

# MALAWI BLOG

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## October 16, 2025: Just a Piece of a Cake

Hello friends of the Warm Heart of Africa.

Takulandirani! Welcome, and thank you for joining us for our 2025 partnership visit to Malawi!

On Sunday, our group of four travelers, Pastor Randy, Pastor Jenny, Patti and myself, made it to Chicago in time to check into our hotel, eat dinner together, and get a good night's rest before heading to O'Hare airport early in the morning to catch the first leg of our trip. Unsure about what impact the government shutdowns would have on our check in, security, or flights, we arrived with plenty of time...just in case.



Too much time it seems, because we were there 30 minutes prior to our own airline staff. But, once we checked our luggage, we headed toward security and made it through with little to no line. And, despite not currently being compensated for their time, every single agent was kind, patient, and friendly to everyone – even when they had to scan Randy's bag three times.

We grabbed a quick bite to eat at the airport and eventually boarded the plane. For those who don't have experience with Ethiopian Airlines, they are often very gracious with the seat assignments for their long trips, leaving a space between every person so we have ample room to stretch and sleep during the 13 ½ hours to Addis Ababa. They also feed us very well in flight.

After the long leg we disembarked in Ethiopia for a quick 60 minute layover before the second leg of the journey. How can this four hours possibly feel longer than 13 hours?!? The four of us arrived at Kamuzu airport in Lilongwe in the early afternoon, made it through customs fairly quickly and with no lost luggage! We were quickly greeted by Mphatso Thole, the companion coordinator for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi and it was so nice to see my achimewene (brother) again. Chicondi Namalanda (Chico, as many of you know him!) assisted us with our luggage and kindly drove us weary travelers to the ELCM compound to get settled.

We met with Bishop Bvumbwe and his head office staff for some brief introductions and to look over our itinerary, and then had some time to rest before dinner. Lazarus treated us to a delicious meal and we all crashed early.

I awoke after 10 glorious hours of sleep, and decided to walk around the ELCM compound for a while around 7am - while I usually hear and see a constant bustle of people preparing for various jobs in the morning, I was surprised to be solo in my walk until about 7:45 when activities started happening.

We were also pleasantly surprised to be greeted by Mama Bishop (Maria) before we all started our travels beyond Lilongwe. She is truly one of the kindest, most lovely people I have had the pleasure of meeting.



Wednesday Mphatso and Stywell (our driver) accompanied us to the city center in Lilongwe to check out the market, buy some fabric and see the sights before taking us to the Lilongwe Wildlife Center. This oasis is in the middle of the city and is a place for trail walking, education, and animal rehabilitation and conservation. In all my years in Malawi I had never visited here – it was lovely to walk together, laugh, and have an easy day before we spend the next few days driving long distances. One highlight was hearing from a school group that they saw waterbucks and a crocodile! But a favorite moment was climbing into a treehouse that was built to discretely watch the birds. We were all completely amused by this! These are the moments that build relationships, friends.



We returned home and met up with Chico's daughter, Chimwemwe, celebrated with her that she is now done with university and is busy with all kinds of sewing jobs, and to give her some fabric that she has graciously agreed to fashion into dresses for Jenny and Patty.

I joined Jenny and Patty who were in the dining hall playing cards, and the three of us were quickly joined by Chimwemwe Leonard, who often assists Lazarus with meals. Patti was an excellent teacher, showing him step by step how to play the game, beating Jenny and I a few times before he had to go back to work. After dinner we all retreated to our rooms to prepare for our long journey to Zomba tomorrow.

After a lovely breakfast, we started gathering our luggage – we took the ELCM's Range Rover so we could more easily navigate the unpredictable roads, but this means our luggage gets packed onto the roof rack. Once our bags and supplies were neatly and carefully packed in, a tarp and strap secured the load. Impressive packing, as usual.



We headed south down the M1 toward Zomba, stopping a few times along the way, first at a favorite stopover for a rest room break and a few snacks for the car. This year's choices were pineapple biscuits and spicy crisps with a passionfruit soda. We continued to Nsipe, a village in the Ntcheu district – and the hometown of former Malawian Vice President, Saulos Chilima. He was among 10 people killed in a plane crash in June of 2024, and his death left the country grieving for days. He was known by people here as humble and a great leader, as well as a hopeful candidate in the 2025 presidential election. Many believe his death was not an accident and some are pushing for a deeper investigation.

We made a visit to his resting place, a cemetery in Nsipe where his parents and relatives can also be found. Although his burial is complete, there was a crew there actively working on building a memorial structure around it, a tribute to his leadership and legacy that will likely see visitors for years to come. I am grateful to the leaders from the local catholic church who gave us a brief, special tour of this place. It was an honor to be there, but certainly special for Chico and Mphatso as well who shared stories about him during our drive.



Our daylight drive gradually became sunset and darkness as we entered the Zomba district. The hazy sky started to thicken and we began to see more and more fires in the mountains. In these areas we often see a lot of small fires in the mountains, mostly for making charcoal. This practice is not legal here, due to the deforestation that happens in the process. The finished product, often sold for much-needed income, and bought for cooking, required wet wood from fresh trees to create. It was lovely, however, to see so much land that had actively been reforested, an intentional effort to help maintain tree coverage in the area. Deforestation here causes much more damage during the rainy season as erosion and flooding can have nothing to soak up or deter the heavy rains. The repercussions continue to grow – more houses and crops destroyed, weakened and depleted soil, and damage to community infrastructure. Every effort to reverse this creates positive environmental change here, little by little.

After a zigzagging around potholes, pedestrians, bikes, and other cars, we arrived safely at the ELCM lodge in Zomba. I am excited for the other travelers to see how beautiful it is here in the mountains, but for now, we are enjoying the tremendous hospitality, the beautiful building with its intricately carved doors, and the delicious food that was ready for us as we arrived. It's amazing how tired you can get simply sitting in a car on a long journey. I am grateful for Mphato's leadership, and Chico's driving. When we thanked him for taking such good care of us on the road, he laughed and said, "No problem - driving here is just a piece of a cake." And, of course, I am consistently thankful for all of the conversation, learning, and curiosity that happens along the way.

Tomorrow we head further south to Blantyre, the beginning of our ministry visits, which will start with one of the newer wells built through the partnership between the ELCM and NWSWI. I hope you will join us for part two!

Today I pray with gratitude for the gracious hospitality we receive each and every time we visit Malawi – and that we might be so inspired to choose this as our default method of engaging with others. (After all, it's just a piece of a cake, right??) I pray for the people of Malawi, that their newly inaugurated president, Peter Mutharika, leads with integrity, humility, and wisdom. And, I pray for those who are severely struggling within an economic system that is in need of recovery and change. Zikomo Mulungu. Amen.

Tiwonana, friends!  
(See you!)

Much more to come....





# October 18, 2025: Mountains, Movement and Migowi

Moni nonse!

(Hello everyone!)

Tathokhoza kwambiri (thank you, so much) for joining us for part two of our Malawi 2025 visit! These last two days have been a whirlwind of activity.

