

Malawi Mission Trip May 20-June 1, 2009

Team Report—Written by Alice Salthouse

I once heard a tale of a person who was struggling with faith issues and the amount of suffering there is in the world. In prayer this person asked God, "Why don't you do something about all the pain and misery in this world, God?" God answered, "I did. I sent you."

On May 21, a team of 9 Presbyterians boarded a small jet in Charlotte, to begin the 10,000 mile journey to Malawi. We were a diverse group of men and women, each bringing a variety of life experiences to the adventure that lay ahead. This was the fifth such journey for the Presbytery of Western NC, but it was my first.

We were headed to a land where life is vastly different from what we are familiar. Malawi is called the "Warm Heart of Africa". People there are pleasant and friendly even though their struggles are intense. They are kind to strangers and often give beyond their means.

As each of us signed up for the trip, we were unsure what tasks we would undertake. I was told that the purpose of this mission is more about being together and building friendships than it is about what we will do. I knew that we would be serving the needs of the Nkhoma Hospital where our missionary, Dr. Barbara Nagy is stationed and I knew we would be delivering supplies to the new school where Barbara's daughter, Happy, attends. What I didn't know was that I would get to participate in an amazing miracle that will save the lives of many Malawians.

Nkhoma Hospital has a catchment area of about 250,000 people. Malawians often travel great distances on foot to seek medical care there and many times people are brought to the hospital by members of their family. Malaria is a devastating disease and joins forces with AIDS to leave the country's life expectancy at 35 years of age. Parasites and infectious diseases that are virtually nonexistent in the U.S. are common place there. Children and adults suffer the effects of malnutrition and starvation. It is difficult for me to comprehend the pervasive nature of the sickness in this land.

Two weeks before we were scheduled to leave, I received a phone call from the Presbytery office. I was asked if I could install some laboratory equipment in the Nkhoma hospital. I had worked in laboratory medicine for twenty years but I have been away from the lab for the past eight years. While I was concerned about my ability to do this, I was excited about the prospect of it all.

Over the next few days, it was determined that I should travel to Kalamazoo, Michigan for training on the instrument to be installed in the Nkhoma hospital laboratory. All the years working in the lab were still there and I actually remembered what was needed to get the job done.

To make a long story short, suffice it to say that there was a sequence of events that took place in Malawi, the US, Holland, and Korea that enabled the much needed laboratory equipment to be delivered and installed. This long story involved:

- finding the most appropriate instrumentation for this 3rd world setting
- getting the money to purchase the equipment
- having a person available who possessed the education and ability to install the equipment who just happened to be coming with a mission team
- getting funding to send that person to Kalamazoo to train on installing the equipment
- bringing a medical technologist to the Nkhoma hospital laboratory from Holland to work in the lab for a year to develop a fully trained staff for the long term
- having that person present to be trained by the one installing the instrumentation
- bringing a Malawian from a northern village who has a lab background to prepare for working in that lab long term

This sequence of events took place in less than 3 weeks. It would have been difficult for anyone to put all these things together over six months or a year. For God, the pieces of this puzzle came together quickly and were neatly fitted together showing a beautiful picture.

During our time in Malawi, this was not the only project executed by the team and it definitely was not the only time that the miraculous power of God was acutely evident.

We delivered school supplies to the Ebenezer School mentioned earlier.

We visited and delivered supplies to the Ministry of Hope Crisis Nursery. This is a place where abandoned babies (birth to 2 years old) are taken and feed and nurtured until they are adopted or reach 2 years of age at which time they are sent to an orphanage.

Two new oxygen concentrators were delivered to the hospital.

We cleaned and painted the Guardian Houses at the hospital. This is an area on the hospital campus where families of patients sleep and prepare meals while a loved one is cared for in the hospital. It is also the place where women who have high risk pregnancies stay so that they will be near the hospital when they go into labor. These rooms are bare and people sleep on a cement floor.

We repaired many things in the hospital that were broken.

We painted hospital beds.

We delivered money that would help build new classrooms to the Ebenezer School.

We did all these things and much more. But, as I said earlier the things that we did were not the best part of the mission. The best part came when we stood in church and sang hymns and prayed with the Malawians with one voice. The deep joy came when:

- We had Malawian friends over to eat dinner with us
- When they showed us how to wrap our heads with scarves the way they do
- We had devotions and sang songs together after dinner
- We went with Barbara and Happy on a hike to the top of Nhkoma Mountain
- We acted like children and got the giggles after lights out in our cots at night
- We played the drums with the nurses and teachers after a meal together
- We listened to the deep rich voices of people walking on the road singing praises in this country that is one of the poorest in the world
- We realized that in the midst of suffering and hopeless situations, Jesus shows up and gives hope and life just like he did when he called Lazarus out of his tomb

It truly is more about the being than about the doing. We left that place knowing that the lives of the people there would be improved because we came. We left knowing that our lives would be improved because we went. God is good – All the time.