

Malawi July 2011

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In July 2011, following a mission to East Africa with the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship, I flew south to spend a week in Malawi. My last trip was in 2005 when I spent 4 months during my gap year with Scripture Union Malawi, and this was when I first met Julian and Caroline Lott.

This is a brief report to share some of my experiences, reflections, along with some practical nuggets to demonstrate how straightforward it can be for others to make a similar trip - and how positive a time such trips can be, under God, for the traveller, Julian and Caroline, individual Malawians, and the wider Church.

On arriving on a Tuesday lunch-time at Malawi's main airport on the outskirts of the capital city Lilongwe, I was kindly met by Amon, an old friend from Scripture Union. He filled me in on all the S.U. news, especially their financial difficulties which have meant the staff have been unpaid for some months. His family (right) hosted me for a night before taking me to the main bus depot in Lilongwe. Here dozens of buses are to be found, each with posters signalling which towns they are heading towards. Buses generally don't leave until they are full (bus time-tables are unheard of!), so having



paid 800 Kwacha (c.£4) and taken a seat (not always guaranteed), we waited over an hour before departure. I was the only azungu (white person) on the bus, so in typical Malawian style I was a source of amusement (given my tiny grasp of the Chichewa language) and treated politely and warmly; all this despite the civil unrest across the country, due to the scheduled public protests against the Government. This led to more than two dozen civilians being killed, and a 20-point

demand being presented to the President, which he still has failed to respond to.



The hour or so journey from Lilongwe to Dedza is pleasant and scenic – through small settlements with children playing as mothers washed clothes, past roadside traders offering travellers anything from bananas to fish or Coca-Cola, and overlooking the low green rocky hills. Reaching Dedza, at around 22C noticeably cooler than Lilongwe, I asked local children where I could find Julian and Caroline – the only azungus for miles. Giggling, they then escorted me, carrying

my bags, up through the shaded cover and sweet scents of the tall pine trees. Knocking on the gates, Julian and Caroline greeted me very warmly, along with their collection of cats and dogs of all shapes and sizes.

Almost as soon as I met the Lotts again, I saw again the remarkable qualities of this couple that are so memorable, challenging and uplifting: warm and generous hospitality; an honest vulnerability about difficulties and discouragements; prayerful, expectant hearts which remember to thank God (and tell others) of His answers to prayer; and a quiet yet deep vision for the future, both for the individual Malawians they serve and more widely for the growth (in number and maturity) of God's Kingdom in Malawi. And behind all this is God's work in them: a



couple who, gripped by the gospel of Jesus Christ and empowered by His Spirit, are simply, without glamour or attention, serving God's mission in a remote corner of God's world.

One of the great advantages for me visiting the Lotts solo was the opportunity and time to have quality time listening and discussing the issues, needs and solutions for the Church in this region. A major problem for the Church in Malawi is the nominalism of church-goers – much of the country would claim to be Christian, yet this is often empty of real faith in, and obedience to, Christ and His Word. I was struck by the reality that it is only God, who by the Spirit, can break through into hearts and minds, and grant repentance and faith. Such heart-work is in His timing, yet the old means of our Bible teaching and prayer remain essential. Many others can see the need for, and lasting fruit of, such change; in Christmas 2008, *The Times* journalist Matthew Parris wrote of his recent visit to Malawi:

“Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.”

He goes on,

“Christianity, post-Reformation and post-Luther, with its teaching of a direct, personal, two-way link between the individual and God, unmediated by the collective, and unsubordinate to any other human being, smashes straight through the philosophical/spiritual framework [tribal hierarchy and deep fears of evil spirits/ancestors]. It offers something to hold on to to those anxious to cast off a crushing tribal groupthink. That is why and how it liberates.”

It is indeed amazing to hear about the way the gospel is changing people inside-out in Malawi, especially when there is so much evidence of darkness. Witchcraft is commonplace, such that even an elder of a church, who has worked on the farm the Lotts are developing, was believed to be involved in using his son as a witch. Worship of other 'gods' is also common – such as a group called the Church of Aaron who worship a straw calf that they have made with their own hands. Just before my trip I had read a chapter in John Dickson's book 'The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission' that argued that it is the very uniqueness of the one true living God that compels us to proclaim Christ to the world, simply because all peoples everywhere owe their allegiance to the one Creator and Lord over all; there are no rivals. Yet this truth was so much clearer whilst I was in Malawi; it is as I heard about the blatant false worship (which manifests itself in other ways in the U.K), that I was reminded that it is the one Lord who alone deserves our humble trust and praise. Oh, to remember that more!

Sing to the Lord a new song:
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous deeds among all
peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy
of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.

