

MALAWI MISSION TEAM REPORT

May 21-June 6, 2012

By Barbie Heilman (Waldensian)



The Western North Carolina Mission team to Africa left for Malawi on Monday, May 21st. Prior to the trip I experienced various emotions – excitement, fear, nervousness – all to be expected given I was headed to a place I never dreamed I would go. Upon arrival, I guess the best way to describe my feelings is sensory overload. So in this report I will fall back on my teaching background and describe my visit to Nkhoma, Malawi through my five senses.

Vision. Nkhoma is a visual smorgasbord. We saw huge poinsettia bushes, hens and roosters wandering free, mud huts with thatched roofs, bicycles, beautiful trees and plants, goats and many colors of the fabrics of Africa everywhere we went. The Malawians are a proud people who exude a dignity and grace that is rarely seen in the U.S. These people are so warm and openhearted and displayed their welcome and ease in their smiles and greetings as we encountered them every day. The people of Nkhoma welcomed our group as old friends. Indeed, some of our group has traveled to Nkhoma several times so they are old friends and those of us who were

new visitors were welcomed just as warmly.

Hearing. The first sounds we heard each day were the neighborhood roosters. They began our mornings and continued their heralding throughout the day but were thankfully silent at night. Another early greeting was the call of the pied crows. These large black and white birds would greet and join us in the yard for breakfast hoping for bread crusts and dry cereal. The town bells would ring periodically during the day calling the people to begin work, break for lunch, come to church or stop work for the day. One Saturday afternoon as we were walking back to the guesthouse, we paused outside the church where we heard the glorious sound of singing. Upon entering the sanctuary we discovered not a full choir of 20 plus people but just 4 individuals singing a cappella to the glory of God. More of this music awaited us as we attended both the English and Chichewan services on Sunday. One of my favorite sounds was the musical “Hello” we were greeted with as we encountered children on the road – accompanied, as always, by their beautiful shy smiles. A final sound each evening was the sound of the neighborhood and wild dogs barking and fighting as they chased unwelcome animals from their territory. Sounds that were rarely heard were planes overhead, cars, television, radios etc.-- all the sounds of our modern world.

Smell around Nkhoma. This sense is a little more difficult to describe. Many memories of the smells of Nkhoma center around the hospital—the smells of sickness and antiseptic. We passed through and spent some time on the hospital grounds as some of our team was partitioning a building into offices for family planning. The smell of fresh cut wood was prevalent in that area. Another member of our team painted a schematic map of the hospital and also painted the Nkhoma Hospital symbol at the front entrance. While walking around Nkhoma market we also encountered the smell of fried potatoes. Vendors were everywhere cooking and selling fresh fried potatoes. A final not so pleasant odor came from the “fish sticks” that could be found in the open fish market. For those who don’t know, fish sticks are literally about 8 small fish tied onto a bamboo stick and sold as a delicacy.



Taste. Yet another unforgettable experience is the food of Malawi. Fresh tomatoes, tangerines, bananas, potatoes and pumpkins were available everyday at the market and our team certainly enjoyed our share of each of these. While we prepared most of our meal ourselves from food we bought in Lilongwe upon our arrival and what we found at the Nkhoma market we were also treated to a traditional Malawian meal three times during our stay. These meals while similar were each unique in the company with whom we shared it. We ate 'nsima which is a staple for Malawians. 'Nsima is a maize based food of a thicker consistency than mashed potatoes. On its own 'nsima is bland tasting but when eaten with cooked pumpkin leaves or cabbage or chicken it is delicious and filling. Another favorite food was Matrine's home baked bread. Matrine, the housekeeper at the guesthouse, kept us well supplied with bread that went well with peanut butter and jelly, cheese, butter or just plain. A last taste of Malawi is Sobo, a drink concentrate we would add to our boiled and filtered water to give it flavor. We had orange and pineapple and both were worth the taste.

Touch is the final sense. Our days began with the feel of the chilly air in the morning. The temperatures as we awoke were in the 50's. As the day progressed the sun warmed our faces and we enjoyed days in the 70's—a much more pleasant winter than below 30 and icy. The cooling breezes that blew all day made walking around Nkhoma a pleasure. I also recall the feel of the Malawians rough skin as we shook the hands of the many people we met. These are the hands of a people who work hard every day to survive but who are also so warm and welcoming to strangers in their midst.

Overall, this trip was an amazing opportunity for me to see a country so different from my own and to realize that the people of that country would welcome someone like me—someone so obviously different from them. This was a journey that will not soon be forgotten and I hope to be able to return to The Warm Heart of Africa – Malawi.