Friday morning, we each packed a small bag to take with us for the next two days. Our group headed to Phalombe district, but we'll be back to Zomba on Sunday evening – we were happy to leave some things behind for a couple of days. (I bet our companions were happy, too, since they are the ones loading them on to the cargo rack of the Land Cruiser every time we change locations!).

After a lovely cup of coffee and some breakfast, we packed into our vehicle and started driving south. From Zomba southward Malawi is rich with mountains, a sight we did not get tired of these last two days. Mphatso told the travelers about Mount Mulanje, the tallest in Malawi, and the third highest in Africa at about 3,002 meters (just shy of 10,000 feet). We will drive by it during tomorrow's travels.



Two hours in the car, down the pitted paved roads and a few rural driving trails, we arrived at the Chimvu parish center. As we drove up to the church we were greeted with embodied joy and enthusiasm by crowd of congregation members and Abusa Nkhoma who were waiting for us, singing songs of welcome. Their words, “takulandilani” (you are most welcome) and “we are cemented together as partners,” felt like a gift, prepared for us out of sincere love and hospitality.



If you've never experienced this in Malawi, it nearly takes your breath away – it's emotional, and special, in a prodigal son returning kind of way – like they've just been waiting for us to come home. And we did. Malawi has been my second home since 2016, and I hope the other three travelers are beginning to feel like this is home for them, too.

While we were there, they took us to a well that was recently dug next to the church. Until this one was dug, the nearest water source required people to walk from several miles away. Now, it is within or nearby several communities who will benefit from year-round, clean drinking water. For context, there are nearly 2,000 primary school children in this village. This particular borehole was made possible through the generosity of congregations in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin who continue to partner with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi. For those who give to well funds for easier access to safe drinking water, zikomo kwambiri, (thank you so much). Madzi ndi moyo. Water is life.



After many of us gave pumping the new well a try, we were invited into the church building for a short program. The congregation sang our way into the space which was large with strong brick walls, (built by hand by the congregation members), solid timber beams and a tin roof. This newer building still needs windows and a concrete floor, but has given them a large enough space to worship. The program included sharing greetings with one another, introducing the elders in the congregation, acknowledging the local village chief who chose to attend, some music from the choir, and having a bit of time to share greetings of our own, translated by our friend, Mphatso. I am trying hard to use as much Chichewa as I can, and, although still sparse, I am happy when I can say something and it's met with appreciation for at least trying! My travel companions have been trying to catch some phrases and our Malawian friends are really gracious, helping us all with good humor.

After the short program, the women in the congregation had prepared lunch for us - rice (which is often used for special occasions), sauteed cabbage, and hard cooked eggs in a tomato sauce. It was delicious. As we rested for a bit after lunch we entered into several small group conversations, and as time passed I noticed the quantity of children's faces in the windows grow exponentially. More and more children heard there were visitors and wanted to see for themselves until nearly every one from the village seemed to be there! As we wrapped up conversations they started making their way inside the church building where we decided to embrace our inner child and start taking silly photos with one another. It was 10 minutes of pure joy and excitement. Oh, to be a child who wonders and embraces curiosity and courage like this!

We said our goodbyes as the choir sang songs of farewell and we loaded into the vehicle. Heart. Full.





Just before dark we arrived at our lodging for the evening (thanks to Chicco's incredible driving, per usual!) – a lovely lodge perched up high in Blantyre with a view of the mountains. We ate dinner together and went to our rooms for a respite.

Saturday morning we awoke, packed up our things again, had a quick plate of eggs and chips and a quick cup of tea and left the city for Phalombe and Migowi. We arrived at our first of four congregational sites today, which also has a brand new preschool! We picked up Abusa Suwedi (pastor in Migowi), Abusa Naitha (Dean of the Phalombe Deanery), and Abusa Ngo'mbe (Asst. to Bishop Phiri in the newly established Blantyre Diocese). We all sardined into the Land Cruiser and we were off to the next congregation.



After a couple of hours on the road, views of the mountains, and several cities, we arrived at the Phindani congregation, one of the seven in the Migowi Parish. It sits at the base of a mountain and next to a beautiful lake (Lake Mpoto) which shares a border with Mozambique. Again, we were greeted by dozens of congregation members with songs of welcome as we were guided to the church. A special row of chairs was waiting for us, which is often the case, and our new travel companions sat in between us to share their translation skills with us. We were so grateful. They shared a few stories about how Cyclone Freddy (2023) and a subsequent pattern of annual storms continue to damage things before they can finish repairs. This particular building had lost its roof to the wind and has only been half finished due to the lack of funds needed for materials.

This is a common thread here, as the value of kwacha has decreased and the cost of goods has increased up to ten times what they should be for staple goods in many regions. They are hopeful the new president will bring some common sense and healing to the economy here. In the meantime, congregations, families, and projects often have to wait. Yet, they are dreaming – thinking creatively about how to increase food security there. Since they have access to the lake, they know that irrigation equipment could help make water more accessible, increasing agricultural yields and providing overall wellbeing for families there. But equipment is costly and often needs assistance or sponsorship to purchase.

This congregation is another one of the Migowi parish, partnered with Evangelical Lutheran Church in Black River Falls. It was a pure delight to introduce Abusa Jennifer who was able to greet them in person and bring words of encouragement and solidarity and love to the community here. They made her and Patti, a member of ELC, both ambassadors, giving them the task of taking stories, love and hope back home with them.



We drove away, the sound of farewell singing in our ears and the children running and waving behind us. We drove past cattle and the lake, and we were headed to the next location.



Another bumpy rural path took us past more mountains (or maybe another side of the same mountain??) and lush baobab trees (being near two large lakes makes this area more lush than others so the trees are full!), until we arrived at the Khulambe congregation. No surprise now, we are greeted by singing, BUT entirely new faces and hospitality to build relationship with! As we entered the building and were invited to sit, we noticed what looked like a newer roof on the building.

[...a moment of backstory – hurricane Freddy in 2023 hit Malawi more than once as it came inland and then doubled back to the Indian Ocean. In the process, this entire region of Phalombe district, which contains Migowi, was greatly affected by wind, heavy rains, flooding, and rockslides from the mountains that killed hundreds of people, destroyed crops and homes, and washed away thousands of livestock in the middle of the night. For more details, you can check out the 2023 blog].



In 2023 Khulambe had lost the entire top half of their building during the storm, and were left wondering what might be next. A women from the congregation even shared with us that she had lost a child that night. Unfortunately, her story is not so unique in this region. Their partner congregation, Evangelical Lutheran in Black River Falls, sent a financial gift through the ELCM that was used to replace the beams and iron sheets for the roof. They shared with us that they can now worship and gather there, even during the rainy season.



After introductions and a heartwarming photo of Abusa Jennifer and Patti with their congregation, we followed the same road back to Abusa Suwedi's parsonage where his wife and family had prepared lunch for us. Rice, goat, chicken, cabbage, tomato sauce, bananas, and nsima – the group's first time trying this Malawi traditional dish. Mama Abusa graciously washed our hands with a pitcher and basin – as a deacon, this image has special meaning for me, as that is the symbol of word and service ministry. I always have a moment of gratitude for this gesture. We ate, thanked our guests, had a hilarious interaction with the children who were practicing their English skills with us, and we were off to visit the final congregation for they day.