(Psalm 96)



The other key issue that Julian seeks to address is whole-life discipleship. The concept of obedience to Christ is difficult for Malawians; many times Julian told me of men whom he had sought to disciple, who showed signs of interest and seeking, yet continued in witchcraft or adultery or other things. So in much of Julian's teaching and conversations, I heard him speaking frequently about the call to follow Christ and the lifestyle implications of this. Repeatedly Julian wanted to point others to the Scriptures to see what God asks of His people. A completely different style of teaching is also required; simplicity, lively drama, and active involvement are all essential as well as fun to try out! It was thrilling to see the centrality of simple yet clear Bible teaching, and the confidence in the Spirit's work to take the Word and use it to change people.

It is interesting to hear that at the recent Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, where over 4000 evangelical leaders gathered in October 2010, the two dominant challenges that emerged were for a more radical discipleship and a call to loving reconciliation (especially within the church). In the subsequently published Cape Town Commitment, the Congress concluded:



“Biblical mission demands that those who claim Christ's name should be like him, by taking up their cross, denying themselves, and following him in the paths of humility, love, integrity, generosity, and servanthood. To fail in discipleship and disciple-making, is to fail at the most basic level of our mission. The call of Christ to his Church comes to us afresh from the pages of the gospels: ‘Come and follow me’; ‘Go and make disciples’.”

So it was so good to see and hear 1-1 and small group discipleship happening and bearing fruit in Dedza. One man, John (photo left), has been working alongside Julian for 9 years – first in Lilongwe and now in Dedza. It was good to finally put a face to a name and to see him eager to grow in his Christian character, understanding and leading of others. He looks after 6 orphans, in addition to their own 3 children and his wife tries to increase their income by selling home-made ice-lollies; she buys the sweetener powder locally and stores the lollies at the roadside in an ice-box that Caroline gave her.

John's family will soon move on to the farmland that the Lotts are developing, 10km from Dedza up a dusty, bumpy road, at a settlement called Chipazi. The farm vision is to be self-sufficient: homes for church workers taking in orphans; water pumped up from the ground; solar panels to provide electricity; and animals and crops that will provide local employment, and food to eat and sell. In time, there will be a training centre built on the land, to equip local Christians for life and ministry. The delays, laziness of workers, and incorrect materials for this building project have all been a frustration for the Lotts, yet the work is now continuing well. Their prayer for the site is that it will truly be a beacon of light for Christ in the surrounding darkness.

A key outworking of personal discipleship is for the Malawians to work on their relationships within the local church. There can be so much bickering, gossip, distrust and selfishness in the surrounding culture, that the call to genuinely serve and love one another, however costly, is quite a challenge. I saw firsthand the regular occurrence of small childish disputes between grown men within the church and the urgent need for Christians who, having tasted the grace and forgiveness of God, to treat one in the same way. Loving one another like this in turns makes Christ visible to the watching world.

On the importance of Christians living in deep unity with one another, the Cape Town Commitment states,

“Three times Jesus repeated, ‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.’ Three times Jesus prayed



‘that all of them may be one, Father.’ Both the command and the prayer are missional. ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ ‘May they be brought to complete unity so that the world may know that you sent me.’ Jesus could not have made his point more emphatically. The evangelization of the world and the recognition of Christ’s deity are helped or hindered by whether or not we obey him in practice. The call of Christ and his apostles comes to us afresh: ‘Love one another’; ‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.’ It is for the sake of God’s mission that we renew our commitment to obey this ‘message we heard from the beginning.’ When Christians live in the reconciled unity of love by the power of the Holy Spirit, the world will come to know Jesus, whose disciples we are, and come to know the Father who sent him.”

My time in Malawi gave a rare insight into the issues facing the church there and the challenges of living as missionaries abroad. It was a privilege to see Julian and Caroline’s life in action, and to be so welcomed and involved whilst there. In some ways the challenges for the church there are similar to the ones here in the U.K., and I am sure that Malawian Christians would have many insights into our church life here. Whilst in Malawi, you can’t help but be aware of the spiritual climate, yet I’ve noticed, being back in the UK, how quickly I settle back into routine or comfort, and how the Christian life often doesn’t have the same sense of purpose and prayerfulness. The call for radical, loving Christian discipleship is for us too, yet how easy it is for us to water down what Christ asks of us! One of the main challenges that I left Africa with was a question of simplicity: The gospel is a story of the surprising grace of God, which we are called to simply receive, celebrate, share and live out in word and deed. Difficult, yet simple!

For details about Scripture Union, see www.tearfund.org/en/get_involved/go_overseas/partners/malawi_su

