

MALAWI BLOG

DEACON LAURA RAMLOW

August 6, 2023: Leg Room, Lilongwe, & Love

Muli bwanji, friends!

I am so glad to share that I am writing this blog entry from Malawi! After four long years we were finally able to return to the Warm Heart of Africa for a companion visit, and my heart is so happy to be here. Quick side note: I am writing this while wrapped in a shawl as it's only 58 degrees here...it feels nice to be out of the extreme heat in the US for a couple of weeks!

On Thursday, our group of eight travelers packed our many suitcases into vehicles and drove to Chicago where we stayed for the night in preparation for our flight. After a good night's rest, we filled the back of the shuttle with our baggage and headed to the airport, boarded our plane, and were met with the best of surprises... we had empty seats in between each of us! Considering the first leg of our trip was 13 hours non-stop, this was an unexpected and appreciated gift of space, flexibility, and comfort on this journey.



We arrived at Addis Ababa International Airport in Ethiopia on Saturday morning, were shuttled from the tarmac to the airport and swiftly directed to international transfer security for the next leg of our flight. As we descended the escalator leading to our gate, we were met with a wall of people, hundreds and hundreds of travelers waiting in queues for shuttles that would transport us to our planes. We uncomfortably jostled our way through the crowd and waited for our flight to Lilongwe, Malawi. But, to my delight, in the middle of the chaos of luggage and languages, I

heard the familiar sound of Chichewa and I knew it wouldn't be too long before we would arrive. The few words I could extrapolate from nearby conversations was enough to make me feel nostalgic.

Although we were not quite as lucky with seating on our second flight, we were certainly grateful for the shorter trip, only three hours from Addis to Kamuzu International Airport in Lilongwe. Upon arrival, the eight weary travelers received their visas, collected all the baggage, and went through customs where officers with trained dogs check every bag for evidence of poaching - an ongoing and serious concern in Malawi as well as several other African countries where wildlife is harmed for profit.





Waiting for us at the other end was a friendly and familiar face, Mphatso Thole, the companion coordinator for the ELCM, who was prepared with a vehicle for our luggage and a minibus for our group. After some greetings and hugs, we loaded the vehicles and our friend Stywell drove us to the Lutheran Compound at the ELCM headquarters. So many familiar things to see on this drive, and yet, there have been so many changes as well. More office buildings in the heart of the city, many more fueling stations, and a road expansion project through the heart of the

capitol city to accommodate the influx of compact cars that have become available in Malawi over the last 5 years.

As we drove through the gate at the compound, I had a moment of comfort - I know this place...and I am home again.

We received our room assignments, and started to get settled in for the next two days. There have been many renovations here at the compound, particularly with the lodging and dining hall - new flooring and furniture in the rooms, and the dining hall kitchen has received an upgrade, too! It's no surprise that we were immediately met with warm hospitality from our friends here - it is a way of life, deeply rooted in the culture, and one of the first



remarkable characteristics you'll notice of the people here. Lazarus had tea and banana bread waiting for us when we got settled, and it was certainly a cup of peace and relaxation for a group of exhausted travelers.

Sunday morning we enjoyed a lovely breakfast - hard cooked eggs, chips, toast with apricot jam and peanut butter and, of course, the ever popular chicory coffee and tea with steamed milk. We walked to the cathedral for worship, shaking hands and exchanging words of welcome, and then found a seat. Mphatso arranged for a few people to sit among us to help translate the worship service so we could understand what part of the liturgy was happening.



The service was brimming with good things: two bishops, Laurie Skow-Anderson and Joseph Bvumbwe; three pastors, Abusa Justin Mofolo, Abusa Evance Mphalasa, and Abusa Bertha Monkondya; and the Cathedral Choir and the brass band shared voices and instruments as they accompanied the service. A special guest, Youth Choir A, were also present and launched a new song during

worship. They are a traveling choir that has been recording their music in video and audio and plan to record this new song. The mayor of Lilongwe, Richard Banda, made an appearance and shared a monetary gift with the choir to assist their efforts in producing new music.

We experienced singing and dancing that was inspirational and lively, blending new sounds with traditional dance and costume. The music engaged everyone with its energy and words, and the congregation's support of these young people was palpable and heartfelt.

Bishop Laurie was invited to preach the sermon, translated by Abusa Mphalasa, and she shared a message about the importance of courage and partnership in the gospel, even in the face of challenges. After holy communion, the children lined up and came forward for a blessing by one of the two bishops, and this was truly a holy moment to witness. Watching the bishops gently placing hands on the



heads of these children as they looked up and were reminded that God loves them was an image I'll never forget. Experiencing love in its most uncomplicated form through the eyes of a child is a practice worth embracing.



I had the opportunity to share a formal greeting with the congregation, bringing them the prayers of their partners and friends from the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. Through hurricanes and floods, pandemics and Cholera epidemics, to food insecurity and destroyed homes, my hope was to be a present assurance in partnership - a reminder that we are not alone - God is with us, even in our

challenges. And we are with them, walking together every day - in person when we are able, but always in spirit.

