LUTHERAN EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND

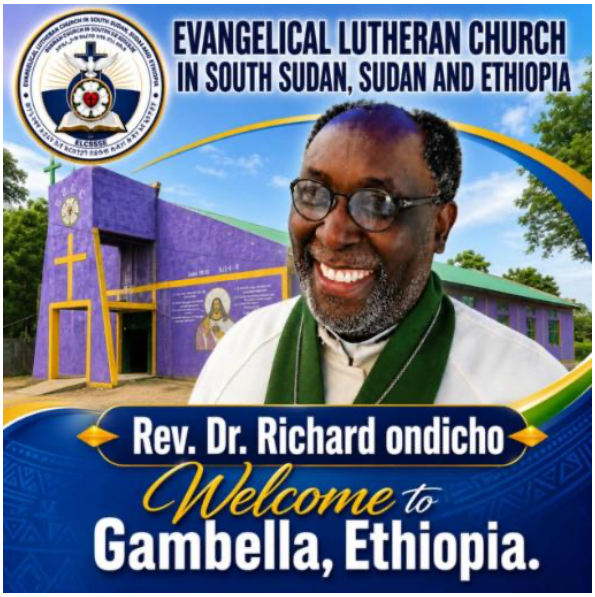
ETHIOPIA MISSION REPORT



Richard Ondicho · 23 November 2026

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!”

— Romans 10:14–15 (KJV)



The welcome poster prepared by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Sudan, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I bring you greetings from our beloved Christian friends in Gambella: the pastors, theological students and church workers who took part in the workshop, and with whom I stayed from 8 to 16 November 2026.

Dr. Ville and the ELCS/ELCSS Coordinator, Rev. Taisto, sent me on an important mission trip to Gambella, Ethiopia, to lead a workshop for pastors, students and church workers. The purpose of the mission was to teach, encourage and strengthen those serving in the church's ministry. Equally important, it was an opportunity to meet the people working in the Gambella area and to learn from them. From the outset, I understood that this was not to be a one-way journey of teaching, but a time of sharing in which I would also receive and learn a great deal.

A journey to Gambella

The trip was originally planned for early May 2026, but circumstances prevented me from going at that time. When the opportunity came again, I accepted it to go in November, and I left on the evening of Sunday, 8 November 2026. I travelled through the night to Addis Ababa, where I had to wait about six hours for my connecting flight to Gambella. It was a long journey, but it gave me time to prepare my heart and mind for what lay ahead.

I had never been to Gambella before and had no real idea what to expect. I did not know how hot it would be, and I knew very little about the town where I would be staying, its people or their culture. Anna and Pastor Taisto had visited the year before, so I had heard something about the place from them. Still, hearing about a place is very different from experiencing it, and this was my first chance to see Gambella for myself. I set out with curiosity, and also with some uncertainty, and almost everything I found there came as a surprise to me.

When I arrived in Gambella, nobody was waiting specifically for me at the airport. There was a hotel van, but at first I thought its staff were there to collect other passengers, not me. For a moment I was unsure what I was supposed to do or where I should go. Then a young man standing near the van noticed me and waved me over with his hand. I followed him, and eventually I was taken to the hotel.

At the hotel I was shown to my room. After I had settled in, I was taken by tuk-tuk to the church. I had no idea what was waiting for me there, and I certainly did not expect the reception that followed. Nothing in my preparation or in what I had heard beforehand had prepared me for that moment.

As I approached the church, I suddenly found many people waiting outside. They were holding a picture of me, and they had laid palm branches on the ground for me to walk on as I came towards the church. I was completely surprised and overwhelmed by what I saw. It was the kind of

reception I would normally associate with the arrival of a king or a very important person, not with the arrival of a teacher who had come to serve.



The welcome outside the church, with the banner bearing my picture.

A humbling welcome

For me, it was simply too much. I felt ashamed to walk on the palm branches, because I did not feel that I deserved such an honour. I had come to Gambella as a servant, sent to teach and to share with pastors, students and church workers. I had not come expecting to be treated as someone special, and receiving such honour made me deeply aware of my own unworthiness.



