

Malawi

By Eunice Ordman (2009)

Never have I seen such poverty as we saw in Malawi in 1996, not in India, not in China. In Operation World by Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, written for Missionaries in 2001, the per capita income of China was \$ 6,000 US, for India \$ 370, and for Malawi \$ 210. Why is the economy of Malawi so low? Poor Transportation. The least expensive transportation is by ocean shipping. Malawi has no port. Railroads provide the next inexpensive transport. Malawi has no railroads, no access to trains. The only way Malawi can export anything is by truck south around Lake Malawi to the sea. The only product valuable enough to export that way was tobacco. We saw no tobacco growing and only one truck loaded with tobacco. The tobacco trade puts Malawi in direct competition with the US, an industrial giant. Large families sometimes as large as twelve children only half of whom lived to adulthood.

We went to Malawi to visit Chip's cousin, Andy who worked for USAID foreign aid program in trouble spots. His wife, Karen, worked for the State Department in Malawi. Andy told us, before we left home, that if we wanted to bring gifts for the locals, we should bring flash light batteries. Batteries on sale in Malawi were often spent batteries of no use.

Given their roles, Andy and Karen needed a house and staff big enough to give diplomatic parties. Their house was surrounded by a fence with a guards at the gate round the clock. They had a cook who had to be skilled at washing all vegetables and fruits in chlorine water to avoid infections. They also needed a house boy, a gardener, and Karen frequently employed a tailor to make clothes. In such a poor country as Malawi anyone working for Americans was considered wealthy by the locals. Their cook and his wife both had jobs so they

employed someone to care for their child.

Andy and Karen lived in Lilongwe, the capital in the center of that long country. While there, I got an infection in my knee. The doctor asked me what medicines I had brought with me. And chose one of them. Evidently he didn't trust local medicines. Before we left to go to Malawi, we got medicine to prevent us from getting malaria which we took before, during, and after our trip. The hundred Peace Corps volunteers were all taking medicine to prevent malaria. Still ten percent got malaria. Many of the Peace Corps volunteers worked in the north where malaria was worse. We didn't go there.

Malawi, the former British Nyasaland, is English speaking with many local languages. It lies along Lake Malawi, formerly Lake Nyasa, which runs north and south near the Great Rift not far from the eastern coast of Africa. It lies between 10 and 15 degrees south of the Equator. There is just one major paved road, running the length of the country and one short road going from the capital and the coast of the lake. Shorter roads were mostly unpaved or poorly paved. The best and longest road has so many pot holes that it was not unusual for a bus to turn over. Two types of buses ran south from the capital. The public buses were overcrowded with every inch of space occupied by people. Reservations only private buses were comfortable and safe. A road repair crew used shovels to lay asphalt which they tamped down with a metal plate on a long pole.

The natives take down the telephone poles to use for fire wood for cooking. Twice a week, on average no one can phone from the capital to the commercial center in Blantyre or the legislature in nearby Zomba.

Malawians are farmers who live in mud huts with mud floors and straw roofs. Blankets

are the only furniture. A Malawi farm was smaller than the area covered by most houses. Each farm was surrounded by a grassy area. I wondered why they didn't have larger farms. With only a short handled hoe the farmer had to crawl around in order to cultivate his farm. This hoe would not work well for removing the sod that surrounded his plot of land.

The public schools were brick buildings with window openings, but no windows and no indoor light, no heat, no cooling. Some classrooms had desks and seats. Many did not. They all had blackboards. Some had a few signs, but no books were in sight. No book shelves, no cabinets nor teacher's desk could have hidden books. Students had to bring a cup and go outdoors to the faucet in the courtyard to get a drink. Students must have been puzzled by the outhouses in the courtyard. At home they simply hid behind a bush if they could find one. When a government edict abolished the school fees, some students sat on the ground around a teacher who stood under a tree.

Students danced in the schoolyard practicing for a dance contest as another student beat on a long drum between his legs.

In a book store we found a book which explained rotation of corn with earth nuts. The peanuts would restore nitrogen to spent soil. What a great idea. A poster said that AIDS was a disease of older people. People in Malawi didn't grow to be that old so AIDS was no danger to people in Malawi. In following years people in Malawi learned how wrong that sign was. AIDS produced many orphans.