As I think about our itinerary for the next several days, I am trying to prepare my heart and mind for what we will see and hear in the south after all the devastation they have endured since our last visit here. I am thankful to have Laurie, Linda, Sue, Nancy, Karen, Mary, and Gabe to travel with and I am grateful for their curiosity, patience, and company as we prepare to move to Balaka and Blantyre tomorrow. It is always such a joy to observe others experiencing Malawi for the first time. I catch myself watching Gabe's reactions as he sees and hears new things, and it's a privilege to hear his questions, perspectives and efforts to learn a new language in a cross-cultural encounter like this.

Dear friends, today I pray that we can pause long enough to see things through the eyes of others, that we stay curious, ask questions and experience new things, and that we have the courage to go out into the world and live the good news that ALL people will know they are beloved children of God.

Ndi chikondi,
(With love,)

Laura

August 9, 2023: Ministry, Water, & Hope

Hello friends,

Monday morning started with a great cup of coffee and some breakfast made by none other than our friend Lazarus. We joined with others at the cathedral for a brief morning devotion, and were invited to Bishop Bvumbwe's office for a meeting with him and the ELCA staff before our departure to our first destination. Jennifer, Innocent, Shakira, John, Agnus, Mphatso, Bestings, Abusa Mphalasa, Dean Mofolo, and Abusa Monkhondya are exceptional leaders with many responsibilities. They are managing ministries of gender justice, disaster relief, education, HIV/Aids, partner relationships, and development projects. I wish I had a full day with each one of them to learn more about the work they are doing!



We presented 9 suitcases of gifts to the ELCM including reading glasses, soccer balls, girls dresses, and pastor resources (thank you to all the congregations who donated supplies!). In preparation for our travels, Bishop Bvumbwe gave us a brief report including his concerns about the 40% inflation rate that Malawi is experiencing, and the impact this will continue to have on food security and basic needs.

As we consider these statistics, knowing how worried our friends here must be, they embody calm and hope and a confidence that God is faithful.

After a long and bumpy ride to Balaka we arrived at the parsonage of the Pastor Sinos Chimwaye, who also serves as the Dean. This home had been destroyed by storms in 2021. The small crew that was there when we arrived were using chisels and hammers on the broken walls to try and salvage any bricks that might be of use when they rebuild. After a long and bumpy ride to Balaka we arrived at the



parsonage of the Pastor Sinos Chimwaye, who also serves as the Dean. This home had been destroyed by storms in 2021. The small crew that was there when we arrived were using chisels and hammers on the broken walls to try and salvage any bricks that might be of use when they rebuild.

Abusa Chimwaye squeezed into the van and we took off for Chimwalire Parish feeding center to see a newly constructed borewell. (Until this was built, women were walking three miles every day for water from the river.)



We were warmly greeted there by the singing of the congregants that had gathered, awaiting our arrival. We followed single file down the path, not too far from the chapel, and circled around the new hand pump. Dean Chimwaye quickly invited me to give this new pump a try, and with one single push, water poured out of the spout and there was clapping and shouting with excitement.

We walked back to the chapel and assembled inside, awkwardly arranged with Malawians on one side and Americans on the other. The Dean found this funny, and asked us to be one congregation, and we danced and laughed together across the room until we were beautifully united as one celebratory group. After some introductions, Bishop Laurie shared a scripture verse, a closing prayer was spoken, and we packed ourselves back in the van.



After dropping Dean Chimwaye off, we continued on to Blantyre (the industrial capitol of Malawi), where we will sleep for the next two nights. We got lost due some unexpected infrastructure changes in the city, but we eventually found the lodge, got checked in, ate a good meal, and crashed for the night. I continue to be surprised by how exhausting traveling like this can be when so much time is spent in a vehicle with variable road conditions and so many new sights to absorb.



On Tuesday we enjoyed a lovely breakfast of tea, bread and jam, and eggs, and took in the view of the mountain that we missed when we arrived in the dark. The grounds at this lodge are beautiful, and many of the people in our group have been excited to identify and archive all the new trees, flowers, and shrubs that we don't typically see in Wisconsin. In doing so we stumbled across a spider in a web, and, let's

just say we were glad it was outside! This creature was beautiful...and big. Mphatso and Stywell arrived to pick us up and we loaded into the van, grateful that we did not need to haul our luggage around today.

We drove south toward the Lower Shire area of the country that endured a lot of loss and damage during the Hurricane Freddy in February. The excessive rain and flooding destroyed bridges and damaged roads, and there were several detours we had to take off of the M1 to get to our destination. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes to flooding and mudslides in this region and many of them are still living in emergency housing, uncertain when they will be able to rebuild or repair.



We passed a large sugar cane plantation, and the factory where they process this plant has a pungent and unusual smell. There was a large cattle ranch (there are a surprising amount of cattle in the south!), and several irrigation and water projects, evident by the lush, green crops in the middle of this dry season.