Standing on the palm branches laid out for the welcome.

They had even placed a seat in front of the church door and asked me to remove my shoes so that they could wash my feet. I declined, because I felt very uncomfortable receiving such an honour.

I could not accept being treated in that way when I saw myself simply as a servant who had come to serve the church. In my heart, it felt that the roles should have been the other way around.

Even so, the whole reception touched me very deeply. I understood that what they were doing was an expression of their love, respect and appreciation, and that it came from sincere hearts. Their welcome was completely unexpected, and it became one of the most memorable moments of my arrival in Gambella. I was humbled by their kindness and hospitality. From the very beginning, I realized that this visit would be much more than conducting a workshop. It would also be a precious opportunity to meet people, build relationships, listen to them, and experience something of the life and faith of the church in Gambella.

As I entered the church, the choirs were singing, and they continued to sing as they escorted me to the front seat. The singing, the welcome and the warmth of the people made the moment very emotional for me, and I could not hold back my tears. I found myself standing in front of everyone with tears in my eyes. It was a deeply humbling moment, because I had come with the intention of serving and teaching, never expecting such a warm and honouring reception.



A choir singing in the church.



Choirs singing during the welcome.

Once I had been escorted to the front, the Assistant Bishop, Rev. Simon, gave a welcome introduction. He welcomed me on behalf of the church and spoke of the joy of having me in Gambella. His words helped me understand even more clearly how much this visit meant to the people who had gathered, and how much they valued the fellowship it represented.

I was then given the opportunity to say a few words to the congregation. I brought greetings from LEAF and from the leadership of the Luther Church, and I conveyed their greetings warmly to all who were present. I expressed our joy and gratitude for the opportunity to be together with our brothers and sisters in Gambella. I also thanked the church for the warm welcome they had given me, and said I hoped the visit would be a time of mutual encouragement and learning, and that it would strengthen the work of the church.



The congregation gathered in the church.

Teaching and learning together

For the workshop, I had prepared lectures on five main topics: Christian Stewardship, Homiletics, Christian Marriage, Christian Ethics, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). I chose these subjects because I wanted the teaching to address both the practical side of Christian ministry and some of the real challenges that pastors, students and church workers face in their daily lives and in their ministry. In particular, I wanted the teaching on African Traditional Religion to help participants understand how the Christian faith relates to traditional religious practices and how it differs from them. My hope was that this would help them recognize syncretism and guard against it in their own lives and congregations. The five topics provided enough material for a one-week workshop with many hours of teaching each day.

All five topics were very well received, and I was greatly encouraged by the interest, attention and engagement the participants showed throughout the teaching. At the same time, I must honestly admit that I had not done my preparation and background research thoroughly enough before travelling to Gambella. In particular, I had not taken enough time to understand what the

participants already knew, or how they understood some of the subjects within their own culture. This became especially clear to me when I taught on Christian Marriage.

During the lectures on Christian Marriage, I came to see that the situation on the ground was more complex than I had expected. All the pastors attending the workshop had one wife. However, among some of the lay members there were men with more than one wife, and some women were living as a second or third wife. I had not fully understood this before arriving in Gambella; the realization came to me only during the teaching itself.

As I addressed the subject, I spoke clearly and with the authority of God's Word concerning Christian marriage. At the same time, I became aware that the subject was making some of the participants tense and uncomfortable. This taught me an important lesson: before addressing sensitive subjects, one needs to understand the cultural and social context of those who are listening. The biblical teaching remains important and must not be set aside. Yet the way in which it is presented must take into account the circumstances and experiences of the people who hear it.

I did not condemn or personally judge anyone. Rather, I tried to present the biblical teaching clearly, faithfully and respectfully. I emphasized the biblical understanding of God's creation of humanity as male and female, and the Christian understanding of marriage that flows from it. My intention was never to attack individuals or their personal circumstances, but to set before the participants what Scripture teaches about God's intention for human relationships and for marriage.