Women in Malawi wore a plain blouse, often a T shirt, and a length of cloth around them reaching almost to the ground. To do laundry they went to small streams and bent down to wash clothes. Women and children carried water and other loads on their heads. This produced

twisted backs in the children. Women often carried their small children on their backs in a wide scarf. Sometimes the women used a pump with an enormous wheel which they rotated to get water. They gathered and carried tree branches long distances to build their cooking fires. A pot on three stones was their kitchen. They used a branch to stir their corn meal mush.

The legislature in Zomba was not in session when we were there. That meant that we could stay in the Ku Chawa Inn, a fancy hotel at the top of a steep hill. When we tried to take a taxi up the hill, all we could find was a rather dilapidated one with few springs in the car or the torn seats. The driver said we must pay enough in advance so he could buy some brake fluid before we left. He couldn't risk going down that hill without brake fluid.

From the hotel were marvelous views of the hills and farmland in all directions. There were trees and flowers around the hotel. Inside were wood carvings hung on the walls and bricks inelaborate patterns in the walls. We lived in luxury there. Next morning the power was out. The hotel could not get in touch with Zomba to hail a repairman. A Journalist there had arranged for a taxi the night before to take him to Zomba. He was told to notify the power company that there was no electricity at the Inn. We hitched a ride with him so that we could visit the University of Malawi in Zomba. There they had a fine collection of magazines in their library, but their books were nearly all over thirty years old, obsolete except for English literature. We had a collection of recent textbooks sent to us to consider adopting at the Memphis State University where we taught. We were happy to donate them to the university in Zomba. Andy advised us that if we sent books by mail they would be stolen. He advised us to send books by diplomatic pouch to him in Lilongwe. He then got a reliable person going to Zomba to carry the

books to the university library.

When we tried to cash an American Express Travelers check in the commercial center in nearby Blantyre, we had to go to four banks before we found one where we could talk them through the process of cashing our check.

Friends of ours in NH had a sister, a nun, who had worked for a French Catholic missionary charity which ran medical clinics and a school in Malawi. That contact enabled us to get an inside view of life in Malawi. We were driven by rather shabby for about an hour on a rutted dirt road to visit a medical clinic which was easier to get to than the one where our friends sister worked. The clinic was staffed entirely by nurses. The doctor came by about once a month to consult with the nurses. The waiting room had cement stools all of a piece with the cement floor for people to sit on. How I would have hated to have to sit on those stools.

There was a small lab where medical shots were prepared. I wish I had asked what kind of shots they gave. A microscope was on a shelf in the lab. Outside was an autoclave heated by a wood fire beneath it. Needles were sterilized in it.

Patients' families cook familiar foods for the patients in the hospital. In the patient wing a mother who had just given birth was in a bed with her daughter from the previous year crawling under her. Another woman perhaps had malaria or tuberculosis. A man was there with a broken leg. The nurse scolded him for being drunk and falling off a bridge which caused his injury.

There were three gaunt mothers nursing babies who were starving. The mothers simply didn't have any nourishment to give the babies. Evidently the nursing mothers didn't realize that their sickly babies were not getting enough nourishment. The usual diet in Malawi of corn

only does not provide the protein needed to make milk. In Malawi the women do the farming. A demonstration garden showed the women that pawpaw and guava trees could grow nutritious food. These foods and others would improve the mothers' nutrition and their ability to produce milk for their babies. The nurses demonstrated cooking in a pot on three stones like those the mothers had at home.

On the wall a chart explained how to breast feed a baby. Another charts explained marasmus or starvation from lack of food and kwashiorkor or starvation because a baby, who was suddenly weaned by a newly pregnant mother, rejects all food.

Another chart on the wall explained in detail just how to brush your teeth. There was a dentist at the clinic who only pulled teeth. I doubt they had any form of anesthesia.

The clinic was staffed by Catholic nuns. When the clinic started the nuns were from the United States or France. When we were there in 1996, they were recruiting black nuns whom they send overseas for training. How proud those nurses were.

Students wore uniforms and sat at desks in the school run by the nuns. How proud they were to be at such a fine school. Chip taught the students how they could make mazes and how they could cut a hole in a small piece of paper large enough to step through it. The kids loved it.