Dean Joseph Ngulinga of the Lower Shire Deanery met us at his home, the parsonage for Ngabu Parish. He and his wife loaded into our van and we headed to the Mwananjovu congregation where a well had recently been built. We were surprised when we arrived as the chapel had collapsed the night before due to high winds and previous structural damage from the hurricane in February. But, even this would not stifle their joy - we were welcomed by congregants with singing, dancing, and joyful hospitality.



We did introductions, offered words of scripture and partnership, and prayed together. The local village chief spoke about his gratitude for the well that was dug with the help of the church - he told us it felt like a dream when machines arrived to build it, and now that it's here, it has changed things and is life-giving. They affirmed the work of the Lutheran church, that when disaster happens they are often the first to respond. Hearing those words brought tears to my eyes, and I felt gratitude for the ongoing work of Lutherans across the globe.

We walked to the new well, took turns pumping water, and celebrated together - *water is life*. This was followed by much more singing, and a traditional meal of rice, nsima, chicken, and sauteed greens at a local elder's home. We watched in awe as the women in the yard were making nsima, a traditional thick, sticky maize flour side dish. This process takes incredible arm strength and patience! After our meal, we walked through the village where there was an African baobab tree. We couldn't miss the opportunity to take a group photo by its massive trunk.



On the journey back to Blantyre, there was a consensus among our group that this was an incredible day - it was such a gift to spend so much time with the Mwananjovu congregation and Dean Ngulinga. We heard stories, met new friends, had a meal together, prayed together, and celebrated together. There was laughter and calm and a deep sense of belonging.

And, simultaneously, it can be difficult to experience days like this knowing how much devastation and loss this region has experienced, and wondering how to best accompany our friends right now. *What do they need? What might God be calling us to do? What does partnership look like right now?* There are no easy answers to ministry that is both wonderful and complicated. But, I am certainly grateful for the insight and wisdom and questions of this group as we share the experience together. They are patient and kind, willing to try new things, they laugh together, share snacks and stories, and I am so glad to be with them as we accompany our partners in ministry.

Tomorrow we head to Zomba where we will meet with another parish partner and the new pastor that is serving there. This is a beautiful community and I hope to learn some new things and hear many more stories!

More to come, dear friends.....

Today I pray that all people everywhere have access to clean, safe water - we should expect it, fight for it, and ensure that it is protected; I pray for victims of natural disaster, that they receive comfort, healing and support; and I pray for good questions, that we might always be considering what's next, what's helpful, and what's right. Amen.

August 10, 2023: Stories, Singing, & Sorrow

Hello from the Warm Heart of Africa,

As we travel through this week the days have been filled with many wonderful people, sights, and sounds. We are welcomed so warmly with dancing and songs of welcome when we pull up to a chapel - there are handshakes and clapping as these beautiful people surround us with their kind hospitality. Oh, and there are so many adorable children...some running and playing, some waving a hand, some clinging to sister's chitenje, and some wrapped snugly against mom. Several young people have engaged in full conversations with us in English, happy to demonstrate their knowledge and aptitude. They make us smile and have a way of capturing our hearts. I will remember their happy, sweet faces as I recollect the more challenging aspects of these last couple of days.



On Wednesday, we left Blantyre and headed toward Zomba and made a brief stop at Chandamale congregation in the Blantyre deanery. Dean Innocent Nangwale told us this new chapel was completed in 2022 and with Hurricane Freddy they lost one wall of their building, which destroyed all of their office and storage space. Thankfully, the chapel area and roof remain relatively undamaged, but I am beginning to understand the breadth of challenges that Freddy created.

Our next stop was to Chimvu Parish Center, the partner parish of Chetek Lutheran. This was a vibrant and thriving parish in many ways. We were greeted with a singing welcome as we found our way into the chapel. We shared some formal greetings and introductions and received a report about the congregation. Chimvu parish has 5 congregations, has a few parish workers, and the women of the parish have many projects and ideas -



among other ministries, they are currently raising a couple of Holstein cows with the hope of increasing the herd and sharing cattle with the other congregations in their parish. This site has one of the oldest borehole wells which did not need any repairs until the hurricane. Now it has a broken handle and cannot be used until it's repaired.



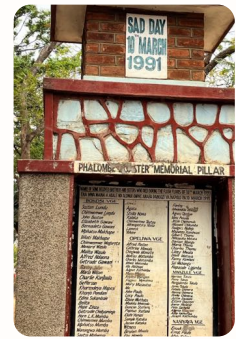
Chimvu was so happy to have Karen, a member of their partner parish, visiting them, and they were excited to share about future projects they are feeling called to do to serve their community. I completely love it when parish partners are able to visit face to face - there is something truly spirit-filled in those moments of connection and it was a complete joy to witness it.