(Whew! Anyone else as tired as I am yet!?)

One last rural route, more mountains, banana trees, several precarious concrete and wooden bridges later and we arrived at the Dzenje congregation complete with the glorious sound of singing and welcome. The original building, we discovered, was entirely destroyed during the hurricane and after finding another area of land, they worked hard making bricks and just finished constructing the walls in August. As we sat inside the floorless, roofless structure, we exchanged words of thanks to God for our partnership and remembered we are one church when we walk together in Christ. Abusa Jennifer did well in her crash course in Chichewa, trying phrases and words in her greetings. We waved goodbye, taking their deep faith, joy, and encouragement with us.



On the way to deliver our travel companions to their homes for the night, their mysterious stories, sharing, and laughing among each another in Chichewa made me smile. My lack of understanding was irrelevant – while their friendship was undeniable.

We stopped briefly at Abusa Naitha's home where we were able to meet his lovely wife, stretch our legs and enjoy some conversation before driving to our lodging for the night. While we were there, Abusa shared that, surrounding his church (which was on the same property) were several other churches, all different denominations – all neighbors. One of these community pastors stopped by to say hello and introduce himself. Our visit was short but very nice.

With our original travel group in the Cruiser and weary from the long day, we drove through the Malawian sunset up Mulanje mountain to our lodge. Although we cannot see our surroundings until morning, I anticipate that this place has some incredible views and accommodations, just based on the reception center and the placement of the cabins we'll be staying in. The staff has worked tirelessly to make a late dinner for us, bring us fans to keep us cool tonight, and see that we had hot water to use in our showers.



Our hearts are full - it has been a good day indeed.

Tomorrow will be the final day with our Migowi partners – there might even be some singing in our future – at least if Chicco has anything to say about it! (IYKYK)

As always, more to come, friends. Tiwonana mawa.



Today I pray that our congregations might find a way of hospitality that invites others in, no questions, just a pure love that says "You're home." I pray that we can all come to understand that God's church has no borders – it's global – it sings in a variety of languages – it prays together – and it loves unconditionally. And, I hope for a future where we no longer need feeding programs or hunger initiatives – that we might recognize that there is enough for everyone, share with one another freely, and create systems that ensure food equity across nations. Amen.





# October 21, 2025: Hearts of Hospitality

Mwadzuka bwanji, nonse. (Good morning/How'd you sleep, everyone?)

Sunday morning we woke up on Mulanji Mountain – a very nice lodge that was a surprise to see in the daylight. The property was quite large and included a main lodge where meals were served, several multi-unit cottages, and several individual cabins. Also found on site was an event hall, a pool, and a few mountain “dams” (small lakes) where people could lounge. There was a playground, an area with outdoor tables and chairs, and during the rainy season, a large stream that has the capacity to weave through the property. Although...I did take a moment to recognize just how unsettling it can be to sleep there, considering all the rockslides that have happened during the rainy season. I imagine it's strange to live in the shadow of something like this on a daily basis, especially considering all the damage the cyclones have caused over these last few years.



During this stay our group encountered some new critters – I had a spider in my bathroom that was large enough to make pause and muster up the courage to smack it with my sandal...Randy had a bat in his room that a staff person shooed out with her phone with the kind of bravery I would have had to train for. There was a bright green praying mantis on my door in the morning, and several brightly colored lizards around the grounds. Although there was no running water in the sinks or showers, they had prepared large buckets in each room with hot water for washing up. It was a lovely lodge and I appreciated the newness it brought to our journey.

After packing up the Cruiser, we headed to the Migowi Parish Center for worship – we arrived, met with voices of welcome and some familiar faces – the Abusa, and Dean, as well as a few congregation members who had been with us at other locations. It is still humbling to know, based on our drives these last few days, just how far people walk to worship – for those who's home congregation was not the parish center, I can only imagine how early they started walking to meet us there. And, many of them were carrying children or other goods along with them.



I had visited this particular building in 2023, just a few months after Cyclone Freddy's destruction in this region. The church walls had several large cracks from the strong winds, impacting the integrity of the structure. And, outside, the foundation of a parsonage was seen, but the project was paused after the storm to divert attention to more pressing needs such as shelter, clothing, food and supplies for the community.

Many of the cracks had been repaired with concrete and although the parsonage was in the same state, there was a new building on site – a children's development center, constructed in partnership with Compassion International. The building was nice, complete with a ramp in the front and whimsical children's characters painted on the outside. We learned that Abusa Suwedi and his wife were responsible for initiating this project – one of their own children was born with disabilities – vision and physical impairments; in Malawi there are far fewer resources for children born with disabilities, and it becomes difficult for parents to care for them. This project will provide a space for young people with disabilities to learn and receive care in a school setting while the parents are working during the day. The project has been a work in progress for two years and is scheduled to open in early November. What a gift this will be to all children and families in this region who face the challenges of disabilities. I am proud of the efforts of this pastor, and for the ELCM's continued mission to care for one another as neighbors.



We sat in a designated space for worship - services in the ELCM Lutheran church follow a liturgy with words and songs that you'll hear no matter where you are – but the choirs often put together their own songs for each Sunday. Among their many songs, this choir shared songs that specifically referenced Cyclone Freddy and the damage it caused, but that also praised God for God's faithfulness and love for them. It's been said before, but Malawians don't often show much emotion outside of happiness, even when they are in pain, grieving, or depressed. I imagine composing these songs is a way to tell the story and be reminded of God's presence in our lives, but also as a way to process the deep grief and fear that this community has experienced in the face of these storms. The pastor's wife was the leader of both songs, and her strong voice filled the room with "emotion" and a plea to God, while the choir joined her with reassurance that God is powerful and will not leave us.

Abusa Jennifer, with translation assistance from Assistant to Bishop Phiri, Abusa Ngo'mbe, preached a sermon from Luke 18:1-8. Her charisma and energy was palpable in this space, and was an inspiration, not just to the congregation, but to the women evangelists who were present in worship.



As they continue their training, these women are well on their way to ordained leadership in the ELCM and are READY to serve! Seeing other women who preach and lead is very encouraging. Jenny was relatable and vulnerable, sharing stories about her family and congregation, not afraid to try Chichewa, and preaching a gospel-centric message that could be understood across oceans and cultures.



Toward the end of worship, the Assistant reminded us of mother's day (which happened in Malawi on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October), and gave us each a belated gift of beautiful fabric – a gesture often given here - many are created especially for holidays like mother's day. The women called each of us forward individually, wrapped the fabric into a chitenje around us, and sang a special song. We were overcome, receiving such generosity from our friends here. I found myself in tears as I made my way back to my chair.

After I was invited to greet the congregation on behalf of our synod with introductions and some information and words of gratitude, Abusa Jennifer and Patti presented gifts to their partners – a pictorial directory with photos of their congregation members and ministries, as well as a beautiful banner that was made by their quilters that said “God’s work, our hands,” had children’s handprints, and an outline of Wisconsin and Malawi. These physical reminders are humbly received and often hung for years as a reminder of companionship and prayer. It was truly a special moment.





