

Sudanese refugees find a place to worship

BY ANDREW FICKES

Sudanese refugees come from as far as Portland and Vancouver, Wash., to special monthly worship services at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Renton. The minister at those services is a fellow refugee, the Rev. Matthew Both, the first ordained Nuer-speaking pastor in the Pacific Northwest.

"It's a call of God to be a pastor in this country," says Both. "It's a blessing from God that has changed my life and my children's life."

Both, 42, was ordained in July, a decade after he became a United States citizen. He misses his homeland and the village he left behind in south Sudan, and his mother remains a refugee in an Ethiopian camp. He sends her money, and in 2005, he visited refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya to teach the people how to be economically productive and self-sustaining.

"I miss my country, because I love the land," he says.

For most of the second half of the 20th century, Sudan was consumed by civil war, save for a reprieve between 1973 and 1983. By some estimates, more than two million south Sudanese perished during the war, while approximately 500,000 were displaced to refugee camps in neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya.

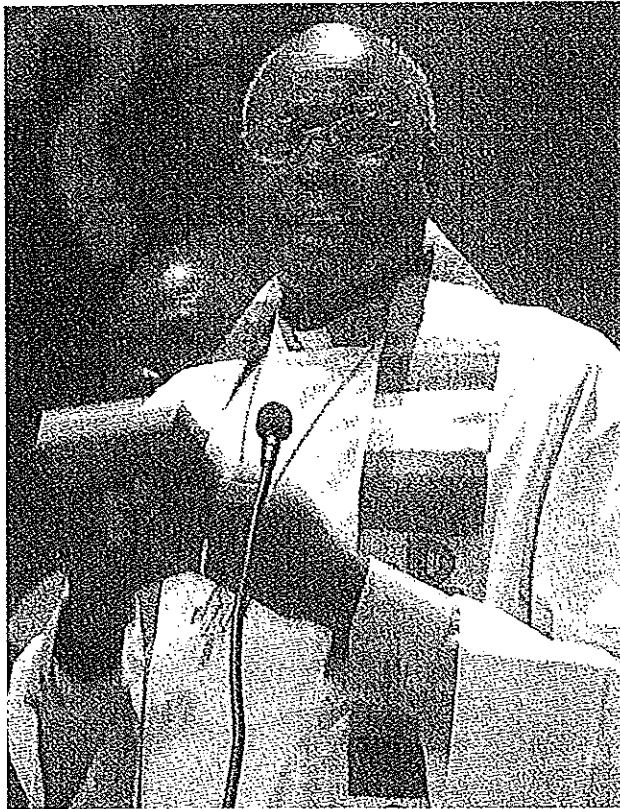
Both lost a cousin and his sister in the war. He adopted his orphaned niece, a common practice among south Sudanese people, and was one of the thousands displaced to refugee camps.

Both was born in July 1967. Six years before, a Christian missionary had established a Nuer-language school in Both's village, teaching the Christian faith from 1961 to 1977.

"We thank this man for bringing the word of God to us," says Both. "We will not forget him."

In 1993, Both, his wife and seven children were among 700 south Sudanese who came in the first wave of Sudanese immigration to America. They landed in Des Moines, Iowa, where they were sponsored by Lutheran families.

Over the next decade, Both learned English, received a high school diploma, and became a United States citizen. In 2003, he went to St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, Mich. as a deacon. He completed seminary training and received



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Top, Pastor Matthew Both addresses his congregation at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Renton. Above, The Sudanese women's choir sings in their native language to the Sudanese congregation.

his degree from Concordia in St. Louis, Mo.

Meanwhile, King of Kings was looking for a Sudanese pastor to minister to the Nuer-speaking Sudanese community and eventually connected with Both.

Now as a pastor at King of Kings, Both devotes his time to counseling fellow Nuer-speaking Sudanese, helping them look for jobs and adapt to American life. His children attend Kent schools, and his wife Rebecca is a housekeeper at Valley Medical Center.

Both and Pastor Ken Wyneken integrate the Sudanese congregation with the English-speaking congregation by having combined celebrations and worship services.

On New Year's Day, the united congregation celebrated the birthday of the "Lost Boys and Lost Girls of Sudan" with some 300 to 400 cupcakes. Sudanese who immigrated to the U.S. were given Jan. 1 as their birthday because many did not have birth certificates.

"It's made it visibly clear that we're a church open to any diversity," says Wyneken. "There's a sense of gratitude from them that we all can learn from."