From here we drove to our new lodging, an ELCM property in Zomba which is beautifully perched in the hills. Our accommodations here are lovely and we were greeted by a few ELCM staff, including Lazarus who will be preparing our meals while we stay here. The group is so grateful to be able to leave our luggage and travel in an empty van for the next few days! After we settled in, we walked throughout the neighborhood, taking in the sunset behind the mountain and admiring all of the beautiful plants and trees here. We had a lovely dinner, complete with vanilla cupcakes, and settled in for a good rest.

Thursday morning after some delicious eggs (have I mentioned how LARGE the eggs are here?!?), chips, and Malawian tea, and headed toward Mbidi. We, of course, saw many active markets along the way, and it has become evident this week that it was a good season for tomatoes and potatoes - they are everywhere. As we get closer to our site, the mountain range broadens and we can now see Mount Mulanje, the 3rd tallest mountain in Africa. And, we can now see the evidence of landslides - long, fresh marks striping the sides of these tall peaks.

Mphatso communicates with us that one of the sites we had planned to visit was inaccessible due to bad roads and bridges, so we switch gears and head straight to Phalombe, picking up Abusa Peter Naitha along the way. Once in the city, I notice an office space for the Evangelical Lutheran Development Service, a ministry of the ELCM. Until today, I was unaware that more than one site existed. We make a stop at the end of the main road at a memorial stone - on one side is a title and date: Sad Day, 10 March, 1991 - Phalombe Disaster Memorial Pillar. Below are the names of all the victims of a landslide that took place here more than 30 years ago. On the other side is a painting of the event. In this community, many people know and share the story, and pass it on to their children. It was tragic and memorable for those who live here.



Continuing on, we arrived at the Phalombe Deanery Center. We are, once again, greeted warmly by members of both parishes in the Phalombe deanery. Phalombe Parish has 7 congregations and 2 preaching points, 3,100 members, 1 female evangelist, and an Abusa - Peter Naitha. And Magowi has 5 congregations and 2 preaching points, 1 evangelist, and Abusa Witness Suwedi.

After a time of greetings and introductions, we leave the chapel and gather in small groups to hear some stories. Phalombe was one of several communities in this area that endured a lot during Hurricane Freddy, and we are so honored to be here to listen to their unique experiences.

One by one members of these congregations came and shared their stories, translated for our small group by Abusa Witness Suwedi. Mary was awoken in the middle of the night to a loud noise and after looking outside and noticing the water rushing down the hill, tried to gather her children to find higher ground, one child was swept away and she managed to get her other children safely into a tree until it was safe to come down. Her home, belongings and crops were all destroyed. Bertha lost a child in a similar circumstance, and is now living in temporary housing until she can find a way to rebuild. Another woman was washed away in the current and found herself stuck in mud up to her neck until she was able to be rescued by neighbors. One man lost his entire herd of cows, and another his harvest-ready crop of maize.

As I sat and listened to each story, watched people's faces, and looked into their eyes, there was so much grief and sadness as they remembered the details of those few days. We thanked them for sharing with us. It doesn't seem like enough.

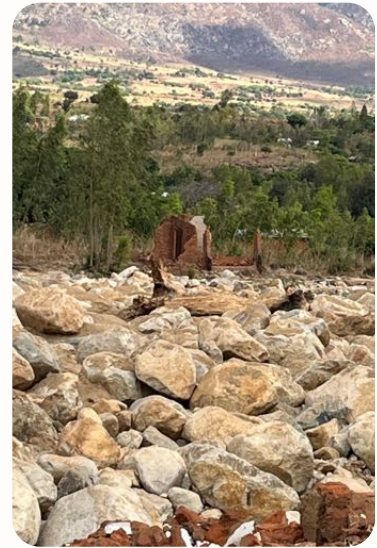
Soon after, we followed Dean Naitha and Abusa Suwedi on a walk through the village. We passed a school which is currently being used as temporary housing for some families with children. Further up there were several large tents, additional temporary housing for the community who have no relatives nearby to live with. We walked over and





around some large boulders, evidence of the landslide from 1991, until we reached the foot of the damage. And, what we saw was overwhelming. Around us were homes, mostly intact, surrounded by feet of dried mud.

In front of us were boulders, so many boulders. Climbing on top of them we could begin to see the point on the mountain where the torrential rain and wind was too much in too short a time - the side of the mountain collapsed and feet of mud and water and boulders surged down the slope, diverted it's path from the river and swept over an entire area of homes and crops.



It was surreal to look toward the mountain where this landslide began, and behind us at where the landslide ended - it was a river of boulders and dried mud, concealing crushed homes and crops of the people who live here, some of them standing with us as we tried to absorb the details of this disaster. Through our conversations we learned more than 1,400 people died and many more are declared missing & deceased.

It was disconcerting to see and I had to step away from the group for a time to hide my weeping. So much loss and grief. Malawians are humble, and may not always express their emotions, so I can only imagine what that night was like for them - hearing the inevitability of the landslide - the water, mud, and boulders, and trying to find your way through all of it in the middle of the dark must have been terrifying. Waiting on high ground or in a tree until the light of the sun revealed the aftermath would have been agonizing.