After worship, we gathered for a photo with the congregation, and stayed outside to look at the school and the new solar powered well that Compassion Int'l also funded. Good things are happening here. We chatted with the evangelists for a bit, and one of Abusa Suwedi's sons introduced himself and told a story of meeting my son, Gabriel, when we visited Migowi in 2023. He remembered details of their conversation and hoped they could meet again someday. It's these moments that remind me of how important the elements of accompaniment are in ministry – these on-the-ground, person-to-person connections that make partnership more sustainable. It's what all previous companion coordinators - Diane, Ramie and John -worked hard to accomplish, and what I strive for everyday in my work now. It makes friendships with our brothers and sisters tangible and the ministry we do come to life.

Abusa Suwedi and his wife invited us to their home afterward for lunch, and we gladly accepted, coming together for a traditional, delicious meal that sustained us for the rest of the afternoon. We were able to take a photo to commemorate a partnership between Migowi and Evangelical Lutheran – a photo of Abusa Suwedi and his wife with Abusa Jennifer and Patti – a keepsake that will likely be displayed as a consistent reminder of their partnership together, their collective prayer for one another, and a hope that they will see each other again soon.



We said our goodbyes, and found ourselves on the bumpy road back to the ELCM Lodge in Zomba. Mphatso took advantage of being so close to relatives in Zomba and went for a visit while the rest of us ate dinner. As we were finishing up, Chicco embraced his inner choir director and started teaching us some songs that he is hoping we'll sing in worship next weekend. (Yikes!!) While Malawians learn and teach so much through singing and dance, we often don't have that practice here beyond childhood, so we are struggling to learn the melodies and text – both of which are unfamiliar. Perhaps with a bit of practice we will be successful!

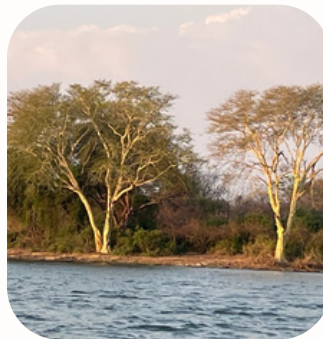


After breakfast the next morning, we were off to Mvuu Camp, a safari lodge in the middle of the bush in a preserved area of Malawi. This is always a favorite mid-trip spot to pause and take in some Malawian wildlife while processing all that we have experienced this week. I am so happy that Mphatso and Chicco have agreed to join us here. Often times they only stay long enough to get us settled, but they have worked hard this week, driving for hours on unpredictable roads, constantly translating conversations, sometimes learning about hunger/water/justice challenges for the first time along with us, and often still working via phone and email communication throughout the day. I am grateful to see them have time for rest as well.

Before even arriving at camp, we saw a few elephants, impala, and warthogs just driving along the river. We were assigned a guide for our time here, Patrick, who talked about safety in the bush and what we might see during our time in this beautiful place.

Although there are slight changes to the practices here, I am always grateful to see the sustainability efforts that they insist upon – no plastics, very few paper products, solar power, irrigation from the river, and upcycling of glass. And when it comes to wildlife, they have so much respect for natural habitat and proximity to animals in ways that ensure a non-threatening presence.

Our first activity here was a river safari, a few hours on a boat to see hippos, crocodiles, elephants, impala, warthogs, and so many birds, as well as several types of trees. At sunset the boat stops for sundowners - a brief time for a cold drink and a snack while we chat and watch the sky become as beautiful as the people who live here.



We docked and headed inside for dinner and were then escorted to our chalets by a guide – walking around at night is not always safe, so they insist we go with an expert. When we return, our bed nets are unrolled, and our beds turned down, ready for a good night's sleep before waking up early for a morning drive. The sounds at night are new and wonderful – hippos chortling, birds calling to one another, mysterious animals walking around the chalets eating leaves and grasses....it's difficult to sleep as you wake to all the new, exciting sounds.

Our guides stopped by our chalets on Tuesday morning to pick us up and have a cup of coffee in the main lodge before our early morning drive. The sun was not yet over the horizon as we loaded the car and drove south along the river. Although Mphatso had a work meeting that prevented him from coming with us, Chicco was along with the four of us and Patrick as we saw hundreds of impalas, some waterbucks, kudu and sable antelope. We saw three lions, a cheetah and three cubs, some large crocodiles, warthogs, several new birds, and enjoyed the fresh morning air. We stopped part way through and got out to stretch our legs and have a cup of tea and a biscuit, and while we were there we watched a family of elephants mosey their way down to the river near us. They were in no hurry, kind of how we all felt just then – just wanting to take our time and soak it all in.

We finished our drive across some very bumpy paths – and unbridled joy came spilling out as we giggled and laughed at the delight this bumpy ride provided to us. Some of us laughed so hard we cried. (Ahem... Jennifer!). Because Chicco has been the driver for so many companion visits, this was not his first time at Mvu Camp, but it was his first time seeing a lion. It was fun to watch his inner child shine with wonder as well.

We returned for breakfast and some down time in our chalets, where we sat and watched families of elephants and hippos and flocks of butterflies living their best lives along the Shire River. Bliss.

Tonight we have the privilege of doing a night safari and I am excited to see again what comes out after dark. I am grateful to the staff here who have trained, some of them for years, to provide hospitality and educational guidance to visitors like us. I always leave this place with new and valuable information. And, I have a deep appreciation for the Malawians who value the ecosystem and wildlife here in such a way that they want to participate in its preservation and longevity. Although I am very aware of how my own privilege allows me to be here, I will likely continue our visits Mvuu when we are in Malawi – even the small contributions we make economically, environmentally, or relationally can support good things.



Tomorrow we will make the long journey from Liwonde to Nkhotakhota, north of Lilongwe. It will likely take us most of the daylight hours to arrive at our lodge as we prepare for this week's ministry visits. We discovered yesterday that we will likely be attending the ordination of a pastor this weekend and we are all excited for this opportunity.

Please stay tuned for more partnership stories, my friends!

Today I pray for a collective awareness of the harmful environmental impacts we have in our own regions of the world, and take the time to recognize how we can be more active stewards of the creation that God has entrusted to us. I pray that our partnership with Malawi will have its own unique sustainability while holding tightly to the gospel. And, I pray a prayer of thanks for the embodied resilience and faith that our siblings here show us each and every day. May their shared strength inspire us to seek justice and change where it's needed most. Amen.

Tiwonana!





# October 23, 2025: Seeing Clearly Through the Cracks

Welcome back, friends!

When we left off in part 3 our group was still at Mvuu Camp, getting ready for an evening drive through the bush. This is an experience that feels both exciting and terrifying simultaneously! When we leave at 3:30 pm, it's daylight and we have the opportunity to see wildlife that we hadn't before, as they travel around looking for shelter, water, or food at various time of the day. Just before sunset, we stumbled upon a male and female lion, asleep at the base of a termite hill. As the driver got dangerously close, I could feel the anxiety in the vehicle rise. The male lion opened one eye, long enough to check out the noise, but then, apparently didn't see us as a threat and chose to doze off again. We stayed long enough to reflect on the grand nature of these beautiful animals, but then left them to their rest. It was so fun to hear Mphatso's excitement – as the companion coordinator, he has accompanied many visitors to this place, and yet, this was his first time seeing lions. What a joy to witness. We continued on with the African sun painting its unique daily dusk picture, but this time, it provided something special – a glimmer of light breaking its way through the clouds, mixed with the pink and orange hues. It was stunning.



Our guide, Patrick, found a safe place to stop for a leg stretch and to have sundowners as we watched the sun set behind the horizon. We soaked in the beautiful sky, ate Malawian groundnuts and sipped iced tea as we chatted with one another. After packing up our things, David, our guide's assistant for the night, took his perch on the hood of the car, grabbed his large torch, and we headed back into the bush to see what nocturnal animals might briefly greet us. We saw a genet (think leopard-raccoon-cat) and, through the darkness, heard the barking of baboons – they make this call to one another when lions are near to warn one another of danger.

Our guide wasted no time and honed in on his tracking skills until we found them prowling. David switched to a red light (far less invasive to wildlife) and we watched and listened as the two lions declared their territory and found a place to rest for the night. We continued on until it was time to return for dinner at the main lodge. Just before we returned, we caught a glimpse of a hippo near camp that was meandering its way up from the river to graze for the night.

We sat down for a delicious meal and near the end, we heard the call of elephants nearby – we watched as guides from the main lodge sprung into action, grabbing lights and equipment, and heading toward the door – as they shined a light around the lodge, a herd of elephants came running past the windows, through the trees and toward the river. Whew! A bit more excitement than my dinner table in Wisconsin!

After an early morning cup of coffee, Patrick took us out one final time in the morning before we needed to leave for our next destination. We saw sable antelope, looked for the elusive black rhino that lives in the area – no luck - many impala, waterbucks, and kudu, baboons and a herd of over 100 water buffalo. We stopped for a cup of tea and a biscuit near a grove of yellow fever trees as we watched these hooved animals in the distance. We even came across a family of elephants slowly meandering through the trees. But the crème-de-la-crème that topped off the morning's adventures was our sighting of a pangolin. These highly endangered creatures are difficult to see due to their ability to hide well. This one had heard noise and was tucked safely under its scaly armor. Many other people, rangers included, had heard via walkie talkie communication, that it was there, and several of them had never seen one before. Historically, these animals are poached for their large scales, but now, if you are caught with one, or any part of one, you can plan on receiving significant jail time.



Once the curious group disbursed, we decided to stay a bit longer with Patrick and see if the pangolin would feel safe enough to get up out of hiding and walk away. Sure enough, just a couple of minutes later, it got up, and started wobbling its way to the woods. Partick said, "let's go see where it's headed!" Ok, we trust you completely. We followed it for a short while on foot, watched how it walked, maneuvered, and just took in this rare occurrence with awe and curiosity. What a cool creature. I leaned toward Mphatso and told him that if I was a creature in the bush that's what I'd be, because I would not have claws or sharp teeth - the only protective instinct I have is to curl up and hide!

We arrived back at camp, said farewell to Patrick, Doreen, and Sonia, received our boxed breakfast for the road, and loaded our luggage for the long journey to Nkhotakhota. Before we even left the national park, I was sound asleep in the front passenger seat – two very early mornings, paired with little sleep due to the new and exciting night noises in our chalets, and I was exhausted. I awoke when we arrived at the Blantyre Deanery Center, just in time to see the new parsonage that has been built! When I was here in 2023, the parsonage had been badly damaged by two years of cyclones and wherever possible, bricks were being salvaged for the new building. It is now a beautiful space that sits in exactly the same place as the old building.



Another stop at the Chiconidi stopover for a snack and cold drink, a rest room stop, and a minute to eat our breakfasts, and we were back on road.



As the hot sun baked the passengers on the left side of the vehicle, we were all weary when we made an impromptu stop by the Mseche congregation and feeding center, part of the Mkaika Parish in the central region. The pastor here is one I have know for years – Abusa Joseph – and I had first met him several years ago when we visited his congregations in Lower Shire.



The Mseche congregation was incredible – we were warmly welcomed by the entire congregation, loudly singing and greeting us with smiles, energy and hospitality. We entered the church building where everyone flooded in, filling the space nearly wall to wall. Abusa Joseph, with his pure energy and love for Jesus, seems a perfect fit here.

We heard stories about the large number of orphans in this community. At the time, there was no ELCM feeding center anywhere nearby, so the congregation decided to step up and remedy the problem in the best way they could – members care for the children, and tried their best to keep up with the demand to feed dozens of vulnerable children here. Eventually they connected with the ELCM head office who wanted to help, and are now providing items like maize flour and sugar to their congregation, specifically for the feeding center.

Both local chiefs met us there as well, and shared their appreciation for the work being done. The feeding center committee works hard to plan and serve each meal for these children, and seem genuinely proud of what they have been able to do as a congregation. Their dream is to have local access to clean drinking water with the building of a well. I wish that for them, too.

I brought greetings from the synod, introduced the group and told them how powerful their ministries are. Their love for the children here is vibrant and authentic, and it was a delight to watch the adults care for these little ones. As I looked out at their small faces, I had a singular moment of disappointment and anger, just thinking about everything happening back home. I was actively watching an entire community here, which has existed in perpetual poverty, and now faces an economic crisis on top of it all, rally together to be sure the children are fed. No excuses, no political games, no exclusions – just adults who wanted to show the children the love of Jesus and be sure they didn't go hungry - to surround them with adults who show up, who care about them, and who will not abandon them in a time of need.

I don't understand how the wealthiest country in the world can ignore our own vulnerable children and adults. How can we sit by and allow food safety nets to disappear? If we are frustrated with the system, are we each prepared, then, to personally share what we have with those around us? How can we deny children food when they are not responsible for their socioeconomic circumstances? How can we take away assistance for people with disabilities? Perhaps we have become comfortable with our complacency – our lack of urgency. How can we stir up compassion for one another? Embody empathy? Understand what Jesus meant by UNCONDITIONAL love. Meanwhile, children go hungry, and vulnerable children and adults and those facing disease or disabilities will suffer unnecessarily. We are overflowing with monetary and intellectual resources.

We. Can. Do. Better.



Our new friends in Mseche prepared a small dinner for us, and as we ate, the singing and dancing continued outside the church – we could not stay seated and instead stood at the doorway and watched the joy and enthusiasm in of this congregation overflow. I noticed the children watching the adults – learning with every song, dance, and embrace, what community looks like. Not just in times of crisis, but each and every day. They embodied the notion that we are Easter people – living in the light of the resurrection, the good news that difficulty and death do not have the final word – Easter people live life knowing we have received grace and are meant to live lives in response to this gift.



As we said our farewells, the congregation continued singing and waving as we drove away, the children waving and running closely behind. We would drop Abusa Joseph off down the road to save him a walk (his motorbike had broken down on the way to meet us earlier and he and wife has to find a taxi to get them there on time). He had left his bike at someone's house and they would now be finding a way to get it back home.

Meanwhile, we continued our long travel day with one last stop. The Nkhotakhota Deanery Center to pick up Dean Wilson Msiki – he has graciously helped Mphatso find a lodge in the city that we might enjoy while we spend 2 days here. Although it was dark when we arrived, we could hear and smell Lake Malawi and got settled into our rooms. We were all exhausted from the 8 hour journey and ready for sleep. We skipped dinner and crashed for the night.





