

Interviewed by Janine Mitchell at the University of Stirling on Monday 01.05.2023.

Interviewee: Jenni Barr

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I would have said 2004 was the main preparation year. But I'm actually thinking that it started happening in 2003 in December, because I was teaching Sunday school, and the primary sevens in Sunday school. And we came out in December, from the cathedral to go to the hall. And that's a busy time because there's a nativity play that has to get put together. So, in our heads, we knew that we had lots of things to do. And an adult came alongside me and said, did you know you have visitors, they've come from Church of Scotland, about perhaps having a partnership. And it just felt that completely the wrong time to have anyone appearing at the Sunday school. But we took probably 15 minutes and sat with them. And it had all started that the church - this is Dunblane Cathedral - had had a mission partner. And the mission partner had now come to an end and come home. And I think the church had written saying, can we have a new mission partner, and Church of Scotland was just beginning to think that that might not be the way forward. And so that's where this came from. But the adults that we sat down with were talking about countries like Africa, and I had already done a little bit of travelling in Africa. So, it was definitely catching my interest. And meant that although we only had 15 minutes that day, it was something we wanted to pick up.

And so, I think from there, we went into 2004. And what I remember was that we had missed the International Year of the Child, but had decided that a year late, we would do something. So, the Cathedral, instead of just saying we will take it to session, and to the adults were quite determined that they would like young people to be involved. And at that point, we put together a committee or a little panel that would judge some projects. And we gave it to the primary sevens to split themselves into three groups and do some research and come up - and we were talking projects, then that got translated into partnership, but at that point, we were thinking projects. And so, one was to do with street children in Zimbabwe, one was to do with orphans in Malawi. And one was something in Egypt, I believe. And the young people themselves did a lot of research; put this together. We had some adults, but some young people on the panel that was doing the judging. And one of the criteria they came up with was the country needed to be safe enough that young people could be involved in the visits. And I think that's the reason it wasn't Zimbabwe because it wasn't a particularly safe country at that point. And it was Malawi that in the end was selected.

Now you probably have thought our partnership started in 2005. And that's because it didn't really become real until that point. And it's one thing to have decided, as a church or as a group, that that's what your partnerships going to be. But this was before Church of Scotland had any planned partnerships, we were really kind of helping to lead the field at that point. It was before the Scotland Malawi partnership, it would emerge a year later, but it wasn't very visible at the time. So, you were in the dark, really in terms of how do we make contact? Where would we start? And where would we go? The young people, having made the decision, then came to session and session in a place like Dublin Cathedral is a big group of people. And what the young people, they gave a great presentation and did audiovisual and, and so on. It was, it was well put together. And I remember them saying if as a church, you want to go forward, I hope we can continue to be involved. And the session completely turned it around and said, in fact, we see you as the leaders, and we would be delighted if you allow us to also be part of this, but it meant it was received very positively.

And I think what happened then through 2004. I can recall in November 2004, we were about to leave the Sunday school on the theme. So, we'd obviously been doing a lot of finding out about Malawi. And my mother had taken ill, and I had to go and the young people, who were just 11 years old, said don't worry, we will take the session, we know what we have to do. I had also at one point, the then minister and youth worker had approached me with the Sunday school and said, if you find a Sunday is a bit too limiting, and want to do other things at other times in the week, think as big as you want, and then come and tell us about it. And so we quite early on set up a thing that at that point that was called the Likhubula Link. And that was for young people. And we didn't meet in the Cathedral Hall, we met once a month in the Dunblane centre, the youth centre, which was quite new, and was looking for people to support it. So, we felt that was a good way forward. And we did a lot of researching online about Malawi, I remember we found the CIA website was very good for stats and so on. As time went on, we learned about people Church of Scotland who were maybe going to visit Malawi. So, they then went with letters from us to introduce us, and it had been narrowed down already to the possibility of the Likhubula area. I rather think because Likhubula House was available, and it meant there was accommodation. If we were taking people out, we had somewhere that we could start from we had somewhere we could stay. That guided us at the beginning. And so there were some key people we were put in touch with. There was a head teacher, Mr Chiromo, there was a minister Mrs. Navaya. The trip to Scotland people going out though, two of them went out with

their letters and came back to Scotland having forgotten to hand them over. So, it was one of those things. And I do remember that in 2005, May, our letter finally was received by Likhubula saying, this is what we would like to do. We want to send three people in and we're coming in June. Please be prepared for us. We now have a committee in Dunblane. But we can explain about this when we arrive. Within a week there was a reply saying we now have a committee, here is your programme, and you are visiting us. And it was, oh, it was a programme that really kept you on your toes as well. And that was myself, a young person from the primary seven. And in the end, the decision was his mother, who was also involved with our committee, would accompany him. Because we were having to learn, you know, what are the stressors and so on. And I think that was a good, a good formula.