And the recovery process will take a long time. Even if residents wanted to regrow crops, there are now tons upon tons of boulders where their fields used to be. Rebuilding homes will endure the same struggles. Relocation is also difficult, particularly if you are widow or have young children.



For folks who had their own businesses, much of their livelihood will need resources in order to rebuild, and this will take time and support to do. And, the most consistent challenge we heard from people is hunger - it was harvest season for many crops when they were destroyed in March, and it took away food security for households until the next harvest, a full year away. I am heartbroken for our friends here.

As we walked back to the chapel, things were different...we were different, and although I am still trying to process everything I saw, I cannot ignore the feeling that we have more to do. What is our next step as we walk together with our neighbors in Phalombe...in Malawi?

We were invited to the dean's home for a quick lunch, and as we loaded the van, the women who were still gathered there sang us a robust farewell song, wishing us safety in our travels. I will be forever grateful to our friends here for teaching me what faith and resilience can look like. But, wouldn't it be wonderful if people didn't have to practice resilience quite so much??

Our final stop for the day was with Abusa Witness Suwedi who showed us one of his congregational buildings in Migowi (partners with Evangelical Lutheran in Black River Falls). Although the roof and foundation are strong, the walls endured some damage from the high winds of Freddy. They are hoping to repair the walls before completing the parsonage which was started just outside the chapel.



The ride back to Zomba was quieter than usual. A time to contemplate and process everything we experienced today, I suppose. What can you even say in the face of a catastrophe like this? How do you make sense of such compounded devastation? How can we show support and love in ways that are meaningful?

Today I pray for creation, that we might repair what has been damaged and preserve water/air/plants/soil so that the next generations can thrive; I pray for food security and a redistribution of resources so that all may be fed; and I pray for our friends in Malawi who have experienced loss and are grieving, that they might be assured they are not alone in their grief and instead might feel the presence and comfort of Christ.

Amen.

August 12, 2023: Courage, Tables, & Good Conversation

Warm greetings to you, my friends.

Yesterday morning after breakfast, we packed an overnight bag and headed to Liwonde National Park for a day of relaxation and some time in the bush at Mvuu Lodge. We drove about an hour from Zomba to the entrance of the park, and, once we entered the gate, it was another 30 minutes until we reached the camp. Along our route we were surprised to see that the Shire River, which flows along the entire 230 square mile preservation, was still very flooded from the heavy rains in February and March. As we drove, we were lucky to see many impala and water buck, an elephant, and a sable antelope before we arrived.



We received an orientation from the guest coordinator, Claudia, and got settled into our rooms. The lodges here are always tranquil and beautiful - solid bases with canvas tops, intricate wood carved walls and tables, beautiful bed netting, and a deck overlooking the bush. We had lunch in the dining area - an open air space tucked into the trees that overlooked an inlet on the river. We had a little time to enjoy the lounge - a secondary space that felt a bit like a large tree house, and mid-afternoon we were invited back to the dining area for tea and biscuits. When I went to the counter, I noticed a vervet monkey mischievously trying to sneak inside - they can be rascals during meal times. Evidently, there was more than one

monkey because a few of the women in our group who had already taken their treats to the table broke into laughter. When I looked over, there sat Sue, nothing but a pile of crumbs in front of her...and outside in a tree right next to us was a vervet monkey, enjoying her cookie. As we laughed at the situation, I became distracted and it wasn't too long before mine was snatched, too. But they didn't stop there - one brave monkey decided to go for the gold and take the entire sugar bowl off the counter and quickly vaulted itself to the rafters where it spilled sugar on the floor all the way across the room before going back to the trees.

After our tea time entertainment we hopped on a boat for a river safari. Our guide for the day was Patrick who has been at Mvuu for 20 years, and had impressive expertise on Malawian wildlife. The air was cool and there was enough wind on the river to create some small waves. The group saw lots of native birds, many hippos, and crocodiles. After about an hour or two, we turned off the motor and drifted a bit to enjoy the





sunset with a beverage and snacks, and took in the view of the beautiful sky before heading back. Right at dusk we spotted two elephants at the shore and we stopped a few feet away to admire them for several minutes - they were completely unbothered by us, and we were awestruck by their presence. We continued on, and managed to dock just before it was completely dark.

There was a campfire waiting for us as we walked across the compound, and we relaxed together for a while before we were driven back to our rooms for the night. Normally, we can be accompanied by a ranger and walk on the path back to our lodges, but there had been a lot of lion activity near the main buildings the last week or so, and they wanted to be sure we weren't ambushed!



The Mvuu staff sent us with hot water bottles (to place under our blankets before bed!) and a flask of hot water for tea and coffee in the morning. After preparing the bednets in our room and latching our doors we got some sleep. But, this place is not necessarily favorable for deep sleep - all around us at night were the sounds of frogs, hippos grunting in the marsh behind us, the roar of lions, and the occasional elephant trumpeting. It's so fun to listen to, even if it means sleep deprivation! In the early morning hours the birds begin to join the choir, and their strange noises were making Gabe and I laugh.

