

BISHOP MARTIN'S *Malawi Reflections.*

Week 1

When I served in campus ministry, I encouraged students to reflect on the differences we experienced as we traveled to various places for spring break service learning. We often recognized the parts of Midwest living that we took for granted, but also found other things that we appreciated about the new culture that we traveled to. And so, this is the very practice that I am reminding myself to do in this beautiful nation of Malawi.

Thus far, my experience has been one of tremendous hospitality. I've been treated with abundant respect and care. People have gone out of their way to just shake my hand. Those who serve us food or just meet us walking around bow out of respect to my office. Children sheepishly giggle when I shake their hand and give them a warm smile. This degree of kindness has been simply overwhelming.

But there have also been other things that I've observed that have troubled me about this place. Over the past few years, our news has been filled with inflation stories, most notably gas and grocery prices. Well, being over here has given me a new perspective without question. I was beyond astounded by the miles people waited in line to get the fuel that they'd need for their vehicles. In the city, in the rural areas, we'd drive by station after station that were empty because they only had diesel gas for sale. Those waiting in line for usable gas were dependent on hearing where the next fuel delivery would be in order to be early in line. Otherwise just join the crowd of vehicles lined up on the roads! I could only imagine the hours that it would take to get to one of the 4-6 pumps by everyone in line. I remember seeing pictures in the 1970s in the US when gas was rationed. That too created long lines of cars waiting their turn. Those images just don't hold a candle to what I witnessed this week. Yes, I understand that our gas prices had been increasing over the past few years until recently, but at least we can fill our tanks without waiting for hours and go about our day. At least we don't create traffic jams throughout our small towns with cars and dirt bikes clogging half of the road.



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This has troubled me as I look at the faces of people leaning against their cars waiting in line.

To close today's post, I'd like to share my first worship experience upon my arrival: morning prayer on Thursday morning. As I was out walking around the Lutheran church compound, I took some pictures of the hand-painted windows in the sanctuary. As I was walking back to the dining hall for my 8 am breakfast, I encountered a car with a pastor in it. As he saw me in my purple shirt, he invited me to the morning worship that apparently began at 7:40 am (it was 7:38 at the time)! As we gathered inside, there were about a dozen people scattered across the left side pews and they began worship. Just a few short minutes later, I was joined in my pew by another man dressed in purple – it was Joseph Bvumbwe, presiding bishop of the ELCM. We exchanged introductions and went about the worship. As the worship proceeded, he would interpret for me what was going on and what was being said without disrupting worship for the others. It was as hospitable as it gets and he made sure that I was acknowledged in front of the rest of the worshipping community. It was a classy beginning to our relationship without a doubt. Thankfully, I did recognize the two hymns that were sung and I could at least hum along in harmony!

I will next post about the weekend worship experiences that celebrated the 42nd anniversary of the ELCM and the installation of a new bishop his staff. Until later...

~Bishop Martin