In the morning, we awoke after a good night's sleep and saw just how windy it was on the lake today – very few fishing boats were seen, as it's too dangerous to take those small boats out with waves this high. When Mphatso and Chicco picked us up, they had brand new haircuts - fresh trims from an early morning barbershop visit! They were excited. As we drove the short distance to the deanery center, I found myself watching out the front window, as I had dozens of times on this trip, but really wondered today about the large cracks that consume so much glass. Although the driver's side is less impacted, I was curious about what happened - is there a way to repair or replace broken windscreens here? Is it costly? Does their insurance coverage work the same? Could they file a claim? This series of cracks goes completely unspoken – no story, no explanation. It's like the cracks don't matter. If we can see beyond the cracks, then we are doing well. We can see where we are going. They are not hindering the journey in any way, and are just a part something bigger.

Hmm.

Over this last week, we have visited several congregations, most of which are gathering in church buildings that have no windows, windows without glass, and some with no doors, floor, or roof. Many of them are in this state because of damage caused by storms. The cracks and damage are certainly frustrating, disappointing, and difficult. It means finding resources for repairs and being patient while the work is being done. But these communities have a resilience that astounds me. These broken things, these cracks – they could stop ministry momentum – they could cause discouragement, or even push us to be frustrated with God. But that's not exactly what I see here. Those things are acknowledged – they are reality – but they are not everything. Through these cracks and lost roofs, there is still a certainty that God is with them, that Jesus will not abandon them, and that there is hope, even as we look at each other through broken walls or glass.



The people here tell us often that our visits are encouraging – they give hope. It took me a long time to realize that, even for a community that thrives on relationships, it's important to know that we are not alone, and that God is bigger than any difficulty that we could face. And, that we are a stronger church when we are church together.

We arrived at the Nkhotakhota Deanery Center, met by Dean Wilson Mkisi and his wife. We barely made it out of the car before they excitedly swept us into their newly constructed parsonage. This space was built large enough to hold their family, and neatly surrounded by a lovely reed privacy fence. Although some rooms are unfinished, the space is very nice.

Outside, we toured the property which sits at the edge of the river and was originally covered by trees and foliage. They removed what they needed to in order to build the house and a garden. He and a couple of elders in the congregation spent more than a year clearing the area and building a road, something that had not existed prior to this. They dug by hand, more than 10 feet down in some areas, to create enough room to drive a vehicle down to the house. We walked through the field which will be filled with maize soon, and saw what looked like a retaining wall. When the river floods, this is necessary to keep the water from coming up too high onto the property. Although the wall looks like it's about 6 feet tall, there is another 6 feet of brick and concrete below the ground, making it stable for years to come. When you get to the top, it becomes easier to see that this wall will eventually be an outer wall for the church building. Currently they are gathering under reed walls and a thatch roof. This is a very new congregation (4 years young) and small in numbers (about 80 right now), but they are confident that once the church building is complete, their congregation will grow rapidly.



After the tour, we were welcomed inside the church. Abusa Mkisi apologized for the lack of congregants there today – there were two funerals in the community and these are priority for people in Malawi. However, there were several church elders and 10-20 church members who joined us for greetings. Even the governor, who is a member there, decided to join us. After our program, the choir shared several songs with us, each one more vibrant with singing and dance. Occasionally the pastor or Chicco would join them, and as they got more and more comfortable, the children who were present also joined in the festivities. Chicco even convinced us to share the song that he's been teaching us all week, and I'm so glad that he did - so many songs are familiar to the Lutheran Church here, not matter where you are, and this was one of them. We sang, they joined us, and we filled that space with love and laughter as God's global church together.

We were invited into the Dean's home for a delicious lunch – so much food to enjoy: nsima, rice, cabbage, tomatoes, chicken, potatoes – and we enjoyed watching a local news station, discussing everything we saw, from maize imports to American education companies. Meanwhile, the choir continued to sing and dance and we could hear them laughing and enjoying one another's company through the windows. Dean Mkisi invited everyone inside and Mphatso asked Pastor Jennifer if she would say some words of farewell. I think it's wonderful that they continue to lift up leadership from women pastors whenever possible. Outside we took several photos, and had the most Wisconsin goodbye I have experienced here yet. Hugs and handshakes with everyone who was present, thanking them for their hospitality and presence. Every wave gets more and more difficult. There never seems to be enough time.



We got back to our lodge right after lunch (our planning team wanted us to be able to have some time to just relax at the lake), so we took advantage of the quiet for a nap and to enjoy the waves and wind. It was lovely. The four of us ate dinner together, chatted about congregations and what has been inspiring here that we can't wait to take home with us. We looked at the stars in the southern hemisphere and headed to our rooms for the night. We are traveling to Kasungu tomorrow and are excited to see another well project. More to come, friends!



Today I pray that, collectively, we can separate ourselves from the status quo long enough to embody the radical gospel of Jesus – providing food, shelter, clothing, care, and love to those who need it most. I pray that we make time for a long goodbye (Although in Wisconsin, we might already have this down!) and a glance at the stars, moon, sun, or other splendors in front of us. And, I pray that we can see brokenness for what it is, name it, but then look beyond with hope at what might be next.

Amen.





# October 27, 2025: Common Ground, Laughter, & Goodbyes

Moni nonse (Greetings, everyone!)

These last four days have been joy-filled, exhausting, and full of heart.

Friday morning, we left Nkhotakhota and made the drive to the Kusungu Deanery. We visited Kamphika Congregation, accompanied by Dean Innocent, and as we drove up and heard voices singing us a welcome, we were ready to exit the vehicle and meet our new friends. Almost immediately, there was a singing procession guiding us to their new borehole well. It was dedicated in February, and has been a life changing addition in this village. Prior to this well, people were walking more than a few miles round trip to their closest water source, and the water was not safe to drink.



The joy for this new well was palpable. Even the local chief danced his way to the pump to show us how easy it now was for the community to get water. As we gathered inside their church, a small structure with brick walls and a thatch roof, we did our usual greetings and messages of thanks and encouragements for one another. The choir also sang, and they were truly incredible. Full of harmony, good spirit, volume, and joy. To end our program, the congregation said they wanted to share a gift with us. In Malawi, gift giving is almost always a ceremony in and of itself – if often includes a processional, singing, and dancing as the gift givers brings the item forward to the recipient. As this group danced their way to the front, they placed a live chicken in my arms. I was overwhelmed.

Trying my best to hold back tears, I thanked them, understanding how valuable this gift was, and how much I appreciated their generosity. (The irony was not lost on either me or Jenny as she pointed out that they gave the chicken, which is intended to be used for a meal, to the only vegetarian in the group!) We named the chicken Irene Nkhuku Kamphika. Irene, because it's just a fun name, Nkhuku which means chicken, and Kamphika, the name of the congregation. She has been riding in the vehicle with us for three days now. After people dispersed, we were presented with a soda and some biscuits from the elders in the congregation. We enjoyed a short break before loading back into the vehicle to our next destination..