We made some hot tea after getting prepared for the day, and sipped it on the deck as we listened to the cacophony and watched the sunrise. At 6:00 am Patrick arrived with the jeep to take us on a game drive to see what animals we might spot in the early morning hours. We threw on blanket ponchos (it was chilly this morning!) as we departed. This reserve has many impalas, water bucks, and kudu, as well as baboons and vervet monkeys. We saw a jackel, more birds, a very old baobab tree, and lots of animal tracks. There was a mother cheetah with two cubs (unusual during the day), warthogs, and a large flock of vultures eating a fresh carcass. Although we didn't see them this morning, the reserve also has around 500 elephants, 20+ lions, and some rhinos (which some brave rangers were tracking today).



The drive during those bright morning hours was incredible, and we returned in time for a lovely brunch and then packed up our stuff. As Mphatso and Stywell drove us out of the park, we spotted a water buffalo - a great final sight as we finished our time here.



Mvuu Camp always impresses me - although it's a destination for many different local and international travelers, they work hard to create an environment that is ecologically sustainable and preserves the natural land, water, and plant and animal life. They use solar energy and generators, with planned breaks overnight to avoid using unnecessary power. They purify water for safe consumption and for growing and preparing fresh foods. And, they avoid unnecessary contact with wildlife by respecting habitats and not creating disturbances or distress as we approach their spaces.

Participating in an activity like this during a visit to Malawi can sometimes feel uncomfortable. After spending a week learning about and seeing the consequences of Hurricane Freddy and understanding the impact this had on our friends, going on safari seems like a frivolous thing to do. And, it is. Much like the roads in Malawi, it creates turbulence in my heart and mind....I was grieving with friends yesterday, and giddy at the sight of hippos today; thinking about food insecurity, and then eating a custom omelette for brunch. How do I reconcile these things?

But, I believe there is some thing really valuable about these activities, too. They truly do show us another glimpse of the spectacular creativity of God; they give us the space and distance necessary to unplug and process our thoughts and emotions; and they create an opportunity to build important relationships and engage in conversation. And, like Mvuu camp, they can also inspire learning about the world around us, like new methods of sustainability and conservation, and family systems. These are all valuable things.

But, by putting these two experiences side by side, it is more difficult to ignore privilege, and that can create discomfort. What might happen if we lean into that discomfort? What might God be calling us to do?

Bishop Laurie has been spending time during our visit preaching about bravery (or courage, as it's translated here) when facing challenges. It's a good reminder for us that God is present and faithful, even when we struggle. How can we respond to this promise? How can we muster up the courage to be present and faithful to others? How can we embody moral courage - to do the right thing even when it's uncomfortable? How can we have emotional courage - acknowledging our emotions without guilt? How can we be intellectually courageous - learning and unlearning with an open mind? Where can we practice spiritual courage - living life with purpose and meaning, serving our neighbors with love?*

In many circumstances, I don't think it's helpful to live an either/or existence. I believe there is room to enjoy life AND find meaningful ways to work for equity, food security, and clean water. Where does God show up in both of these things? But also, how can I use my privilege to advocate for someone else and create more equity? How can I respond to everyday experiences of God's creation with gratitude? What systems are in place that are keeping people out and how can we make sure there is room for all at the table?

All of these questions were on my mind on the road back to Zomba. And, while I don't have answers to all of them (any of them?!?), I know that when we wonder about this together, things begin to change. Who might be someone you could start a conversation with? What issue are you being drawn to right now?

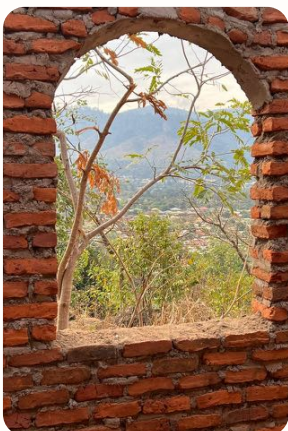
To get us started, here are a few things we learned from our amazing visit to Liwonde:

- From the HIPPOS: symbiotic relationships are mutual and reciprocal (this is key in accompanying one another!)
- From the VERVET MONKEYS: tenacity can often have sweet results.
- From the ELEPHANTS: Slow movement does not mean weak movement.
- From the WATER BUFFALO: Stand strong.
- From the BABOONS: Communities matter.
- From the LIONS: be proud of who you are.
- From the BIRDS: sometimes a little good noise can get people's attention.

Today I pray for all people to find the courage to face whatever the day throws at them, reassured that they are not alone; I pray for all of us to build longer tables with enough room for everyone; and I pray for continued efforts toward environmental preservation and sustainability, that we might honor and respect all of God's creation so that the next generations will see the goodness of God. AMEN.

