

PARTNERPLAN

Ken Ross - Malawi October 2023

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Dear friends,

When I was visiting churches in Scotland in May and June this year, I was still shaken by the impact of Cyclone Freddy which swept through southern Malawi in March. To some degree things have now normalised. There has been a huge amount of reconstruction and rebuilding. Still, however, there are many who are living in makeshift accommodation after their houses were destroyed. Many more are struggling for food supplies since the crops on their smallholdings were swept away by the storm. All this in an economic situation that was already very difficult. For example, it has been a hand-to-mouth struggle for Malawi to pay for imported fuel, so it is common for petrol stations to run dry. Hard times!

Still, life has to go on. At ZTU our first group of twenty students on the taught Masters programme, who started in January last year, have now completed the coursework part of the course. All are part-time and they have come to ZTU for 20 intensive residential sessions over the past two years. There was a lot of bonding among the group, and they came to form quite a cohesive unit. Now it is encouraging to hear them speak of how they have found the programme to be transformative in terms of their own development.

The next stage for them is to write a 20,000-word dissertation to complete their degree. They have headed off with a wide range of projects – some digging back into history, others taking a biblical text and exploring its meaning in the Malawi context, others again tackling troubling issues in Malawi society and subjecting them to theological analysis. We expect a rich harvest when the dissertations are completed.



As we look ahead to next year, we are planning to admit another cohort to the taught Masters in Contextual Theology. A new initiative in the pipeline is to work in cooperation with the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa to offer a research Master of Theology degree with a specialisation in theological engagement with economic and political realities. It is planned that this will be delivered entirely online to quite an international community of students – a new venture for ZTU.

Three years ago, when we were in the darkest of Covid times and wondering if we would ever come out of it, an idea was conceived in Zomba: The Theological Society of Malawi. Against the odds it managed to meet in 2020 and it was immediately clear that there was a strong appetite for an association that would bring together faculty who are working in theological education in more than twenty institutions across Malawi. The following year the Society formally came into being, Trustees were appointed, and an Executive Committee was elected. Last week it held its fourth annual meeting, this time hosted by Zomba Theological University. It was able to launch its third book, giving an element of permanence to its work. It is creating an atmosphere of lively theological debate, with feisty WhatsApp exchanges keeping it

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going in between meetings. This in turn offers the stimulus that keeps faculty members fresh and renews their teaching.

A very familiar sight in Malawi is a group of Women's Guild members. They are conspicuous because they wear a uniform – white blouse, black skirt and white duku (headscarf). They don their uniform when coming to a special service at church or when carrying out evangelism and social service in the community – a very regular activity. The presence of the Guildswomen is woven into the fabric of Malawian life. A new development in our Synod is the emergence of an equivalent organisation for men – known as Men's Ministry.



Hence, I found myself at our congregation at Bemvu being asked to put the white jackets on the first 21 men who have committed to form our local Men's Ministry. These 21 have all come through a course of instruction and have dedicated themselves to be part of the fellowship and witness that will be offered by the group. Its emphasis is on becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ and bearing witness in the community.

At the same time, its potency is drawn from both ancient and modern culture. Traditional culture in Malawi put an emphasis on fraternities and sororities, usually based on age-groups who came through an experience of initiation together. I felt that something of this tradition found expression in the creation of the Men's Ministry. It is also responding to a very contemporary and very disturbing reality – increasing incidence of suicide among men. This appears to be driven by intensifying economic pressures but also by a tendency for men to turn in on themselves in difficult times rather than sharing their burdens with their friends. It is hoped that the Men's Ministry will have a pastoral function in providing the kind of solidarity that will make a difference for men when they face difficult days.

Their signature identity statement comes from Proverbs 27:17 – “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” In a typical Malawian call-and-response, a leader shouts out “As iron,” and there comes a rousing response, “sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” It is a vision that is proving inspiring to many men in Malawi at the moment.

There is no doubt that Malawi is facing a very challenging time but, when we are tempted to despair, there are people who restore our hope by their courage and imagination.

In friendship, as always,

Ken

Please pray for:

- The people of southern Malawi as they seek to sustain and rebuild their lives following Cyclone Freddy.
- Zomba Theological University's first group of Masters students as they work on preparing their dissertations.
- ZTU Faculty working on further development of postgraduate programmes.
- The Theological Society of Malawi, that it can bring encouragement to its members and ever higher standards to the delivery of theological education throughout the country.
- The Men's Ministry in the CCAP Synod of Blantyre, that it can become a source of strength to its members and a source of blessing to the wider community.