I remember we wanted to take a gift. And so, some of the young people painted a big banner that had a Scottish flag and the Malawi flag, and a handshake with an African hand and a Scottish hand. We waited till the last evening from we will present it. And we were aware of great excitement. People kept breaking into smiles in this committee meeting because they wanted to give us their gift. And they had commissioned local carvers, who had then carved a Scottish person and an African person with a handshake. And we hadn't even met each other. When we arrived at the edge of Likhubula, the Mvano, the ladies who were all in their uniform, which said that they were members of Mvano, were waiting for us in the in the in the sunshine, and singing and dancing, as soon as they saw us broke into singing and dancing. And we simply saw that as a lovely welcome. I think it was a year later that I learned that they were singing the song, Umodzi, which has actually been written for us, because they had already chosen that word, which means working together and unity, and that they'd had that vision from the very beginning and greeted us with it. I also remember that on this short journey from Blantyre to Likhubula, our truck had a puncture. And we stopped and this really kind of like a bicycle repair kit was brought out for this enormous great truck. And at the same time a gentleman handed me a turkey as a gift. So, I knew that I'd arrived in Africa at that point.

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We actually started to put together a memorandum of understanding. And I think we always saw it as important that visits weren't just one way. And so, we were out in June 2005. But three people came back to Scotland in November 2005 - a very cold time for Africans to visit. They stood in the snow and became the VIPs who put the Christmas lights on for Stirling. And there was great rejoicing five days into the visit when Mr. Chiromo, indoors, took off his hat scarf and gloves.

We put a committee together mainly from the cathedral at that point because it was seen as something that came out of the cathedral. So that's where it's perhaps relevant to say, perhaps following the visit where the Malawians came to us, we, we moved eventually, we were already registered as a charity, but we then became a limited company. And we felt that perhaps part of the risk was that we were opening the cathedral to risk in the way that we had done the first visit. But also, we had a lot of publicity when we came back from the first visit, Dunblane Hydro gave us a large hall, and we had a big public meeting and showed the pictures and so on. We've had a lot of coverage - double page spreads - in the local paper. And it will talk about Dunblane being linked with Likhubula, and so because we're not now an arm of Dunblane cathedral, our committee now has more of a mixture of people - some of faith, some of no faith, and people from different churches and so on. It allowed the schools to come on board at that point as well. Having said all of that, although we're not an arm of the Kirk session, they invite us to give a report every year, because they're interested, and they want to be informed. And we've always felt very good support that's come from them as well.

What I would say about the early visits, because I, the three of us, were out in 2005. I went out on my own in 2006 - I think we wouldn't do that now - but I was well looked after by the community. I don't think we would plan it that way another time. The minister and his wife went out in 2007. And a rather large group went out in 2008. That was more mixed: it had people from the school, it had a number of young people. And so, I think in the very early days, there was a lot of 'Suck it and See' what are we going to be involved in? And what does it mean to be a partnership? What I do remember is when our visitors came to Dunblane, Colin Macintosh, the minister, greeted them and gave this lovely picture where he used the handshake shook somebody's hand, and then pointed out that it wasn't a flat palm asking for something and it wasn't a hand dropping money into something, it was an equal. And that that was our challenge: to find ways of doing that. And I think, overlaying that we've also recognised that within a family, if somebody is struggling, then people help out. So yes, we do help out with certain things. But it's within that kind of spirit. When again, we had visitors back from Malawi and Dunblane. I mean, we certainly haven't had as many visitors from Malawi here as we've gone there. But part of the difficulty is how expensive those trips are, and it has to be balanced. But it was very clear that we knew each other well enough, by this last visit, that we tried a review of all the various things that the partnership had dabbled with. You know, at one point, we had goats and we offered goats, and there were various initiatives. And what their committee were saying very clearly to us is look at the ones that have worked, where you listened to us, and where we advised how it was going to be best done in Malawi, it has had good success. But where you were telling us how it was to be...

And sometimes it wasn't just as there were others in Malawi that we have sought advice from in terms of goats and so on, who came up. But I think in these rural areas, the people know very clearly how they want to be able to do things. And, and that definitely is a key principle now. And it wouldn't be difficult if the Likhubula committee didn't agree with the direction something was going and they will be able to say

