandenong Fellowship has fostered other Lutheran Sudanese Fellowships—in Traralgon, Frankston and Geelong—and we meet together every three months, rotating between locations, and to support each other when families suffer loss. Together with six other denominations we are part of the Nuer United Christian Churches group, which also meets together every three months, again in rotation between locations.

In time we hope to fully integrate into Australian society and the Lutheran Church of Australia. Our leaders therefore worship at the Sunday morning Holy Trinity English-language service, but we also gather for worship in our heart-language on Sunday afternoon. This is conducted by our leaders—lay men and women deaconesses—supported by the Moorabbin-Dandenong congregation’s pastor. Until recently we had our own pastor, and we miss this and hope for it again.

Our children are growing up as young Australians, more familiar with English than Nuer. It is very hard for them, particularly in their teenage and early adult years. We cannot parent our children in Australia the way we used to back home, so this is very difficult for us too. For the first fifteen years here, most of our children attended Sunday School run by volunteers from Holy Trinity using English, and some still do, but our teenagers and young adults no longer worship much—like many Australian young people.

The Holy Trinity Lutheran church building in Pickett Street, Dandenong, was our gathering place and ‘home’ until we left it late 2019 because it had been sold. We now worship in the Marian Room of the St Mary’s Community Centre, New Street, Dandenong, which is rented on Sunday afternoon. However we miss having a place where we can gather whenever we need to—for meetings and activities during the week (for example choir practice and sewing group), to host other fellowships and the United Churches group when it is our turn, for our children and youth, and for meal fellowship.

We want to share the gospel with others, particularly in our homeland. We therefore support a Lutheran mission in Bentiu, South Sudan, sending money and church uniforms there. John Belani of Christ the Lord Slovak Lutheran Church in Melbourne is a partner with us in this.

These are the things that matter most to us—our core values:

- Our children and their future, with particular concern for their faith and participation in the church, their participation in their Nuer cultural heritage and language, and our ability to parent them well here in Australia where we can’t do it our traditional way.
- Having a pastor to serve us God’s Word and sacrament in our heart language, and to lead us in our life as a Christian community.

- Our church life together as we wish to live it out, including with other Lutheran Sudanese Fellowships and with the Nuer United Christian Churches group here in Melbourne—and therefore a suitable church place to do this.
- Our Sudanese family back home.
- The Bentiu Lutheran mission in South Sudan.

I give you this detail because I hope by reading it you realise that one of the most important learnings from cross-cultural ministry is to *listen to the people tell their story in their own voice*, and to *facilitate its hearing for others*. I really wonder how much I didn't do that sufficiently as a church leader/District bishop, and how much it still doesn't happen in our engagement with the 'other'. So learning number one is *listen*, and listen *deeply*. For which, of course, one must be *present* (as our Lord is present for us)—and not just for an occasional meeting but for the ebbs and flows of the community's own life. Of course, busy leaders can't do that, but someone should do that on their behalf and in such a way that the story is heard, understood and suitably expressed for others to understand. I don't pretend I've finished that for our Nuer brothers and sisters, but they are graciously patient!

Here are some other learnings:

- Our Nuer brothers and sisters are a *self-identifying, self-organising* community. They didn't form or come to us because we English-speaking folk had it as a line on a strategic plan somewhere. Indeed they *sought out and found us* in our various locations in southeast Melbourne, Gippsland and Geelong, seeking the hosting and support of Australian congregations and their church facilities.
- Therefore *numbers matter*. A few isolated families might join an English-speaking congregation with speedy assimilation, but a larger number already with a dynamic community life in its heart language will seek to worship and organise itself that way too.
- *Numbers matter for the host community as well*. A large, well-resourced host congregation has different possibilities than a small community which itself may be challenged in terms of leaders, finances and facilities—when another community seeks their support, and along the way as they age. Many migrant groups come to industrial areas where our Lutheran church has not been strong.
- Our Nuer communities are *oral and communal*, not written and individualist. Help into the written world of our governance and administration (church and wider community) is needed and appreciated, but we have to be careful what we expect in this. Conversation and phone calls are far better and fairer than emails, agendas, minutes and other written documents. For this reason, mobile phones are a key tool, and computers are a much bigger leap. Indeed the mobile phone connects those who've fled their homeland to family back home so effectively that the heart can stay there.
- Given the oral nature of this community, *personal relationships* rather than organisation processes are the best help too.

- The type of support most needed changes over time, from open reception and welcome on arrival, and direct assistance with basic necessities, through coaching and practical help with the complexities of living in a land like ours, to more developed assistance as time goes by and the new community's capabilities grow. In our case, initial welfare help has moved through community development courses and coaching, to the training and support of Specific Ministry Pastors. A combination of local, District and LCANZ efforts are really appreciated, with focus on the local.
- None of this is to reduce the importance of bringing the different cultures together, including in worship. This is important to build up the one body of Christ among communities committed to each other, but it needs to be balanced with the regular spiritual needs of each community as well, so that shared services are a progressive journey over time—while we all learn Nuer of course! The training and call of Specific Ministry Pastors from the community itself is therefore a legitimate and necessary task, allowing Pentecost to happen again, that is, so *we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own language* (Acts 2:11). The goal of 'integration' is good, but are the timescales and other expectations, including tying funding to this, realistic and fair? The best approach I've seen in this regard is to ask, *What can we do together?* The point is to think in terms of partnership and mutuality—true 'fellowship' in the New Testament sense of *koinonia* or *communion*, all in Christ of course.
- The life and faith of the next generation is a huge challenge—as it is for us Australian-born folk as well.

I trust that this is of help, as we all journey more and more into the one community that matters—the Holy Trinity's transcultural community of self-giving love!

*Pastor Greg Pietsch is trained in Transitional Ministry through the North American Interim Ministry Network, and is serving a Transitional Ministry at the Moorabbin-Dandenong Lutheran Church in south eastern Melbourne. Prior to that he served a Transitional Ministry at Doncaster-Ivanhoe, and was the Vic/Tas District bishop from 2005–2015.*