



From St Mary's to South Sudan: the Adelaide priest answering a call to be bishop in his homeland

On Australia Day 2026, while most of the country enjoys barbecue and the beach, Canon William Deng will be boarding a plane, leaving his home, his wife, and his six children behind.

He is trading the familiar pews of St Mary's Anglican Church in South Road, Adelaide, for a diocese of hundreds of thousands of people in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan. Recently elected as the second Bishop of Aweil, Canon William is stepping into a role that is as daunting as it is prestigious and he is doing it for free.

It's never been easy for us who really answer the call of God! It's never been straight. It is always difficult,â•• Canon William says of the decision. â••I answered the call and I'm ready to go.â••

A voluntary sacrifice

The magnitude of the shift is difficult to overstate. Canon William has served at St Mary's since 2014, becoming a beloved figure known for his â••Ding-lishâ•• â•• a warm mix of Dinka and English languages â•• and his ability to bridge cultures.

Now, he returns to the region of his birth to lead a diocese in a country still finding its feet. The position of Bishop of Aweil is voluntary, unpaid, and fraught with logistical challenges.



Canon William Deng in St Mary's South Road as he prepares for his next challenge in South Sudan

“That is really also another answering the call freely,” he says. “Freely you receive! it makes it tough though, because the country I’m going to is a little bit of a young country and a lot of problems here and there.”

The greatest sacrifice is personal, though. His wife, Linda (Achol), and their six children – Mawien, 21, Deng, 19, Amiir, 17, Leek, 12, Abak, 10, and Wol, 5 – will remain in Adelaide.

Bishop Sophie Relf-Christopher, Administrator of the Diocese of Adelaide, noted the significance of this separation. “It will be important for the Diocese family to stay in contact with Achol and William’s children, the youngest of whom have only known life as South Australians of South Sudanese heritage.”

She asks the Adelaide Diocese to keep the family in their prayers.

Canon William admits the distant relationship will be difficult, but plans to return to Adelaide perhaps three months a year to visit. “My family will stay here and I will go there and it will be back and forth – it has never been easy.”

The Road to Aweil

Canon William’s journey to the bishopric has been circular. Born in the small town of Marialba within the Aweil diocese, he eventually fled the conflicts of his homeland, meeting his wife in a refugee camp in Kenya.

He spent more than a decade in the United States, studying at the Trinity School for Ministry in Pittsburgh, before moving to Australia in 2013. Now, after 12 years in Adelaide, he feels a familiar cycle closing.

“I spent 12 years in the United States and I moved. Now, 12 years in Australia and I move again,” he reflects. “So the next 12 years will be in South Sudan – God knows.”

He returns to a church that is exploding in numbers. While Anglicanism in Australia faces declining attendance, the church in South Sudan is a powerhouse. Canon William estimates his new diocese alone covers a city population of roughly 500,000 to 600,000 people in a country where there are nearly 4 million Anglicans and 61 dioceses.

The Province of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan has grown to such strength from a base formed by early missionaries from the Church Missionary Society, such as Archibald Shaw who arrived in 1905, establishing a mission station at Malek, just south of Bor.

Despite baptising only one person in his first 10 years, Shaw’s commitment to living among the Dinka people laid a foundation that helped the church become a pillar of hope during the country’s long civil wars.

A legacy in Adelaide

While his eyes are set on Aweil, Canon William leaves a profound mark on Adelaide. As the Canon for South Sudanese Ministry, he has been instrumental in navigating the identity crisis faced by some South Sudanese youth in Australia.

“There is a missing of both cultures! they are not fully Australian, they are not fully Sudanese,” he observes of the youth who struggle with belonging. Through music, marching together at Festival times such as Christmas, and engagement, Canon William has worked to anchor them in the community, arguing that the Anglican Church must step up to support these young people who are Australian and unlikely to ever return to Africa.

Bishop Sophie praised his influence. “Canon William, his wife Achol and his whole family are well-loved members of the community and have shared the parish’s passion for God’s mission.

“William’s leadership has helped us advance the standing and influence of Adelaide’s South Sudanese-speaking congregations.”

The next chapter

Canon William hopes to receive his Australian citizenship just days before he flies out – a final stamp of belonging before he departs to lead his people abroad.

He leaves behind a salaried position for a role reliant on faith and the support of others. The parish of St Mary’s has set up a fund to support his ministry, a gesture he accepts with grace.

“It is God’s grace and I will still trust God will provide,” he says. “I will still believe that God has something for me and that something is greater than the salary I got.”

Canon William Deng will be consecrated as the Bishop of Aweil in early February 2026.

You can contribute to the Diocese of Adelaide’s gift to Canon William through the account below:

BSB 705-077

Account 00000172

Name: Synod of the Diocese of Adelaide

Reference: William Deng

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