

REPORT ON VISIT TO MALAWI IN FEBRUARY-MARCH 2016

By Richard And Laetitia Tucker

Introduction

This was my ninth visit to Malawi, but my first with Laetitia [her second visit, having been before in 2006]. It was a joy to introduce her to many friends I have made, and also for us to see the country together at the end of the rainy season with ripening crops and looking fresh and green – for the most part, and with the glaring exception of the Lower Shire. Laetitia's being with me gave an extra dimension to our visits to clergy couples and Mothers Union groups.

We were received everywhere with kindness and generosity. We visited all four dioceses and I had useful talks with all four bishops; two bishops entertained us to meals in their homes, and a third arranged a diocesan reception for us. Clergy and MU groups offered us warm hospitality. We spent time in a parish in process of making a link with a Birmingham parish. We visited seven parishes in all, and I preached in two of these – St George's, Zomba, DUS, and St Paul's, Mchengautuwa, Mzuzu, DNM. We went into eight schools, and in two of them recorded short sections of class teaching for the benefit of future skills share teams. Finally, we had one day off in a wildlife reserve.



Richard Tucker visits an ACM project in the drought-stricken Lower Shire

The Nation – Climate and Economy

Malawi is very vulnerable to extreme weather events, and has had more than enough of these since early 2015. The south of the country has fared particularly badly. January 2015 saw several days of prolonged intense rainfall there, ruining growing crops and washing away precious topsoil in many areas. Crops were replanted, but widespread drought prevented them from growing well and the harvest in April-May was poor. The result was that by September last year in some parts of the South, stocks of maize and other grains had run out, there was nothing left to plant, and people were going hungry. Deprivation of all kinds, including food insecurity, is worse in isolated rural areas and on marginal land.

This year, 2016, has seen severe El Niño activity affecting an area covering parts of several African nations, and Zimbabwe especially acutely. Last year's pattern of drought and poor crops is being repeated across the south of Malawi, broadly from Balaka southward to Blantyre and more acutely in the Lower Shire. Over much of the southern half of the country, many watercourses that should have been full at this time of year, the end of the rainy season, were low or dry.

Nsima made from maize is still the staple food throughout the country, and we saw maize growing everywhere - much of it in the south was in poor condition. Amongst thoughtful people there is a growing awareness that a broader range of food crops should be grown to tackle the results of both climate change and soil starvation. Cassava, millet and sorghum are all more drought resistant and could be more widely grown. However, many rural people are reluctant to change planting patterns.

We saw queues of hungry people waiting to buy maize at ADMARC depots across the south; needless to say, prices have climbed steeply and poor families are suffering hardship. The

government is buying in maize from Tanzania and South Africa; it remains to be seen whether this will avert a famine crisis. Our visit to the ACM project in Chapananga, in the Chikwawa district of the Lower Shire, was heart-breaking – dry, sandy land devastated by flooding followed by drought, failed crops, hungry and dispirited people.

Malawi is very dependent on agricultural and forestry products for its exports and foreign currency. An effect of drought was that last season's crop of tobacco, its biggest export, was smaller than average and of poor quality. The nation has also been heavily dependent on foreign aid, which has accounted for as much as 40% of the government's budget. This aid is still suspended after the 'cashgate' corruption crisis. The government is trying to bridge the gap by among other things, raising charges of all kinds [including visas for UK visitors]. A misguided attempt to introduce fees for primary education fortunately failed. One symptom of the economic crisis is a plummeting currency: the Malawi Kwacha has fallen from MK 700/£ last July to MK 1050/£ this February. Most people have little faith in the government, though Pansi Katenga of CA praised them for showing 'leadership'.

The Anglican Church

Amidst all this economic distress, we found the Anglican Church remarkably vigorous and hopeful. The bishops are full of plans and capital projects, and in many cases are realising these, often with the help of external benefactors. At the same time, I feel that for at any rate three of the bishops, self-sustainability, at least in terms of running costs, is more than just a slogan. But economic adversity is slowing up dioceses' moves towards reaching it. +Alinafe pointed out that DSM is about 85% self-sustaining, rather than the 70% suggested by +Francis in his paper.

One noticeable omission was any suggestion from bishops or others that B'ham should mount a major famine appeal. This seems to reflect a sense that B'ham's role should be financial support for the dioceses' work, along with a very selective range of church-based development projects. I looked at detailed plans for their classroom block with the Development Officer of Lake Diocese; they are very keen to go ahead soon.

The process of creating new parishes continues steadily. The well-tryed method is to identify the most promising outstations, challenge them to build their own church and promise them a parish priest. The little parish where I preached in Mzuzu has had a priest for three years and its church building has been completed for two.



Memorial to Bishop Donald Arden at Malosa