

## Malawi Mission Trip Report– May/June 2008



"Kaya" - probably the most frequent word in my bumbling Chichewa vocabulary. It translates into "I don't know," and during my stay in Nkhoma, Malawi it was often accompanied by an apologetic smile and a casual shrug of my shoulders. "Kaya, kaya, kaya." I didn't know the answer to the request ' and many times I didn't understand the question itself. "Zikomo," my Malawian friend replied anyway, thanking my for my bungled effort.

Uncertainty is a scary thing - at least for us blackberry-toting, schedule-obsessed Americans. We like concise answers, rapid results; if weren't sure about something, we readily consult Google. For the people of Malawi, however, uncertainty is a constant, an unpredictable force which governs almost every aspect of their lives. Doubt, insecurity, confusion -these are things that Malawians live with day in and day out.

The average life expectancy for a person living n Malawi is thirty-five years. Thirty-five years - a number that continues to drop each year. The spread of AIDS is largely responsible for this decrease; an estimated 14% of the population is infected. This epidemic has created a nation of people whose future is uncertain: carriers are often unaware of their HIV status, patients are unsure as to when or how they will receive treatment, and thousands upon thousands of orphaned children are unwanted, left without a home or a family.

Malnutrition and other diseases also cast their shadow of doubt upon much of life in Malawi. Parents wonder where the next meal for their children will come from, or how they will afford to send them to school. Doctors and nurses question the best usage of their limited supplies, attempting to gage which patients will receive medication, and which patients will have to go without. Churches struggle to minister to their needy congregations, unclear as to the best way to address the spread of AIDS in a Christian context.

During our two week trip to Malawi this spring, our mission team was also confronted with a number of uncertainties, a series of questions to which Google could not provide the answers. However, when placed amidst the overwhelming problems of Malawi, our bothersome queries seem quite trivial. We were going to visit Barbara Nagy, a missionary from Morganton, NC, who serves as a pediatrician in a hospital in Nkhoma. Living with her three daughters, Melia, Anna, and Happy, Barbara has served as a valuable resource to the Nkhoma community. I boarded the plane with questions racing through my head.

What would Malawi and its people be like? I did not even know my fellow team members, having only met them several days before in order to pack supplies. (Though by the end of the trip we knew each other quite well.) Excited but anxious, I readied myself for the lengthy flight across the Atlantic. What would we be doing? We gradually discovered that the answer varied from day to day - depending on a variety of "mystery" factors. Although we were initially going to build a primary school in Nkhoma, the building permits were delayed, and the land was not yet ready for construction. Fortunately, the school will still be built in the near future, providing local hospital employees with a much-needed resource for their children. Though the delay significantly altered our plans, we were able to split up and work on different tasks, immersing ourselves in several different projects. Some of us stayed near Nkhoma Hospital, working on a busted generator, organizing and stocking the pharmacy, visiting and performing rounds on the pediatrics ward. Others headed out into rural Malawi, traveling to 10 different local health centers which feed into the main hospital in Nkhoma. There we painted staff housing, visited with patients and staff, and distributed much-needed medical supplies - including blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes, and thousands of hand-knitted baby caps. Tom Kilgore visited every one of these health centers, where he painted the Nkhoma mission statement in both Chichewa and English. Though plans changed from day to day, we



always found somewhere to go and something to do - though the bumpy dirt road often provoked questions as to whether or not we could get there.

My greatest doubt, however, continued for much of the trip, and I wrestled with tough questions as I met and spent time with the people of Malawi. As I saw more and more of the countryside, I asked myself how people could live in such conditions. Bubbly children waved to me, smiling and giggling as I attempted conversation. I saw their faces streaked with dirt, their stomachs distended from malnutrition. How can such poverty exist so plainly in such a beautiful country?

For me, this question involved much more than simple logistics or planning; it prompted doubt and worry, challenging my understanding of God's loving role within the world. Where is God in the midst of such suffering?

Somehow, amidst all of the doubt and confusion that consumes their lives, the people of Malawi are able to answer the ultimate question of faith with certainty. They answer in both word and in deed, unwavering and confident in their belief that GOD is ever-present and alive in their midst. Singing and praying, dancing and clapping, Malawians praised God enthusiastically throughout our trip, thanking Him for his grace and the fellowship of each other. They also thanked us - welcoming us as fellow Christians and sharing with us what little they had. Their living testament was truly inspiring, and their continual commitment to God and each other nullified the doubt I had initially felt. As we stood together in church on our last Sunday, singing the hymn 'Marching in the light of God'

in both Chichewa and English, I felt a renewed sense of purpose, and a tremendous admiration for this joyous people. God is at work among them, even amidst suffering and disease.



Weeks later, I am still unsure about many things in Malawi, and many of my questions will probably remain unanswered. What will happen to the people I met in Nkhoma? How are they doing? Will I ever see them again? At the same time, I am certain and convinced of this: I want to go back someday, and our Presbytery should continue to send representatives to Nkhoma each year. We should continue to support Barbara Nagy and her mission; she is doing truly incredible work there, and the Nkhoma Hospital is continually improving through our and others generosity. We should also seek new ways to extend our work there; our

newest goal is that churches in the presbytery adopt individual health centers, working to equip them with the necessary medical supplies. This will strengthen the entire network, allowing the centers to treat simple cases which would be worsened by extended travel.

"Kaya" - I'll remember this word for a long time to come. But I'll also remember "Zikomo," which means "Thank you," "I'm grateful," and sometimes "Goodbye."

Zikomo. I am thankful and grateful for my memorable trip in Nkhoma.

## Virginia Boyce

Team members would appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences.

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to make arrangements.

Virginia was a member of the PWNC Malawi Mission Team which included: Rev. Michael Bailey, Tommy Bursleson, Luvina Glover, Mac Robertson, Jacob Sharp, Laurie and Rebecca Toman, Teresa Locke and Tom Kilgore