**wishinguwelltoday*

August 14, 2023: Walking Together, Sunsets, & Children



Happy ~~Monday~~ Tuesday, friends!

(I lost internet connection last night, so we're finishing this entry a day late!)

Sunday morning we traveled to Sadzi congregation where we met dean/Abusa Anderson Salani who is serving as the pastor of this parish. This is a familiar place, as I have been here nearly every time I have visited Malawi, and it was exciting to arrive once again at this beautiful chapel in the mountains. I was surprised to see just how much construction was underway! Like so many other congregations in the ELCM, they are growing and need more room for worship, so there is a new, extended foundation and all new walls surrounding the existing structure which will

add 2.5 meters of width on each side. They have plans to extend the roof, demolish the old walls, and extend the concrete floor. Phase 2 will include adding some office space for the pastors. They have really good leadership and fundraising efforts within this congregation and they are proud of the work they are doing to improve their building so there is space for all.

I saw so many familiar faces and it was a blessing to receive such hospitality from the friends I have come to know. Hosh has been an active elder, overseeing many of the church logistics, including the building projects. Dave and Jack are also very involved and were gracious to answer all of our questions. There are also a couple of evangelists in this parish and a second abusa - it took me a second to recognize him,



because the last time I saw him, he was an evangelist and the youth choir director! Hamilton Chakalamba was ordained as a pastor one year ago and is now serving Zomba parish. He was so proud of his ordination and excited to be a pastor now. Although he did lead the youth back into the sanctuary after worship to sing a few songs together....once a choir director, always a choir director! ;)



Worship was lovely, filled with so much singing by the youth choir and women's prayer group. Mphatso arranged for a few translators to sit among us so we knew what was being said. Bishop Laurie shared a message of courage and partnership which was encouraging. During the service a young girl kept circling the congregation...eventually, she decided to sit with Karen and this led to several children gathering around her for the rest of our visit. Grandma energy is universal. Our friends surprised us with a gift to bring back home to Immanuel Lutheran, a banner with photos of all five congregations in the Zomba parish - something to hang proudly in the church as a reminder of our continued partnership together. We also

shared a greeting and attempted to sing a familiar song, which they helped us with. We sang and danced together to end the service.

When we got back outside the chapel we decided to walk around and see the construction progress up close, which the congregation was happy to show to us. It also allowed us to see the glorious view of the city that is unique to this place. Gabe was approached by a few teenage boys who were very interested in a conversation about music preferences, career interests, and school. It was really awesome to see him engage without my assistance, but instead worked on his own to find the right words to communicate and build new friendships.



After lunch, we gathered for a time of Q&A - *What do youth in congregations do together? What activities do women do at Immanuel in Eau Claire? What are the policies and procedures around pastors, salaries, and stewardship?*



We also took some time to drive into the city to see the preaching point (mission start), Matawele, a new congregation that is slowly building itself up and meeting a need for a faith community in this neighborhood of Zomba. It was wonderful to engage in such intentional dialogue and visits....but, it was no secret that we were all exhausted by then.

We headed back to the lodge and were surprised to see that Lazarus has made us pizza for dinner! It was wonderfully delicious and an impressive demonstration of his culinary training.

Tuesday we stopped by the Mangochi parish center and picked up Abusa Peterson Bandecha and his wife - we took a quick look at the chapel there, and they showed us that they used the remainder of the land behind the chapel and parsonage as a large garden, an unusual but brilliant use of the land that the abusa and his family maintain themselves. We hopped into the van and drove to Chilore chapel and feeding center. This location was extremely remote and very difficult to get to. It would be nearly impossible during the rainy season to take vehicle, or even a motorbike there. Using the energy of a small, portable solar panel, a group of youth had lively Christian music playing in the chapel when we pulled up, and there was a dance party happening that spilled out in front of the church as we were welcomed with robust singing and dancing.

This feeding center provides meals twice a week to around 40 children five years and younger. And Chilore is nearly 100% reliant on agriculture - when they are affected by drought or flooding, it creates immediate challenges of hunger. When they can only provide one meal a week, the ELCM often responds with supplies like rice and maize flour to assist.



In 2017 a well was dug there with the support of the NW Synod of WI and the ELCM - the existence of this well, just a short walk down the hill, had a very positive impact on this community's health, the feeding center, and the ability to water gardens. Prior to building this, the village here spent an entire day getting water, or were accessing unsafe water from nearby ponds. We celebrated the gift of madzi (water) as well as the newly



built chapel space that provides them shelter during the rainy season for worship and for the feeding center. After our greetings and prayers together, and a recognition of the local chiefs, the music was started and there was dancing!! We all joined in as the name of Jesus was shouted, and we jumped and held hands, and moved our feet and laughed. It was so good for the soul to celebrate life together. There is a noticeable sense of camaraderie in this village, and it was a privilege to witness them caring for and collaborating with one another, encouraging one another, and finding ways to share happiness together.



