

# MALAWI'S WARM EMBRACE

Jen Edge and Sarah Teti

Landing in a foreign country is always a wild experience. Everything smells different, the light hits different, and the sounds... oh the sounds! Landing in Malawi is all of that plus some! After many many hours of flight travel you find yourself in a VIP lounge at the Malawi airport, your head spinning. That is, until you meet Sam. The Honorable Sam Chirwa, a first term elected member of the Malawian Parliament. His district is one of 193 constituencies in Malawi, each constituency representing about 40-50,000 people. By the sheer number of phone calls Sam fields each day we think that each of them has his contact information. He is always accessible to the people he serves, talking to everyone wherever we went. He greeted us for the first time with smiles and hugs helping any worry fade and was replaced with excitement for what this trip would reveal.

During our ten days in Malawi, we visited many villages with finished and ongoing projects. In Mchengautuba, in Mzuzu, a city in the north, we saw the magnificent church and school that Pastor Fred's Watertown congregation helped to build over the past twenty years. In Bandawe, we worshiped in Thipula church where, despite the dilapidated roof and ceiling, the congregation sang with joyous voices of their gratefulness of God's grace and their thankfulness of a visit from Mzungus (white folks) to their village church. In Mbowe, we watched the women who live in the Widow's Fund village sew together and share fellowship in an area built only for them with the help of church funds from the US. All of these projects would not be possible without Sam's leadership, the General Secretary of their region, and the US donors from Presbyterian Congregations like ours and the congregation in Watertown. And yes, Pastor



Mchengautuba congregation choir

(Left to right) Sam Chirwa, MP; Jen Edge, co-lead of FPC Deacons; and Sarah Teti, Director of the FPC food pantry at Elephant Rock, Malawi



Garry IS a celebrity there, and witnessing his impact and collaboration over the years and what has been accomplished, you can see why.

Leading many congregational trips to Malawi, Pastor Garry has ignited the productive spirit of the people in this region over the past twenty years by bringing together people whose purposeful collaboration and aligned goals have helped to bring about successes and support for people in need. A constant message from our visits was the clear resiliency, industriousness, and commitment to community that was evident in all the successful projects. Trust and friendship are essential to the successes of this work, built through visits, and handshakes and often, singing and dancing.

Surrounded by the energy and hopefulness of the women of the Widow's fund project was inspiring. The partnership has grown from initially helping to put iron sheets on a hovel for a widow to building them a beautiful house where they can thrive. Through the long-standing partnerships, the women in this community support one another as they sew, strengthen their community, and support their surrounding villages. The women work to sew for the PantiPlus project which provides much needed menstrual supplies to women and girls in the surrounding community. Without access to these supplies, girls cannot regularly attend school. The benefit of seeing these projects in person, is difficult to put into words. But playing even a small role in the support of people's self-determination is inspiring.

The first village we visited was Mzimba Luwerezzi, the village where Sam grew up. We were the first Americans to ever drive out the long, bumpy dirt road to meet them. We were welcomed with

## MALAWI'S WARM EMBRACE (CONT.)

song, dance, and many celebratory speeches. The excitement was palpable as the chiefs of these villages looked to us to take them to the next step in their prosperity as a region. Each group of villages essentially needs three things to prosper and support their people. A clinic, a school, and a church. The villages can build a clinic, but to staff it, they must build two houses for their nurses to live in. Once there are two houses for nurses to live in, the government will send the nurses to open the clinic. The same goes for teachers for the school. Once the village has built two houses for two teachers, the government will send two teachers to work in the school. Lastly, the church needs a home for the reverend. Each house costs about \$12000 US Dollars to build. All of these projects are built collaboratively. Each village in the surrounding area contributed bricks for the project. We toured the area and could see the bricks ready and waiting on the additional capital needed for the cement. The people of Mzimba Luwerezhi have built their clinic and one nurse's house. Once they complete the second house, they will open the clinic. Right now, the 20,000 men women and children who live there have to walk two hours to reach the nearest hospital. A woman in labor cannot deliver safely in a hospital without traveling by foot for two hours, as there are no ambulances and most villagers do not have cars. The health and wellness this clinic will bring to the people in this region is immeasurable.

This project revealed itself to us slowly during our trip. Mzimba Luwerezhi was the first and last stop on our trip and it's clear why. Sam wants to bring his village, his home village, the prosperity and success of the other villages helped in years past. By the end of our trip, it was clear that we were the right people to help!



We would like to see the FPC Metuchen congregation take on this task. We would like to see our congregation of friendly enthusiastic Presbyterians visit Mzimba Luwerezhi this coming July. Our prayer is that this visit will be a ribbon cutting for their new clinic! We hope that when you meet Sam Chirwa in February, you can understand a bit of why he's come and what he brings to us. A trusted friend and official from a country who needs our help. The Malawian people showed us why their country is called the warm heart of Africa.



Top: Villagers at Mzimba Luwerezhi  
Bottom Left: Rev Fred gives a speech at Mzimba Luwerezhi  
Below: Villagers with Sam Chirwa, MP at Mzimba Luwerezhi