We stayed at a hotel in Kusungu, and our rooms had air conditioning. It was a lovely treat during this hottest month in Malawi. We had enough time to rest for an hour or so before heading down to the dining room for dinner. The four of us played cards and enjoyed sharing a pizza and some cold water for our meal. In the middle of our conversation, lights and sirens from police cars pulled up to the front of the hotel. In walked several military and police personnel, followed by a man we didn't recognize. We were so curious what was happening. As we sat, a man approached our table and asked if we were American. Ummm.... we said yes and he asked what state we were from – after telling him, he shared that he studied in Kansas for 10 years. Likely seeing the confused looks on our faces, he introduced himself, Enoch Chihana, the Second Vice President of Malawi, just inaugurated three days prior. Oh, ok! A neat interaction for us. He seemed humble enough, and, as we looked around at all the political party dresses, colors, and shirts of the other people gathering nearby, we presumed they were at the hotel ballroom to celebrate the elections. Each of us slept pretty well in our climate controlled spaces that night. On a trip like this, sometimes it's the little conveniences that show us how accustomed to privileges we often are.



Mphatso and Chicco spent the early morning hours on Saturday tending to our vehicle which had a problem that needed to be addressed. When they arrived, Chicco loaded our bags... again... (sheesh, this poor guy!) onto the luggage rack and made our way to the Kathongera Congregation. We parked just near the borehole well on the property that was dug in 2012, the first of the Emma and Claire wells through our synod. After a brief demonstration of the well, we had a quick tour of the garden positioned directly behind where tomatoes and other vegetables are grown year-round, thanks to years of easy access to water. We then gathered inside a very large, unfinished church building for greetings, prayer and singing as we walked together. Chicco even convinced us to sing the songs we've been practicing. They responded by joining us and clapping with so much laughter and encouragement.





My words included memories of the stories Bishop Berg shared with me and photos that I saw of the dedication of this particular well – Bishop Berg, Emma and Claire were all in attendance that day. I acknowledged the importance of clean water – for growing and cooking food, for drinking and bathing, and for making bricks - and that I could look around at the walls of this church and see just how much work they have done to build these walls. The timbers for the roof are in place, and now they are just waiting to install the tin roofing sheets. This will allow them to worship during the rainy season as they consider next steps for concrete flooring and window frames.



Our program ended with a gift processional, but this time the women brought forward a chitenje for each of us, placed it around our waists (or over the shoulder for Randy) with robust singing and dancing. Another gesture of generosity and kindness from another beautiful congregation. Randy was able to share a thank you from the group before we departed. We were invited to Abusa Bread's home afterward for a quick lunch and a prayer before the next leg of our trip.



We went directly from here to Chisemphele Congregation, a rural site whose church building is also large, built with strong brick walls, and a fully installed roof. They are still hoping for a concrete floor at some point. And they, like so many other congregations here, articulate their faith with certainty, particularly the hope they hold that God will be their guide, their source of blessing, and that we continue to follow Jesus, even when faced with challenges.

As we shared prayers, introductions, songs, and fellowship, we were the recipients of yet more gifts! We felt so thankful to receive a chicken, some tomatoes and carrots from their garden, and cold sodas to refresh us for the journey. This chicken, Jonah Chisemphele (because the choir sang a song about Jonah, and Chisemphele is the name of the congregation), will join Irene in the vehicle – two of the most well-traveled birds ever! As we delivered Dean Innocent back to the deanery center, he showed us the church building and property. Bishop Martin and I were here to see the borehole well at this site last year, and, at that time the building had no floor. About half of this big building now has concrete floor – progress! As Malawian sometimes say, “pang’ono pang’ono,” little by little.





We left with handshakes and words of farewell and started the drive toward Midisi where we will worship tomorrow. Along the way, the vehicle began making a clunking noise that had us thinking we might have a problem on our hands. We got out and, and as Chicco assessed the situation, the rest of us started walking a short distance to a fueling station to search for a place to use the restroom and wait until Chicco and Mphatso decided what to do. Sure enough, an issue with the bolts for one of the calipers. Thankfully, he had pulled over in front of a mechanic shop who assisted him with a temporary fix. While they worked hard on the repair, eventually in the dark with only a phone light to see, we played several rounds of cards to occupy our time. A couple of hours later Chicco pulled into the fueling station, happy to have a capable vehicle. Although the fix is temporary, we are all hoping it will get us where we need to go.



Just after dark we checked into our lodge long enough to wash our hands before traveling just down the street to a new restaurant for dinner. The Pilgrim's Café – a modern looking place that had just opened a couple of months ago. Although much of the community is experiencing a blackout, they had a generator that allowed them to have lights and working stoves. We ordered chips and chicken, and the owner asked if he could take our photo while enjoying our meal to help with social media advertising. Of course, our new friend! The food was plated beautifully and was delicious. Eventually the generator stopped, the blackout was over, and we knew that we'd all have power when we got back to Ram Lodge. Because dinner was late, most of us when directly to bed when we arrived to the lodge, knowing that tomorrow would be another full day.

We had coffee and ate breakfast the next morning, took our time and enjoyed our conversation. The group has started to reflect on the past two weeks and the fact that we only have a couple of days left here in Malawi. We sometimes joke about the reality that these visits are such a firehose of new people, cultural nuances, language, experiences, and places that sometimes we have to go back to our photos or journal entries in order to remember what we did just last week!



As soon as our companions arrived and we loaded the vehicle, we drove to the Madisi parish Center. Madisi has a lot of acreage and the site holds the church building, an educational center where they host classes for pastor training, etc., a parsonage and some homes, as well as an ELCM lodge for guests. Because Bishop Berg assisted with this project early on, there is a room in the lodge dedicated to him with a placard on the door.

When we got out of the vehicle, I saw my first familiar face of the day, Derrick, who often drives for Bishop Bvumbwe, but who has been our driver for a handful of our trips as well. He is a kind man and is always ready with a smile, handshake, and a hug. I don't see him as often as I once did, so it was lovely to have some time for conversation. My oldest two daughters, Julia and Maddie, got to know him well in 2017 and think of him as their Malawian agogo (grandfather).



We entered the church just before 10 am to find the space already packed with worshippers. Although it's likely that many came today specifically for the celebrations, it was incredible to see so many people together this morning. We were in the front two rows with more than 100 children sitting on mats in front of us. Behind us, a full space, every bench filled, some sitting in isles, or standing if room could not be found. The place was literally filled wall to wall. likely around 500 or more in attendance for the installation of Dean Thomas Chikako and the ordination of a new pastor, Abusa Aliafe Banda.



For those who have experienced Lutheran liturgy, these same elements exist in the church here as well - greetings, confession and forgiveness, readings, responsive Psalms, gospel acclamation, gospel reading and sermon, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, hymns, and special music of various kinds. The service is spoken in Chichewa, of course, but our friends were kind and provided interpretation throughout the service.

Because this was a special occasion, there were several choirs present - some from Madisi congregation but some traveling from Lilongwe as well. The music director, Innocent, also from Lilongwe, brought some sound equipment and a keyboard to accompany hymns and liturgy as well as providing backing tracks for a few of the choirs. Sometimes the congregation will start spontaneously singing a song, and, somehow, he'll join with an accompaniment that matches the key they have started in.





