News from the Whittaker family

Hi. Greetings from Mäpuru!

I received an email from a Uniting Church minister colleague the other day saying “Hi I haven’t heard much from you lately how are things going?” So I thought it might be good to update our friends and colleagues about what is happening with the Whittakers.

Just to recap. In July Penny, Dean, Amber and Hannah left SA and moved to Arnhem Land because Penny had been invited to teach in a new Christian School at Mäpuru which was commencing that month. The school had previously been a Homeland Learning Centre associated with Shepherdsford College on Elcho Island, which meant teachers came out for a few days each week. The Mäpuru community had been asking the Government and Education Department for many years to let them become a proper school of their own and this had not happened. So after being knocked back once too often they took matters into their own hands and decided to become an independent school under the auspices of the Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA).

Meanwhile, back with the Whittakers…..Dean took six months leave from his ministry role with Congress in SA, Amber deferred her social work studies with Uni SA and came with us offering to help Penny in the classroom situation while continuing her Uni studies with one distance education topic offered by Charles Darwin Uni (CDU) called “Yolngu Studies”. Hannah enrolled in the Katherine School of the Air studying at year 8 level with Dad as a tutor.

Mäpuru had previously had no balanda (non-Aboriginal) residents. About 100 people live in Mäpuru but there are only 9 houses. So the Whittakers and Linda Miller the founding principal (with a full teaching load also) and her husband John Greatorex (a lecturer in Yolngu Studies at CDU) moved into Mäpuru in July and the Mäpuru Christian School commenced. (Linda and John have had a longstanding relationship with the community. The school had a small teacher accommodation unit which suited Linda and John while our family has been living in a classroom modified quite brilliantly to meet our family’s needs. While it works quite well for us using the classroom for accommodation has taken the community’s best classroom out of service as a classroom and this needs to be remedied as soon as possible.

NTCSA has committed itself to having a house in place before the 2011 school year commences and have in faith backed the aspirations of the community. We also believe that a second teacher house will be needed in the near future.

In her teaching Penny works very closely with Roslyn Malnbunga, an amazing Yolngu woman who shares the teaching load with Penny. Linda shares the teaching of the secondary kids with Jackie Nguluwidi who is an inspiration in the way he takes leadership in the community and the school.

Anyway… after the school had been running for a while Linda, Roslyn and Jackie met with Penny affirming her work and asking her to commit herself to stay teaching at Mäpuru until the end of 2012. Penny, the girls and I spent some time in considering this new development and discerning what to do and came to the conclusion it was the right thing to say yes we would stay on.

So I have notified Congress SA and The SA Synod that I will conclude my placement as Adelaide Congress Minister on December 31st 2010. One factor in me feeling I could do this was hearing stories of how positive things were happening in the congregation in my absence. I want to pay tribute to all the members of our Congregation for their hopeful approach to my being away, and especially the Church Council, supply minister Denise Champion, assistant pastor Snooky Varcoe and social worker Claire Watkinson and the many folk who give their heart and soul to serving Christ in our congregation. I certainly will miss everyone, but I also feel a confidence that God is continuing to work in exciting ways in our church. May God bless you all.

I am unclear about what next for me, but I believe God will open up new opportunities for me to fulfil my sense of call based out of Mäpuru. I have needed time to lay low and recover, and am beginning to feel somewhat replenished. Please pray that the way forward will become more clear for me. Meanwhile Penny is finding her role exhilarating and profoundly challenging at the same time, and I’m sure she and Linda, Rosslyn and Jackie would appreciate your prayers also!

Amber is throwing herself into all the adventures and friendships she can, and picking up the Djamharrpuynu language rapidly – while the rest of us lag way behind in her wake. Hannah is thriving, studying hard, making friends and getting taller at an amazing rate.

The community and the children here have been wonderfully welcoming and it is a very happy and peaceful place to be (although as I write the generator is quite loud!) We are hoping to have a significant slab of time during December and January back in Adelaide to catch up with family and friends and to say farewells and prepare for further time away (rather than our originally expected return.)

I have attached to this letter a newsletter that Linda put together recently for supporters of Mäpuru community and the Mäpuru Christian School. I think it gives a number of interesting glimpses into what’s been happening. Please pray for us and if you feel you can offer any other form of practical support it would be greatly appreciated.

I think all of us have felt we have been very privileged in the relationships, roles and opportunities we have had in SA, and we miss and treasure those things. At the same time we all feel now that it is right for us to be up here in Mäpuru, so we are on a new exciting, but daunting, stage of our journey. Thanks for taking the time to read about it. All the best. God Bless.

Dean (and Penny, Amber and Hannah)
Today after 28 years of struggle, we celebrate the first nine weeks that Mäpuru has had a school. So very much has happened. This has only been possible because of the strength, integrity, determination and vision of Mäpuru elders, past and present. This vision is for a dignified future for their children on ancestral lands. At a meeting this week with delegates from the World Council of Churches, Linda Marathuwar said that they were so determined to continue living on their ancestral estate and gain respectful schooling for their children that she, and the others who have passed away had built an airstrip by hand. She said:

“Through our own sweat and hard work we cleared an airstrip by hand and axes – no bulldozers then ... no graders and no wheel barrows. We dug up the roots with steel bars and carried dirt and gravel on sheets of paperbark to fill in holes to make the strip level. It took a very long time.”

Mäpuru families thank NT Christian Schools Association wholeheartedly for working tirelessly as an advocate for the creation of Mäpuru Christian School. Their employees have become the enabling catalysts for a range of developments and services not before possible. What has been achieved here in nine short weeks is both inspiring and a long time coming to the Mäpuru families. When we say “… and we’ve only just started this journey together …”, there are broad smiles all round. We’d now like to share a small part of this journey with all of you. I know it’s too long, but there’s so much to share, so please bear with me.

The first “Letterbox”

Have you ever wanted to send something to Mäpuru? Perhaps a postcard, or a skirt for a relative? Well now you have two options.

At the Mäpuru turnoff, on the Central Arnhem Highway is a large, padlocked container. Every Thursday Nhulunbuy Freight Services drives by the container, often stopping to unload food and other freight. To get the deliveries from the container to Mäpuru is a good 6 hour round trip, 5 hours of driving and an hour loading and tying down the goods. It is much less wearing on Jackie to collect food for the co-op, than to do the boat trip to the barge at Elcho in the middle of the night. Along with the Secondary students, we’re taking it in turns to do this trip.

Mail bags are delivered perhaps weekly by Marthakal Yolŋu Airlines or MAF, when ever a charter flight is coming our way.

Secondary students learn how to conduct an inventory, checking the orders against the delivery dockets, and stock off the truck.
On the 20th July Mäpuru Christian School began operating. There are 56 school age students and a further 5 preschoolers attending. NTCSA has taken on this school with no advance funding, with the expectation that the Commonwealth and NT governments will fund the school in 2011 based on Mäpuru’s enrolment and attendance.

NTCSA’s advance budget for Mäpuru provided a school troop carrier. Left: Here we are loaded up with stationery and supplies, crossing the Goyder River on the way out.

This vehicle is also central to cultural programs, taking our elders onto country where they share the depths of their culture, lives and histories.

Right: Linda Marathuwarr and Margaret Bambalarra took the school to the ‘first airstrip’, telling of how their families cleared the ground for Bäpa Djepi (Rev. Harold Shepherdson) to land his plane.

Sheppie encouraged Yolŋu to stay on their ancestral estates whilst also embracing Christianity. To our astonishment, the uprights of a bough-shelter that these women grew up in still existed, standing sun bleached in the soil.

We are recording these events to develop oral history archives as well as literacy activities, so Mäpuru students can be immersed in a learning environment where their family stories and culture are valued and honoured in school learning.
Jackie and Roslyn really love teaching in Djambarrpuyŋu, teaching their culture and language as a formal part of the curriculum. We have been on excursions to a Yirritja source of white clay, laid down in small, round pebbles in a creek bed by Garrtjambal. Roslyn and Jackie also teach cultural knowledge in song and dance. In this picture they are teaching us all about the Dhuwa storm clouds that circle around with rain, like Gurrumul sings on his CD.

The educational outcomes are evident. Elders come and participate, clapping and cheering the students on. Hours after the lessons are finished, the depth of joy still reverberates around Mäpuru. We hear our students playing yidaki and biḷma, singing in rousing waves of intensity in the distance, all afternoon and into the evening.

Pre-school: Under Roslyn and Penny’s guidance, Caroline has secured a CDEP (work for the Dole) position as our Pre-School Yolŋu teacher. She takes the preschoolers to the verandah and old school building for their mornings. We are hoping that DEWR can assist us convert Caroline’s CDEP role into a permanent preschool position.

Roslyn and Penny are teaching Transition to Year 5 in the primary classroom, 28 students. Whooeee! What a hive of learning activity that room is.

This effervescent, enthusiastic group of students have been immersed in using Roslyn’s weaving skills as the basis of their literacy program. Roslyn is thrilled that her co-teacher, Penny Whittaker, wants to develop literacy materials with her about weaving and colour.

Below: Can you see the wall frieze of collecting pandanus along the bottom of the board in the photo below?

Not only are the children finding their learning relevant but Roslyn is also very pleased:

“what we’re doing is working, they’re reading, the children are reading. I hear them playing together, talking in English, practicing the English we’re using in class!”
Jackie and Linda's Class – Secondary

Jackie and Linda have the great pleasure of teaching this class of 28 tall, enthusiastic young women and men. Students have been filling in forms to apply for birth certificates in readiness for driving licenses and opening bank accounts. They have also been learning about why Westerners read illustrated story books to young children, then writing and illustrating our own stories for Roslyn’s class.

One story “Ben’s Run” emerged after buffalo hunting one afternoon. Poor Ben.

Yolŋu Radio for Mäpuru

Aboriginal Resource Development Services (ARDS) operates a radio station, Yolŋu Radio. They broadcast a wide range of traditional and contemporary Yolŋu music, alongside news, stories and health promotion information in Yolŋu languages. Mäpuru does not receive transmission for any radio, television or mobile phone services.

During July, Brian McDonald and his colleague Spud Murphy, arrived to install the Yolŋu Radio satellite dish on the school roof. Now all of Mäpuru are enjoying listening to Yolŋu radio, hearing the news from neighbouring communities, and have even broadcast some of their own news via this network. Thank you Brian, Spud and the folks at ARDS.

Fundraising

$ for $ Grant Target $12,000

If we can raise $12,000 the NT Government will grant the school $12,000 to match our fundraising. We’d like to use this money to purchase class sets of readers, computers, guitars, a keyboard, sports equipment and art supplies.

Teacher Accommodation Target $800,000

Our major need is 2 houses for teacher accommodation. A modest 2 -3 bedroom house will cost $300,000 to $400,000. We plan to use NTCSA’s Transforming Skills, who will provide builders, local trainees and community members to erect the dwellings. We have a one bedroom flat and need to accommodate three teachers and their families now. If you have some contacts who may like to contribute towards this please let us know.

If you’d like to assist Mäpuru through a donation, we can provide a tax deductible receipt through the Institute for Cultural Survival, which now has Public Benevolent Institution status.

Bank: Australian Central Credit Union
Account Name: Institute for Cultural Survival
BSB: 805 050  Account No: 6333 4134
Reference: Mäpuru Christian School

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