

What's happening with cross-cultural ministry at St John's Geelong?

James Ruei and Milton Fritsch

In 2007, James and Mary Ruei and family, together with around 30–40 South Sudanese friends, started worshipping at St John's Geelong. Initially, James was the unofficial spiritual leader of the group. In 2017, James was employed by the congregation as the South Sudanese Lay Worker for two days a week. On Sunday 6 October 2019, there was great rejoicing and giving thanks to God as James was ordained as a Special Ministry Pastor.

During this time of Covid-19 restrictions, Pastor James Ruei continues to serve the South Sudanese community by livestreaming worship services from his living room. He begins the service at 12 am and the service lasts for almost two hours. The service includes singing, led by Pastor James who loves to sing, bible readings, prayers, and a weekly sermon. The service is run through Facebook live and it is great to read the comments that are sent in by the South Sudanese members who are participating in the service. Participants include people from Ethiopia and North America as well as local members here in Geelong.

Pastor James continues to keep in touch with members through phone calls and some visiting. He encourages members to read selected verses from the bible in preparation for a weekly bible study which is held on a Saturday in a home.

Each week, prior to Sunday services, the South Sudanese community practice singing the hymns/songs by logging into messenger through their mobile phones.

We had been planning for a small group of South Sudanese and members from St John's to visit Gambella-Jekou in southwestern Ethiopia toward the end of May and early June. Sadly, this trip has been postponed until a more suitable time. The reason for the trip is to experience where many of our South Sudanese families were living in Ethiopia. Our plans included visiting Kule refugee camp, visiting Madding and Jekou Warreda, Pastor James' birthplace, and meet family members, including his mother. We also planned to worship with one of the local Lutheran congregations and spend time with students at the orphanage school which is located on the church grounds. Over the past couple of years, St John's congregation has supported the school through monetary donations which have helped to build the school and provide basic furniture for the students.

Prior to the imposed restrictions due to Covid-19, we were running a monthly Pal Makta service at St John's. Pal Makta means 'combined service' in Nuer. The service is conducted by both Pastor James and Pastor Milton. It is a bilingual service in Nuer and English. We are encouraging South Sudanese members to share their stories with the congregation as part of the Pal Makta service. In February, we were blessed to hear from Thalual Marwang who shared how he had escaped the violence in South Sudan as a

young boy together with his brothers. We heard how he and his brothers lived in a refugee camp in Ethiopia for twenty-one years. Thalual eventually made it to Egypt and then to Australia. As we hear these stories, we can only marvel at God's hand of blessing over Thalual and others during these very difficult times in their lives.

Our goal is to fully integrate the South Sudanese fellowship into the life of the congregation. We are slowly, but surely doing this through our monthly Pal Matka services. Members volunteer to pick up South Sudanese families that need transport. We hold regular social get-togethers between leaders from St John's and the South Sudanese fellowship. We currently have seventeen young people preparing for first communion. This includes ten South Sudanese young people. The South Sudanese support group meets monthly to support this vital ministry.

Looking ahead, we plan to restart our monthly Pal Matka services when restrictions are lifted. Pastor James and the South Sudanese plan to recommence public Nuer worship services when the restrictions are lifted to fifty people. They also plan to recommence the Nuer language classes that were being held on a Saturday afternoon.

Pastor James says that the biggest challenge facing his members is that the longer they are unable to meet for public worship and other gatherings, members will begin drifting away from active participation in the church. Ongoing pastoral care and visiting of families is vital to preventing this drift from occurring.

The South Sudanese love to meet in gatherings. Prior to Covid-19, they would travel long distances to be part of the Victorian South Sudanese Lutheran Community. This gathering of between 90–120 people is held at different locations around Victoria four times a year. The Australian Youth Conference is normally held on the first weekend in March. Last year 3,200 people from around Australia and overseas attended this conference. The wider South Sudanese Community are anxious to resume these gatherings once restrictions are lifted.

We thank God for the partnership that we have in the gospel between St John's and the South Sudanese community.

James Ruei and Milton Fritsch are pastors at St John's Geelong, Victoria