This experience was a valuable learning moment for me as a teacher and as a missionary. It reminded me that effective teaching requires not only knowledge of the subject and faithfulness to God's Word, but also careful preparation to understand the cultural, social and historical context of the people being taught. I left the session with a deeper appreciation of the need to listen first and to understand the local context. Only then can one teach in a way that remains faithful to Scripture while also being sensitive to those who receive the teaching.

Questions, faith and shared understanding

The third day became particularly important, because it gave the participants a good opportunity to ask questions arising from the earlier teaching. One of the most significant questions was what the church should do with members who have two or three wives. Although the topic for that day was Christian Ethics, the discussion naturally returned to Christian marriage and to the practical challenges the church faces in this area. The openness of the participants allowed us to discuss these matters more directly and honestly. It also helped me understand much better the realities facing the church in Gambella.

During this discussion I also discovered another important gap in the participants' theological resources: even the pastors did not have access to the Small Catechism. When I referred to the

Sixth Commandment during the teaching, I found that they were not familiar with its content or its significance in the way I had assumed they would be. I therefore had to adjust my teaching and take time to teach the Ten Commandments as well. What had been planned as a workshop on particular subjects thus became, in some respects, an opportunity to strengthen the participants' basic Lutheran catechetical knowledge, which is the foundation for everything else.

I was greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm with which the participants received the Lutheran teachings that we believe, teach and confess. Their willingness to learn and their eagerness to ask questions showed me that there is a real hunger for deeper theological understanding among them. I was especially encouraged that they did not simply listen passively. Instead, they engaged actively with the teaching, asked difficult questions, and sought clarification on matters that affected their ministry and the life of their congregations.

I also felt it was important to give the women an opportunity to speak more freely about their experiences and concerns. Therefore, on Thursday I took time to meet with them separately. This allowed me to listen to them and to hear what they were thinking about the workshop and about the issues being discussed. It was a refreshing and valuable experience to hear their perspectives directly, in a setting where they could express themselves openly.

During this conversation, the women explained that for some of them this was already the second time they had taken part in such a workshop, since Anna and Pastor Taisto had led a similar one in Gambella the previous year. This year's workshop, however, was different in one important way. Bishop Wichieng had advised that the workshop should bring men and women together rather than separating them. As a result, pastors, deaconesses and other church workers were all able to participate together.

I appreciated this approach very much, because it allowed the whole church community to learn together. It meant that men and women serving in different areas of ministry could hear the same teaching, ask questions together, and reflect together on the challenges facing the church. The separate conversation with the women did not replace this shared learning but complemented it, by giving them additional space to share their thoughts and experiences more openly.

Serving in demanding conditions

The extreme heat made the teaching sessions physically demanding. The temperature was around 40 degrees Celsius, and each day I spent more than seven hours standing and teaching. I was sweating almost continuously, and I needed to drink a great deal of water throughout the day. The combination of long hours on my feet, the intense heat and the continuous teaching was exhausting. For the participants, sitting and listening for so many hours in that heat was almost unbearable, and yet they remained attentive and eager to learn. Their attentiveness and participation encouraged me greatly and gave me the strength to continue with the programme.

The Assistant Bishop, Rev. Simon, therefore suggested that we adjust the schedule to suit the conditions. We taught in the morning from 9:00 until 13:00. Then, instead of continuing through the hottest part of the day, we took a break of about five hours and resumed the programme in the evening. This proved to be a wise decision, because the cooler evening conditions made it much easier for both the teacher and the participants to concentrate and to benefit from the sessions.

The evening sessions were arranged mainly as question-and-answer sessions. This gave the participants an opportunity to raise questions arising from the lectures and to discuss matters that were especially relevant to their own ministry and circumstances. These sessions also created a more interactive setting, in which I could listen carefully to the concerns and experiences of the pastors, students and church workers and respond to them directly.