Students said they had trouble understanding some of the things the teacher told them. We told them to ask questions. With their male teacher standing right there, they said they were afraid to do that. We told them to go to the teacher's office. Shocked horror was the response. They would never, never do that. Disaster. In a public school, if they went to a teacher's office, they would be raped, and sent home in disgrace. Their teacher would be transferred to a better

school. Not so in the French sponsored private school. There was no other private school to transfer to, but the students didn't realize the difference.

Because corn was the only crop grown in Malawi some people nearly starved when the mill that normally ground the corn was closed for repairs. Some charity workers tried to teach the farmers how to grind their own corn with a mortar and pestle, but no one seemed to want to do that.

One of the international foreign aid programs tried to get the natives to use an ox cart. No one wanted to. Why not? Oxen were signs of wealth, not for farm work. We saw only one ox cart while we were in Malawi, and it seemed to be there mainly to be photographed. We did see a few donkey carts, actually being used for work.

We met a young woman perhaps from a mixed marriage of Chinese and Western parents. She was traveling world wide working for various charities. At that time she was working for a German charity serving orphans in Malawi. It was providing housing for young Malawians in lovely modern brick buildings with modern bathrooms and kitchens. After observing life in Malawi, she said this was terrible preparation for life after school when these young people would return to life in mud huts with straw roofs where food was prepared in a big pot over a wood fire. She was right of course.

An elderly Catholic missionary from France came to Malawi expecting never to see his family again. However he had developed heart trouble and was being sent home. He was upset. His family were no longer alive. What could he do in France? When he first came to Malawi, he gave some young students some seedling trees and told them how to water and care for them.

Their parents were incensed. It was God's job to plant trees and man's job to cut them down. Consequently so many trees had been cut down for fire wood to cook with that the annual rainfall had diminished which reduced the farmer's crops. Eventually the government realized what was happening and started raising seedling trees. However it would be a long time before they became large trees.

Meanwhile cutting down trees and telephone poles continues and rainfall continues to diminish. This was disastrous to their agriculture.

We visited a Christian church. On the altar was a black Jesus and Mary. In the back room were the white Mary and Jesus they had removed to people they could identify with.

We lingered on the road outside a Mosque. Someone invited us in. He said we should remove our shoes, but need not remove our socks as the Muslims did. He showed us to a place which had formerly been behind a wall separating the women from the men in the sanctuary. The wall had been torn down, but the carpet showed where the wall had been. He brought us seats although the congregation had none. In the sanctuary were only men. Three times the men stood, bowed, and kneeled with their heads to the floor as they chanted their prayers. After the service, mostly in English, some men were angry at the man who invited us in.

“This woman should not be here! Why is she in our holy place in sight of the men?”

“Women should not be here. Until the wall is rebuilt, women should stay at home.”

“These people are from the United States. They wanted to learn about Islam. I invited them to join us so that they could learn about our faith.”

The argument was settled amicably. Later next day we met some of the Muslims we had seen in the Mosque. They were quite friendly.

The most remarkable thing about Malawi was that Hastings Banda, President for Life, stepped down peacefully. The change was initiated by the Catholic Church. In Malawi six times as many people are Christian as Muslim. Almost half of the Christians are Roman Catholic. People walk miles to attend churches. One Sunday the bishop and the priests read an encyclical praising the Virgin Mary, condemning birth control and abortion and then went on to say that the poor in Malawi were suffering and there needed to be a change of government. Copies of this speech were distributed to all households where someone could read. President Banda held an election to see if the people wanted a change of government. Yes, they did. Banda gave people a year to organize political parties in anticipation of the election to come at the end of the year. Those elected wrote a constitution in imitation of the US and British constitutions. Establishing a court system was difficult because there were no lawyers in Malawi. For quite a while, in making decisions, they looked for precedents in British and American law cases. This was difficult because such law books were not available in Malawi.

As President Banda had kept his personal finances and the government's together, he was the owner of record of much of the economy when he retired. Legislation was written for the government to recover much of the property. Banda sued in the newly established courts, claiming the law was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court held that the constitution required two thirds of the lower house present to be a quorum, and that less than two-thirds had been present when the law was passed. This case bounced back and forth in the legislature and courts for the rest of Banda's life. He remained living peacefully in Malawi, speaking at High School commencements and riding in parades as retired President, for the rest of his life.