When our visit ended, we slowly made our way out of this rural area and toward Monkey Bay. We arrived at the ELCM lodge in the late afternoon, got settled into our rooms, and were immediately greeted by crafters who had quickly set up a display of items for sale on the beach for us. These local artists had beautiful paintings, wood carvings, and even woven items. A wonderful variety of things was purchased by the

group. Then we spent a little time just taking in the lake in the gazebo and playing a few games as the sun set. Our group ate chambo for the first time on this trip - these whitefish are caught directly out of Lake Malawi, which is a freshwater lake, and they were absolutely delicious.

As the adults chatted toward the end of dinner, Gabe returned to his room to do some journaling. A few minutes later, I received a text....he had used his skeleton key to lock the bathroom door, and it was not working - he was locked inside. After laughing about his situation, I walked back to see what I could do to help. Sure enough, the lock was broken and we needed to call for reinforcements. A quick text to Mphatso and 4



people showed up, ready with a variety of kitchen knives, waiting to assist in getting the doorknob off. When this solution failed, another person brought a machete to try and wedge between the door and the frame...still not enough. Then the rescue team found an axe and were able to use this tool to pry the door open so Gabe could get out. Success! Needless to say, it has become a running joke all day. We enjoyed the sound of the waves lapping against the shore before getting some sleep. This was the first night since arriving in Malawi that I got a full night's rest. It was. glorious.

Our travels today took us to Salima where we were guided by Abusa Oswel Simwela, one of the pastors of the Salima parish. Our only visit for today was to the Chigumakire Clinic, a building sponsored by First Lutheran Church in Eau Claire. We shared introductions and heard from the community health committee, the government-trained health professionals, and the local chief. Due to the government regulation of health care

in Malawi, public clinics are required to follow certain expectations and receive limited supplies. Currently, this clinic serves 369 children under 5 years old in the village. They also care for 115 vulnerable children (orphans). Because these health professionals are on staff for several clinics, they rotate and Chigumakire is only open to receive patients twice a week - around 63 children are able to be seen.



The presence of this clinic has created a reduction in child deaths from preventable diseases like Malaria, cholera, and pneumonia. This was really great to hear. But, there are still significant challenges. There are often shortages of medication, requiring people to travel a distance and purchase from a pharmacy - this often makes treatment inaccessible and costly. There is also no borehole nearby, which would give the clinic, and the preschool next door, access to safe drinking water. And, there is a definite need for children 5 years to 18 years old to receive treatment as well - it will take time, conversation, and an appeal to the government for this to happen.

The medical team, and a mother and four year old daughter, offered to show us how the clinic operates. There are two exam rooms where a parent/guardian would bring their child, be asked a series of questions, and then the team would check things like breathing and swelling - all done with no medical equipment. Once certain illnesses are eliminated, then further testing may be needed. This little girl needed a rapid test to determine whether or not her symptoms were due to Malaria. After a quick finger prick and a fifteen minute wait, her test was negative and her mom would be given instructions for rest and fluids, after a diagnosis of a simple virus.



It was so great to see the clinic functioning and working hard to serve the community. And, the impact has certainly been noticeable here. But, it is evident that there is more to be done, so we

hope to continue the conversation with our friends in the ELCM to see what options there are for a medical facility like this one and how we can support them. Even though the medical system in the states can be frustrating and imperfect at times, today I have an appreciation for the options and access we have to healthcare, particularly for testing and treatment of so many preventable diseases. Basic healthcare like this should not be a privilege - it should be afforded to all humans on the planet without cost or restriction. How can a planet so intricately connected struggle so much to distribute life-saving medications?

After this visit, we started off toward our lodge and ended up with a flat tire, ironically right near a tire-repair shop. Our team exited the bus and waited under the shade of a tree as these men jacked up the bus, found the spare tire, switched it out, and got us back on the road in no time. The Red Zebra is our lodging for this night, and the grounds here are as beautiful as I remember in 2016. The property is right on the shore



of the lake, and there is a long pier that extends quite a distance. With hurricane Freddy, there was a lot of flooding which included the lake this year, an unusual phenomenon. It looks to be about 10 feet higher than normal for this time of year. But, it is a beautiful place to end our ministry visits before heading back to Lilongwe tomorrow.



I think the travelers have been enjoying the grounds filled with many plants, a gorgeous beach, and the water. Dinner included veggie and beef curry and fish, and we briefly discussed the possibility of hosting a summit in September for friends of Malawi. I cannot say enough good things about this group of travelers - they are gracious, patient, flexible, fun to spend time with, kind, they continue to ask such great questions

(even if I can't answer them!), and their curiosity about the people and ministry of the ELCM is heartwarming.

Today I pray that all of us find a community where we feel like we truly belong...one that deeply cares for one another and can genuinely share both challenges and happiness. I pray that we can all find a moment during the day for laughter. And, I pray for health care to improve on a global scale, where people become more important than the profits. Amen.

More stories to share in 2024!