

A Community of Faith: Thoughts on Malawi Mission Work

Good morning, I am Dr. Barbara Nagy, an internist and pediatrician serving as a PC(USA) mission coworker in Malawi since 2003. I would like to bring you greetings from our family and from our partner church in Malawi, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). We would like to send our profound thanks for the support of Presbyterians in western North Carolina, including the many prayers, letters and gifts sent from Black Mountain Presbyterian Church.

As I reflect on what mission in Malawi has meant over the past ten years, and what I can look forward to in the future, I thought of the scripture passage for today from John 4 that reflects the importance of the community of faith.

‘One sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.’

It is interesting that this scripture about sowing and reaping is inserted in the middle of the story of the Samaritan woman, who, though an unlikely candidate, was one of the first people in the New Testament to spread the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

The work that I have shared in at Nkhoma Hospital and with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in Malawi has been one of supporting and being supported by many others in the body of Christ, both in the US, in Malawi, and in many other

countries throughout the world. One very influential book I have read recently has been a biography of Dr. Robert Laws, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary who spent his life opening up Malawi and through it central Africa to Christian missionary work. He and many of his colleagues spent decades telling the story of Christ to people living at the lakeshore in what was then Nyasaland, finally bringing constantly warring tribes and people living in daily fear of witchcraft to an understanding of God's love for them. There were decades of hardship. Many died of infectious diseases and wild animal attacks, but this did not discourage them. They were the fertilizer in God's harvest for Malawi, and I see the footprints of their service in all I have experienced since arriving there.

Dr. Paolo Friere, a Brazilian educator, also spoke of the importance of community in transforming people's lives. He spoke of people needing to understand that *they* are the main instruments needed to transform their communities into health places. Books like 'Toxic Charity' and 'When Helping Hurts' have reinforced the concept that simply giving people things neither delivers them from poverty nor proclaims truly the message of the Gospel. We have therefore recommitted ourselves to working with communities, through evangelism, health and education, to try to be faithful witnesses of God's presence in our midst.

A brief introduction to Malawi: we are a country about the size of the state of Pennsylvania, which is now home to almost 17 million people. 11 million are Christian and 3 million are Presbyterian, a much larger number than in the US

presently. I have been working primarily on the pediatrics ward at Nkhoma Hospital, which serves about 300,000 people if associated health centers are counted. When I arrived in 2003 malaria, pneumonia, HIV and malnutrition were very frequent, and the hospital struggled to care for so many patients in old and poorly functioning wards. We have been blessed with major renovations of the pediatrics ward, which have gone hand in hand with improved ways of taking care of patients, leading many more people in the communities to get their children vaccinated, consider family planning, and send all children to school. Community work with insecticide treated bed nets and spraying houses for mosquitos dramatically decreased the numbers of children getting sick each year. When I first arrived we often had trouble convincing patients' parents to accept life saving therapies like blood transfusions or oxygen, but we began to see a transformation as people at the village level began to advocate with their friends and families to trust us. Because of this trust, the death rates on our pediatrics ward have fallen dramatically, and many diseases have begun to decrease in frequency.

Village health workers have begun to go out to remote areas that have been without health services, finding malnourished children, giving vaccinations, and treating malaria, pneumonia and diarrhea without people leaving their villages.

Maternal mortality has been a major problem throughout Africa, with governments, donor agencies and the World Health Organization working hard to decrease it. Our Malawian friends would recount that every family had experienced a maternal

death in a close relative. Improved care at many hospitals throughout Malawi helped reduce maternal mortality from 1500 to 510 per 100,000 live births, but at Nkhoma we were overjoyed to see the mortality rate drop to 8 deaths out of 4000 births in 2012. The major reason for this is that a Safe Motherhood program at the community level was helping families understand the importance of giving birth in skilled birthing facilities. Many women delivering their babies in villages developed obstetrical emergencies and died before reaching the hospital. It had been a cultural taboo to deliver a first child outside of the home, and significant community meetings with women, men and traditional elders enabled a shift in community practices such that 95% of women now deliver their babies in health facilities.

Education has been strongly identified as a priority for families and communities throughout Malawi, yet most schools are overcrowded and completely lacking in resources. This primary school at Nkhoma has 1500 students in 15 classrooms. Many have to study out of doors due to lack of space, and teachers teach two full classes every day. There are no textbooks and no desks for younger children. Many village schools lack even a building. Ebenezer School was therefore established at Nkhoma mission station to offer high quality basic primary education to community members. Links to the primary school shown previously have already started to strengthen the older school, and volunteer preschool teachers will be supported and supplied as the Ebenezer School gets better established.

Working hand in hand with the CCAP includes chaplains that accompany hospital rounds and all teams that go out to communities. Bible studies for chiefs have brought together leaders to work for the good of their communities. Marriage seminars have strengthened families and helped to provide better lives for women.

We are thankful for the support that has also been offered by our congregations in Western North Carolina. May the name of our God be praised!