

Merry Christmas [Khrisimasi Yabwino], friends.

Warm greetings on behalf of our partners and friends in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi. Here are a few updates for you!

HEALTH

In early August the Ministry of Health in Malawi made a public declaration that Cholera was no longer a public health emergency. After cases significantly decreased in all areas of the country, the emergency efforts ended, although the population was encouraged to continue ongoing prevention efforts.

In collaboration with the World Health Organization, there have been increased efforts to vaccinate children against Polio and health officials have established pop-up clinics around the country to increase accessibility to the vaccine and awareness of the disease.

And, in September, there was an announcement about the launch of a long-acting, injectable HIV PreP; this **Pre**-exposure **Pro**phylaxis is bringing a hopeful option for the prevention of HIV/Aids. This disease, affecting nearly 1 million people in Malawi, is the leading cause of death there, surpassing even Malaria and neonatal conditions.

BISHOP ELECTION

The election for bishop in the Blantyre diocese, originally scheduled for July was postponed for additional planning and preparation. Once the election has happened, an update will be shared so we may celebrate this milestone together.

WATER IS LIFE [Madzi ndi moyo]

In October, Pastor and former Bishop Bob Berg passed away. Family and friends from the US and Malawi grieved his death and celebrated his life together, thankful for his gentle spirit and faithful call to ministry. It was during his call as bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin that a formal partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi was established. From early on Bishop Berg and Bishop Bvumbwe discussed the importance of clean water and lifted up the idea of building borewells in rural areas that did not have sufficient access to clean water. He shared his love for Malawi with the synod and through his encouragement, and the vibrant fundraising efforts of his granddaughters Emma and Claire, they were able to raise more than \$114,300.00 for borehole wells in Malawi.

These efforts grew with subsequent bishops and the work of the companion coordinators as the partnership between the NWSWI and the ELCM continued over the years. After our recent visit to Malawi in August (more on that below!) we continued to hear how access to clean water was an integral part of every ministry priority in the ELCM. We visited several new deep-drilled borehole wells and saw the impact they were already having in those communities. Access to wells provides drinking water, but also improves overall physical health, education and safety for girls, and agricultural outcomes.



As climate change continues to affect weather patterns and causes more frequent extreme droughts and flooding, there is also a growing need for solar-powered wells which have the capacity to draw water from much deeper underground. These can be a game-changer during the dry season, during a draught, or in the aftermath of severe storms and flooding similar to the effects of Cyclone Freddy from this past February/March. To read more about this, you can check out this article: <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/resilience-and-adaptation/malawis-battle-for-climate-resilient-water-and-sanitation>

Therefore, we have started a Bishop's Initiative called **WATER IS LIFE** - the goal is to partner with the ELCM and raise \$40,000 by synod assembly 2024, enough to build 2 new solar wells. If you would like more information or would like to be a part of this initiative for clean water by making a gift to this fund, please visit: <https://nswi.org/malawi>.

ECONOMY

Malawi is experiencing severe economic strain - the pandemic destabilized exports, especially tobacco, the largest of their agricultural exports, and there have been consistent struggles with imports, causing shortages in goods and fuel.

A few quick statistics:

- 40% inflation rate
- Kwacha (Malawian currency) is seeing a 44% devaluation against the US dollar - a staggering 85% devaluation overall.
- Fuel, water, and power have all increased by 50%
- Food and goods have increased 15-50%

These struggles continue to be impacted by several factors, but were exacerbated by a cholera epidemic, and Hurricane Freddy earlier this year which displaced nearly 90,000 people and increased housing, water, food, and job security across the country. This crisis has forced people to make difficult sacrifices in order to feed their families, pay school fees, and maintain health. These realities also create barriers for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi, making it very challenging to do the work and maintain the programs and projects that they have been called to do.

MALAWI VISIT

In early August our group of 8 travelers landed in Malawi for the first in-person visit since 2019. Included in our itinerary was time in Lilongwe, Balaka, Lower Shire, Migowi, and Monkey Bay. Bishop Laurie shared scripture, preached about courage, and blessed congregations and children in each community. A representative from Chetek Lutheran also visited her partner parish in Chimvu where we learned how the women of the congregation have started a cattle program. And, representatives from Immanuel Lutheran in Eau Claire spent time with their partner parish in Zomba where we saw the progress of their building expansion which will accommodate the growing membership there.



Along the way we made stops to see several borehole wells, all of which were built near feeding stations in remote villages in the south. Gathered around these wells with the community we took turns pumping the handle, heard "madzi ndi moyo" (water is life), and celebrated the gift of water as we learned how transformational this well has been.