He also adds background music to enhance the prayers, or other elements of worship. He's a talented musician, and has worked hard to schedule tours for several of these choirs around the ELCM. Many in the church have assisted with writing songs, including Chicco, and there are professional video and audio recordings available to watch and listen to online.

These choirs share different types of music and dance, some more traditional, while others more contemporary – it is so fun to witness the creative choreography. But one of my favorite parts of their singing often includes the support of the congregation – sometimes, people will be so moved by what they are seeing and hearing from the youth, that they stand and move toward the choir, waving a chitenje like they are fanning the group – it's act of encouragement that means “keep going!” And when looked at the young children sitting in front of me, they were captivated by these groups.



The installation and ordination were formal inclusions in this service, many readings, verbal commitments to be a witness to the gospel in their respective leadership calls, and a laying on of hands. These new leaders are also given gifts from the head office – for the dean, a new, blue clerical shirt (the color for deans here), and a chasuble. For the newly ordained, a collar and clergy shirt, a clergy cross, a stole (made by, Maria, the Bishop's wife), a new bible, and a communion chalice and paten. They sign their letters of call and show them to the congregation for a rousing applause.

And there are a few uniquely special moments as well – the wives of these two are invited to present a gift to their spouse, and stand in front with them as a visual show of support for the work they have been called to do. For Abusas and Deans here, they travel a lot during the day due to the large geographic area that contains several congregations per parish. It can certainly be a lot to take on as a spouse.





Thomas and Aliafe were invited to say a few words, followed by visitor greetings. First up was Tobias – he is a representative of the ELM in Germany and his greeting was funny and heartfelt. From my understanding, they have had a relationship with the church here since the mid-80's and it often includes working on development projects like community water and solar projects together.

Then I was invited up to say a few words – I included some of my usual elements – greetings from the bishop and congregation, appreciation for their enormous hospitality and generosity to us, and introductions of the travelers. But, I also shared a special thank you to the youth in the church – for the ways they tell the stories of their faith so confidently through their singing and their dancing – that the little ones are looking up to them and learning from them. I told them to keep going! We are praying for you! And, I thanked the congregation for teaching us new ways to encourage our young people. It was a blessing to be there and an honor to have a chance to address this large congregation on such a special occasion.



Chicco also encouraged us to become a choir and sing the song we have been sharing this week. Even Mphatso and Dean Innocent, who was with us for a few of our travel days, joined us. Hesitantly, we all gathered in the front of the sanctuary where Chicco jokingly told the congregation, “this is a song from America - if you know it, sing along.” He’s such a kidder. He then lead our song which made the entire congregation immediately sing along. The words “Ali yemweyo Yesu sama sinta” translate “Everywhere you go, Jesus is the same.” He included verses Ku America, Ku Madisi, etc.... (in America, In Madisi) to which we sang our reply, Everywhere you go, Jesus is the same. The encouragement and laughter was a gift to our humble little choir, and we were so glad we braved the experience! JOY!

After the greetings, there was a presentation of gifts to the church as well as to the new dean and pastor, including goats, rice, gifts of money, and wrapped gifts. Worship officially concluded and we processed outside – a mere four and half hours later. (Whew!) We lingered to meet some new people and visit for a while before walking to the lodge to have a reception with the Bishop.

We enjoyed a hearty meal with the Abusas, a few deans, Bishop and Maria Bvumbwe, and the ELCM staff while enjoying some conversation before driving the rest of the way back to Lilongwe. Along our route, we heard some familiar clunking again, Chicco assessed that things should be ok. And he was right, of course! After many of us dozed off in the car for a while, we all woke just as we entered the city. We arrived back “home” in time for dinner and some rest after the long day, but we knew that it would still be a couple of hours before our travel companions would have cleaned and returned the vehicle and made their own way home. They work so tirelessly to be sure we have all that we need while we are here, even if it means sacrificing their own rest or comfort. We are very grateful to them. We had the chance to chat a bit with Tobias at dinner who is also staying here tonight and it was lovely getting to know him better.

We spent Monday walking through the market one last time in Lilongwe to find some special gifts to bring back home with us. I have become so much less timid when it comes to bartering, but also when I need to tell some vendors that I have enough. They scramble for our attention, which is understandable when it's your livelihood. It feels like a really cool, chaotic art crawl, and we always find something new and unique that will be a lasting reminder of our time here. And, for many of us, we will return home with something for our loved ones, that, like our Malawian friends, we can give generously and in a special way.

Our little group also decided to get something special for Chicco...since he has been frequently using the phrase "just a piece of a cake" throughout the trip, we decided to purchase his family a cake. But, we decided we also wanted to make him laugh, so, while everyone started eating lunch, Mphatso and I snuck off to the grocery store next door and had the bakery write "piece of a cake" on it. We told him we had a surprise – that we wanted to show him our gratitude for all that he had done for us during the trip, and then presented him with the cake – he immediately laughed and we couldn't help but join him. He started taking photos of it and sending it to his family. Enjoy, Chicondi. You deserve it. We also picked up chocolates for Mphatso's family, but had to immediately place these in the fridge in Lazarus' kitchen as the hot temperatures were rapidly turning them to liquid! We could not do these trips without him as a guide, and I hope this small gesture will be something he can enjoy with his wife, children and grandchildren.



We spent time the rest of the day packing up our suitcases and getting organized for our flights tomorrow, playing some cards, picking up the beautiful dresses that Chimwemwe made for Jennifer and Patti, and having dinner together.

Tomorrow will be bitter sweet, as it always is when I leave this place. I reach a point when I am in Malawi that I deeply miss my family and long to hug them. But, I also wish I could stay a bit longer and engage in conversation, planning, and dreaming together with friends here. I always leave a part of my heart here, but I know I will return and we'll pick up right where we left off. I will look forward to the day I can come back to my second home here in the Warm Heart of Africa. Until then, I will take with me all the love, stories, joy, prayers, and music that has so graciously been given to us these last two weeks.

Tiwonana, Malawi.

Today, I pray that we find an element of our day and treat it as a celebration, giving thanks for something good and acknowledging even the smallest things that bring us gratitude. I hold a continued prayer (because it can't be said enough...) for access to clean water and food for everyone – no questions asked or requirements needed, just basic needs of life fulfilled. I truly believe we would be a more peaceful world if we could break the barriers of greed, power, and politics and make it happen. And, I pray that we might work hard to acknowledge the good things we see in others – how might things change if young people were asked more questions and praised for their creativity and ideas – what might change if we seek out people older than us to share a meaningful story from their life and thank them for their wisdom, or tell a mother she's doing an amazing job, or a coworker that we appreciate their hard work and dedication? In a culture (the US) where divisiveness is second nature to us now, and everyone seems to be taking sides, how can we make a choice to come together, to talk, find common ground, and to share ideas that can lead to the common good of all people, not just for those who think, act, or look like us. We can do this, friends. Keep going! Amen.

Zikomo kwambiri. See you in Malawi in 2026!

(Enjoy some extra pics below!)