Adjusting the programme because of the heat also reminded me of the importance of being flexible when ministering in a different cultural and geographical environment. A good programme cannot always be followed exactly as planned. It is necessary to pay attention to the circumstances, to listen to the local leadership, and to make adjustments that allow the participants to benefit as fully as possible from the teaching. Flexibility in such situations is not a weakness in planning, but a way of serving the people better.

By Friday, 13 November 2026, I felt that the participants and I had reached a good level of understanding and harmony. The earlier challenges and differences in perspective had gradually given way to greater openness, trust and unity. I felt that everyone was now fully engaged in the workshop and moving in the same direction. At this point, we were truly working together, and the workshop had become a shared experience rather than simply a teaching programme led by me.

It was also on that same day that I learned something that deeply humbled me. I discovered that the pastors and other church workers who had come to take part in the workshop were sleeping on the dusty floor. Until then, I had not fully understood the conditions in which many of the participants were staying during the workshop. The realization affected me deeply, because I was staying in a hotel while the very people I had come to serve were sleeping on a bare floor in very difficult conditions.

As I reflected on this, I began to feel that perhaps I too should have stayed with them in the church hall. The hall had no mosquito nets or air conditioning, and the conditions would have been very hard, especially in the extreme heat of Gambella. Nevertheless, the knowledge that I had more comfortable accommodation while the pastors and church workers slept on the floor made me feel uneasy. As someone who had come to serve them, I felt that perhaps I should have shared more closely in their circumstances.

This was another deeply humbling moment for me during the mission. It reminded me that ministry is not only about teaching others, but also about identifying with the people we are called to serve and sharing in their lives. Their willingness to sleep on a dusty floor simply in order to take part in the workshop challenged me personally. It also gave me a much greater appreciation of their

commitment to the church and to learning. Their sacrifice and dedication became an important part of what I carried home with me from Gambella.

Looking ahead: supporting the church in Gambella

As I was leaving Gambella, Bishop Wichieng called me from America. He expressed his satisfaction with what I had been teaching, and he tasked me with preparing a curriculum for the seminary. I completed this task while I was in Nairobi, before returning to Finland. The Bishop also expressed his desire for the seminary to continue receiving teachers, even through online teaching, so that the work that had begun could continue and grow.

In addition, there is an urgent need to build at least two classrooms for the seminary students. Without adequate space, the students cannot be taught in the way that the work of the seminary requires.



A simple structure of wooden poles and an iron-sheet roof, showing the basic conditions in Gambella.

The church in Gambella also needs teaching materials. I contacted the Rt. Rev. Roland Gustafsson, Emeritus Bishop of the Mission Province in Sweden, to ask for help in sending theological books to Gambella. He graciously responded positively to the idea of sending books from Scriptura.

I noted with great concern that Gambella and the other four deaneries have long been an overlooked area. No missionary had ever been sent there until Rev. Taisto and Anna Sokka visited last year.

My recommendation is that LEAF plan to send a missionary to live in Gambella and help with the mission work there. The area is very large, and the church has five deaneries, which is far more than occasional visits can adequately support. None of the pastors receives a salary, yet they carry

out their ministry with joy and commitment. Their faithfulness under such circumstances makes their work truly admirable and deserving of our support.

With gratitude and prayer

Throughout this mission, the words of St. Paul were clearly before me. I feel truly blessed that Dr. Ville sent me to Gambella. Since my return, Gambella has continued to occupy my mind, and I have remained in contact with the pastors and the Bishop.

Although the weather in Gambella was very challenging, I heard that you and others were praying for me. It is no wonder, then, that the workshop overflowed with good discussions, and that I did not catch malaria, even though Gambella is a malaria zone. It is also thanks to you that the funds provided for the workshop enabled us to finish as planned.

Kindly continue to pray for our brothers and sisters in Gambella who, though isolated and overlooked by the Lutheran Church in Sudan and South Sudan, have remained faithful to the Word of God.

23 November 2026

In Christ, I remain His servant and yours,

Richard Ondicho

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