

BISHOP MARTIN'S

Malawi Reflections. Week 2

It was the biggest emotional roller-coaster of the trip. As we arrived at the Woyela Feeding Center in a remote rural area of central Malawi, it was pure joy! Laura and I stepped out of the van to a chorus of singers from this congregation gathered outside of their worship center surrounded by jubilant children and our hosts who would gladly show us around the property. The power of song connected to smiling children excited to see guests from far away just filled my heart with the very love of God.

As we ventured up the hill to where they keep some of their animals, we were escorted by church leaders and our interpreter, Mphatso, whom some of you likely remember if you're from the NWSWI. They were explaining to us that they would be granted various animals (much like how the ELCA Good Gifts catalog works) and they would in turn find a mate in order to breed them and make this gift far reaching. So we got to meet several goats, chickens, and even a few pigs that they had received and over time multiplied. As they fed the goats, one in particular bullied his way around the food poured onto the ground, nudging all the others away with his horns. One teeny tiny baby goat was allowed in. Everyone else got to eat only what they could while they could! Anyway, once additional animals are bred, they'd be given to another family from the church to do the same. I believe they hope to offer every family an animal within the next several years to utilize for their basic needs.

As we ventured back to the place of worship, I was seated in the center seat, joined by others who would speak to the gathered crowd. I would offer the last word, including the prayer of blessing to conclude the program. Friends, I wish you were there to hear the music. About 10-15 youth sang for us in between each speaker, offering about 5 songs to fill our souls. That was the high point of this gathering.



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Week 1

But the low point was hearing the stories of the other speakers. They explained to us how parents would abandon their children because they did not have jobs to feed them. They explained to us that of the many orphans sitting right in front of me, most are either malnourished or at best get one meal each day for just half the year. They explained that this church comes together as a feeding station to try to make a difference in these kids' lives. I don't think that I'll ever forget the looks on those faces. It was far too saddening.

Then it came my turn to bring "greetings", as I've already done a few times to other communities. But this time was different. I had to say something else. I had to find words of encouragement somehow because from their viewpoint, my words were important. My words carried a certain power due to my office.

First, I made the choir stand up so that I could give them a standing ovation filled with gratitude. Second, I made them promise to me that they'd sing the rest of their lives. Then I turned my attention to this room filled with hungry people, especially those kids with potbellies from a lack of food. I tried to teach them that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope in Christ does not disappoint. I then informed them that I plan on asking all 191 congregations of our synod for the following:

1. We'll pray that the parents who cannot feed their families will find jobs.
2. We'll pray for the caregivers of the children, that they might find patience.
3. We'll pray for the children, that they might be fed.

Friends, that's the least we can do. As partners in this journey of faith, we have this opportunity to make such a difference for this feeding center. I went on to remind them that at the Last Supper Jesus commanded us to love one another as he has loved us. I also went on to remind them that Jesus welcomed the little children as "...theirs is the kingdom of heaven". So let's help that kingdom to come!

A little later, we gathered everyone outside of the church for a photo. As I was surrounded most closely by those children, along with the others, I stood out in my purple shirt, towering above that community, completely justifying my new nickname, "Bishop Giraffe"! They were filled with joy when I simply waved at them. They were filled with joy with mere eye contact. One was quite filled with joy simply by taking a selfie of himself and Laura without her knowledge while she was capturing some images of her own! And the roller coaster continued as the children ran alongside our van as we departed.

~Bishop Martin