



Music makers: Providence Defina (right) joins Fablice Manirakiza on the drums at the inaugural St Paul's Lutheran Church Burundi Day.



End of an era: The closing of the old Lutheran Church in Fahey St, Shepparton.

Called to do God's work

PASTOR REVELS IN CHALLENGES AND BLESSINGS OFFERED IN SERVING HIS MOSTLY MIGRANT PARISHIONERS

By Declan Martin

St Paul's Lutheran Church pastor Matt Anker could not find happiness in a career of finance and business, so he answered a call to join the ministry.

Reverend Anker first studied economics at Monash University in Melbourne, where his then girlfriend and eventual wife pushed faith into a more prominent role in his life.

"There was a real sense of peace and relief in hearing the central message of the church, that of forgiveness," Rev Anker said.

"I became quite involved in the church, but continued working in public service in finance, and yet I had this nagging sense of calling to the ministry that I thought was ridiculous because I lived a life outside the church. I thought I was an inappropriate candidate.

"I ended up quitting my job and buying a lawn mowing franchise in the hopes I would be too busy to think of this calling.

"But it became so unsettling I talked to my pastor at the time and he helped put in an application to become a pastor and after six years of training in Adelaide I became a pastor."

Rev Anker started his studies aged 26 and went to work full-time as a vicar in the Port Adelaide parish for a year before he was assigned to Mildura for four years.

"I was surprised that most of those studying were on to their second career. The youngest was 22 and the oldest was in their 50s," he said.

He became the pastor at Shepparton in 2007, a role he thought would be a quiet one, but after several years he realised it would be a challenging yet fulfilling position.

"I thought I would have time to do post-graduate studies," he said with a laugh.

Migrant families from the Congo make up a large number of the parishioners

at St Paul's, but although they arrived before he did, most were not attending church.

"Some made contact with the church, but most weren't attending," Rev Anker said.

"The first three families, who had grown up attending the Lutheran church in the Congo, and one family from Sudan sought the church out.

"Those first three families started attending and we supported them. And they then invited others to come and join.

"When new people came into town they were invited to pray with them. Slowly but surely, things grew."

Rev Anker said many migrant families were aware of the Lutheran name because some of the biggest refugee camps were run by Lutheran groups.

"They trusted the name and it was synonymous with the hospitality and care," he said.

"We benefited and they connected with us easily."

Rev Anker said the old church was a weatherboard building in Shepparton's north that was built in the 1960s with a view to see whether the church would grow.

"As soon as there were 60 people in attendance, it was chockers," he said.

"When I arrived we had 30 people on average for a Sunday service. When we got to about 90 we started renting St David's Uniting Church and while we were renting we tried to raise money for a new church."

Rev Anker said the current church and African House on Poplar Ave, which opened in 2014, had been great for the community.

The church has an average of 120 parishioners at its regular services, made up mostly of Congolese, Burundian, Nigerian, South Sudanese and Sierra Leone migrant families.

"For African folk it's a very central part of their lives. It has enabled people to be supported in their faith and



Speaking: Reverend Matt Anker.

daily lives in a much more significant way. We have people through here every day," Rev Anker said.

"It has created a sense of community, of having a home. Most of our parishioners have been displaced or had their homes taken from them. The church has become a real powerful place of belonging.

"They can go cook in the kitchen or spend time in the sanctuary singing or praying or whatever else."

Rev Anker said it had been quite powerful to witness the impact the church had on people.

"In the beginning I visited them and they knew about half-a-dozen words in English. I knew no Swahili. We laughed a lot and did our best with sign language, but one thing they knew was that I came as a minister of the Gospel. They understood when I was praying, even if it wasn't in their language," he said.

"We tried to get things in place quickly though. There are key parts of every service I do in Swahili, particularly relating to the forgiveness of sins and the blessing of God.

"Before too long there were people who could translate — working with translators has become a part of life here.

"It's important to be patient with one another and caring enough to wait and understand."



Reminiscing: St Paul's Lutheran Church pastor Matt Anker reflects on his path to becoming a minister and the powerful sense of belonging the church has given to many people.

Rev Anker said his language skills were improving and he could now understand a lot more words.

Rev Anker has spent more than 10 years in Shepparton and said he saw his future here.

"The experience here is worlds apart from what I expected, but what we have here is a great blessing.

There are enormous challenges but the blessings outweigh those," he said.

"I'm involved in areas of work I've never dreamt of being involved in, from assisting with immigration to supporting families in Africa.

"One of the most enriching things about our church's African people are

they are unashamedly Christian. Anglo-Australians are much more private about their faith, but Africans live it out vibrantly and that comes through in their worship and conversations and the way they interact with the community.

"They bring energetic expression of faith through song and dance."