We visited Phalombe and saw first-hand the devastation of Hurricane Freddy – heavy rains and wind caused mudslides all over this region, destroyed homesteads, and resulted in the deaths and disappearances of hundreds of residents. Survivors told us their stories which often included the children and spouses that they lost as they searched for high ground in the middle of the night. We walked past emergency tents, and stood on the river of boulders and dried mud where houses and crops once were, knowing that this would now be a permanent landscape in this village.

During our two weeks there, we also explored Mvuu Camp (safari camp) and took in native wildlife, birds, and nature. The group spend some time with the ELCM and ELDS staff who are working so hard to preach good news, expand programs that will improve health and well being for others, and provide relief efforts as they face a growing number of natural disasters. We spent quality time with our Malawian friends, met new people, laughed, danced, and ate delicious meals together, and learned so much. If you wish to read a more detailed account of our visit, our travel blog and photos can be found here:

https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/0a/0a854394-3a19-4d9f-b1ae-f93021508921/documents/Malawi_Blog_2023-3.pdf

NEW RESOURCES

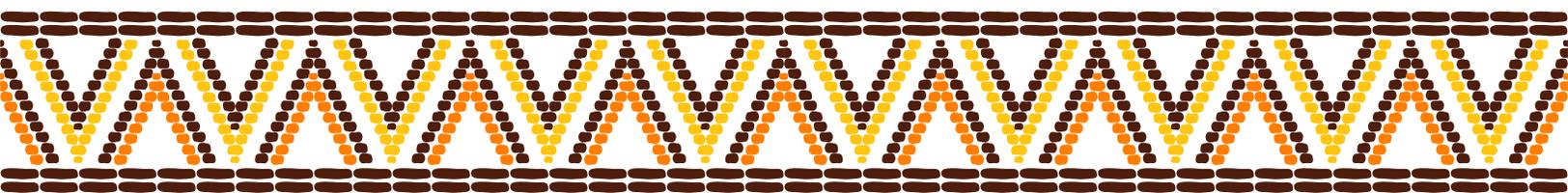
During this liturgical year you may see some new resources that are designed with our Malawi partnership in mind. The first resource, **The Warm Heart of Advent**, is a 4 week worship series that captures the experiences we have had and the heart of the people from Malawi. The second resource will be a 40-day Lenten devotional called **Journey to the Neighbor** and will be a collaboration of writings from partners in the US and the ELCM. These resources, and others, can be found here: <https://nswi.org/malawi>

THANK YOU

I am so grateful for the enduring and faithful partnership of the people and congregations of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. Your continued generosity, prayers, support – ALL the ways you show up for our siblings in Malawi – is greatly appreciated. And, as always, please feel free to reach out to me any time for further conversation, partnership support, or educational workshops regarding our accompaniment with the ELCM.

Mulungu akhale nanu,
(May God be with you)

Laura Ramlow



Dear Partners/Companions,

CHRISTMAS WISHES AND NEW YEAR GREETINGS

As a year is drawing to an end, and as we are celebrating Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, on behalf of the Presiding Bishop of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi, Rt. Rev Dr Joseph P Bvumbwe and the Acting General Secretary, I would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy Prosperous New Year 2023.

The year 2023 will go down in history as one of the most difficult years we as a nation in general and as a Church in particular faced enormous challenges such as cholera, cyclone Freddy, economic meltdown and so far El Nino which will associate with dry spell in Malawi. Almost 90% of the country has not yet started receiving rains. The dry spell will lead to next year's food shortages. We all know too well how negatively these have affected our daily life spiritually as well as physically.

Despite all these challenges you have been with us. This celebration of coming and the birth of Christ reminds us how God has been faithful during these difficult times. 2023 has been a difficult year worldwide due to the Ukrainians and Russians war, now Israelites and Palestinians in Gaza. This has affected all of us globally. May this holiday season be a time of rest filled with peace, love, joy and all the things that make life worth living.

From miles away, no matter how far we are as companions/partners, the warmth of Christmas should bring us closer. The birth of Christ should let the light of faith and warmth of our partnership make this season a time of reflection.

The most consoling and encouraging message of Christmas as in Luke, the angel told shepherds, *"Do not be afraid."* God is also speaking to us during this time that we should not be afraid. He is the God of hope. The coming Christmas should bring us hope. Romans 15: 13: *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* Luke 1:14: *"And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth."* Luke 2:14: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace."*

Once again, we send all our blessings and good wishes to you. May Jesus coming strengthen our partnership and bring peace, health, happiness, and prosperity in the coming New Year of 2024.

Mphatso Thole

Communications Director - Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi

