

Malawi Companionship

January 2021

Muli bwanji, dear friends of Malawi.

Grace and peace be to you in this new year. With all the complexities of 2020 still fresh in our minds, we are called to look forward at the next year with hope that God will continue to walk with us as we work together in mission for the sake of the world. Today, I would like to share a few updates about our companionship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi.

Covid-19

Last spring the coronavirus pandemic had taken root in Malawi, and the growing number of cases left people feeling worried as businesses began shutting down and testing sites were few. In response, our partners in the ELCM invested time and resources into Covid-19 education throughout the country.

In conversation with our friends in Malawi, we heard very quickly that the needs were many, as Covid was adding extra strain on health, income, education, and food security. Once again, the caring people of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin contributed generously for these needs, allowing us to send \$15,000 for feeding centers and \$49,664.07 for covid relief in August.

In December, a Covid-19 variant began showing up, and has proven itself to be even more concerning, as positive cases and Covid-related deaths have grown exponentially. Here's a quick overview:

- As of October 1, 2020 there were 5,779 positive cases and 179 Covid deaths reported in Malawi.
- As of January 1, 2021 there were 6,684 positive cases and 191 deaths (an increase of 905 positive cases and 12 deaths during the 12 weeks of October, November and December.)
- As of today, January 27, there are 21,660 positive cases and 555 deaths (an increase of 14,976 positive cases and 364 deaths in less than 4 weeks).

Yesterday we received communication that Maria Bvumbwe's sister, Ailet Katsabola, a long-time member at the ELCM Cathedral in Lilongwe, died of Covid 19. This news has devastated their family and the congregation where they all worship and serve together. We grieve with Maria and Bishop Bvumbwe at the loss of Ailet, and we pray for a quick resolution to this pandemic.

According to our ELCA Global Mission Regional Representative, Phil Knutson, "The Evangelical Lutheran Development Service (ELDS - of the ELCM), in Malawi is working with volunteer community change agents to distribute posters and pamphlets and conduct door-to-door awareness campaigns to prevent and control the spread of Covid-19. ELDS also facilitated identification and selection of artisans (tailors) in targeted villages to make masks that meet the WHO/Ministry of Health standards. The training included information on how to wear and care for cloth masks effectively."

There is great concern among our ministry partners - while there are several hospitals in the country, Malawi has less than 3 dozen ICU beds, making critical care tricky. For those with more "common" illnesses like Malaria that require clinic and hospital services, they are finding difficulties getting the treatment they require due to the overwhelming need for space/medical staff for Covid patients.

Currently, temporary emergency treatment units are being established in several districts, an evening curfew has been established and schools have been suspended.

We know that there is a great need for fabric, thread, sewing machine repairs, and other supplies for masks and personal protective equipment that are currently being made by ELCM ministries and distributed to various regions throughout the country. Part of our Walking Together offering will be designated for this ministry. If you/your congregation feel called to contribute to this fund, we invite you to do so anytime before February 28.

Mission Support

In addition to the \$64,664.07 in food security and Covid relief that was shared with our partners in Malawi in August of 2020, your generosity allowed us to send \$46,941.20 for deep-drilled wells and \$54,038.23 designated for 17 specific parish to parish partners.

For those who are not familiar with Malawi, most of the 65 pastors in the ELCM serve multiple-point parishes (anywhere from 5 to 13 congregations). Because so many of these parishes are in rural villages, and due to the uneven terrain and lack of paved roads, there is a great need for bicycles and motorcycles so the pastors and evangelists are able travel between congregations. Last summer we were also able to send funds specifically for this need.

Youth Assembly

During the last week of November youth from the ELCM were able to gather for their assembly at the Lutheran compound in Lilongwe, with limited attendance. Their theme "Let Us Do the Work of God Whilst it is Still Daytime" focused on educating and empowering young people to stand up against gender-based violence, specifically violence against women, girls and children. The event gained the attention of local television and news programs, and encouraged many to see how Christians are called to work for justice.

Familiar Friends

In July our dear friend, and General Secretary of the ELCM, Mabel Madinga officially retired after many years of service to the church. She contributed so much to the partnership we share with the ELCM, and her kind spirit, her wealth of knowledge and wisdom, love for children, her friendship, and faithful call to love and serve others in ministry will be truly missed!

In November, the ELCM office welcomed back Mphatso Thole who will be resuming his role as companionship coordinator. We are excited for his return and look forward to walking together in creative new ways in 2021!

Companionship Visits

Due to ongoing travel safety concerns, as well as the unpredictability of coronavirus cases in the next few months both locally and abroad, it is unlikely that we will be making a visit to Malawi in 2021. However we are beginning to plan for 2022 and will be deciding what ministries would be best to focus attention on as we accompany our partners.

That said, we are already imagining ways we can use technology to our advantage and wondering how we might learn from one another, culturally and theologically using digital platforms and videos. Typically we have engaged in the Pastors' Academy, and while this will be one area of ministry that we discuss, we are also hoping to expand that with more connections among young people, women's ministries, worship, etc. We will be sure to fill you in when we have more details!

As we continue to walk with our siblings in Malawi, please join me in praying for them:

Creator God, we thank you for teaching us how to humbly accompany one another as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ through our words and actions. Continue to bless our siblings in Malawi, comfort those who weep, bring assurance to those who are suffering, strengthen those who are weary, and shelter the vulnerable. By the power of your Spirit, continue to inspire all of us as advocates for justice and compassion. And, in this next year grant us all glimpses of joy and fill us with the hope and peace that can only come through Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you have any questions about our companionship with Malawi, please don't hesitate to connect with me using one of the contacts below.

God's peace be with each of you.
Zikomo Jesu. (Thank you, Jesus!)

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Bishop Bvumbwe/Maria Bvumbwe visiting a congregation during the pandemic.



Boys at the youth assembly perform their songs for the group.



Girls at the youth assembly perform their songs for the group.



Bishop Bvumbwe and Maria deliver motorcycles and bicycles to pastors and evangelists to help with transportation concerns.



A story about the youth assembly is shared in the newspaper.



Malawian newspaper picks up the story of donated bikes/motorcycles.