that very clearly. And we will be hearing that as well. But what I would be saying is that in terms of receiving, I think we were receiving from the very beginning. And any of the young people who have visited, they would come back, we saw the influence into the school of some of the messages from people who had already been out. We know of one person who'd said I would never have chosen this path and this career path. But when I heard the aspirations that the girls had in Malawi, and then looked at the opportunities open to them, I looked at the opportunities open to me in a different way. And we were quite clear that there were a number of, there's some Edinburgh schools that would send sixth-year pupils who'd finished all their exams, got their place in university and made their life choices really. And then they would go out and visit Malawi, we were often taking people that were eleven, twelve, right through their teen years. Because of Likhubula House. And because Mulanje is such a dramatically beautiful mountain. If anyone goes to visit Malawi, they're likely, if they can, to try and go there. And because of Jack McConnell's interest in Malawi, and a number of other things that happened in the Scottish Government, there was a time when a large number of politicians were moving through. And it became difficult for us. Lots of people would arrive in the area and promise all kinds of things. But they didn't deliver, and they disappeared, and the promises didn't come to anything. And our partners in Likhubula will say, but we know, if it comes from our partnership, we know that it will happen. And there was a stage where I think we've felt very anxious about all of that, and then realised that all that we could control was what we were offering and have clear communication on our part and clear principles for how decisions would be made. And if we, if we stuck to that, then we would be in a position to deliver. And I believe the local community is very proud of the fact that that we're still there.

There was another thing that came in probably quite early about 2006, where we recognised the value of Mary's Meals. There were classes in this local school in Likhubula, that had 100, 200 children, and many of them just couldn't fit into a classroom and they would be taught around a tree. And I remember being hesitant, even at the thought of Mary's Meals because it might bring even more children back into the school. But at that point, Mary's Meals was in the North of Malawi, but not in the South. And it was a smaller organisation. It's now so big that it has its own way of operating. But they made an agreement with us. And we even had a direct debit form that Mary's meals could identify it came from Dunblane. And if we could raise £15,000 to build a kitchen, and £15,000 to run it for three years, then they would move not just into our school, but into the whole area. Because one school would take children from other schools if they knew that the children were going to get a meal. And so, we started fundraising after Christmas. And by Easter, we had raised those funds, and that money went straight to Mary's Meals. So, in many ways, I think as soon as you're part of a partnership, it spawns other partnerships. And we're very aware of keeping in close contact with brothers and sisters that are doing similar kinds of work.

We have some people who've been involved for the 18 years from the very beginning. We've been refreshed by new people coming on board with different skills and different perspectives and different enthusiasms. We've been refreshed by new partnerships, for example, the link with the Boys Brigade, and their eagerness to be able to link in practical ways with projects that might add to what we were doing. I think it needs an honesty. Ann will know her pen pal scheme that she had - I did a pen pal scheme through the primary school in the early stages, and it took a lot of managing. Something like that can easily go out of control; can be people asking for help from the UK for somebody who's sick and so on.

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And you need to have clear, clear ways of managing it. Scotland Malawi Partnership have got better protocols now that can help schools develop partnerships. And there are ways of, for example, having a project on water that can be done in a school in Malawi and in a school in Scotland and actually sharing information. So, I think for us one of the things was we had to learn to be able to say that's not working or that was a mistake. And we're sorry if that's the way we went. Some of it wasn't in our hands. It's easy to think now once a month we have a WhatsApp call with Malawi. This is the very first year we've ever done that. And I can remember in 2004, we had sent a parcel, never arrived, sent a letter, never arrived, tried phone calls, couldn't get through. And I got in touch with Bobby Anderson who was organising volunteers at the time and knew the country. And I remember getting in touch with them and seeing the 17th approach that we've just tried hasn't worked, help me find an 18th. And yet mobile phones have then come in in a way that has empowered local Malawians. And I think we're still finding with our committee; they might not have enough Wi Fi in the village to be able to get our email. So that might be delayed a few days until they can go to the town. But they can definitely get a message from WhatsApp. And that has made a great difference for the communication.

It'd be interesting to hear what people from Likhubula say to you when you're out this summer. But they were saying to us, if we look at all the things we need, and there's a lot we need, the future of hope for us is education. That's the way forward. And they said that so clearly. And although we had dabbled with all kinds of other things, I would have to say that almost as we first got involved, there almost was a case of kind of Maslow's hierarchy of needs being involved. There wasn't clean water in the area, and there wasn't access to clean water. Even for Mary's meals, water would be drawn from the same river that the motorbikes were being washed in and so on. And so there were businessmen on our committee that were passionate about trying to find the best way to help with water. And over the 18 years, the government have finally come into that part of the world and done more than we were able to do. But at the beginning, we tried a borehole but there were so many rocks, there were difficulties with that. But we found a spring that with permission could be tapped. And every tap

that was on that spring had a committee. But we would sometimes arrive for a visit, and it would be gushing water and pouring the water out. And we would say, why have you not bought a washer, it is just in that shop there. And they would say, well, Scotland will fix it. So, Scotland has not fixed it. And that kind of partnership has become tighter. So that hierarchy of needs: the food in school that brought 100 children back to school in the first week, and the Mary's Meals model that it involves volunteers that come early in the morning and carry the water and stir the porridge for hours before they serve it to the children. But they know the benefit to the children. And it has worked in a remarkable, remarkable way.

But once it was a case of what are we really going to focus on, education was the thing. There was an awareness that it's much harder for the girls to get secondary education. But for boys as well, because it has to be paid for, there was difficulty of access. And while we help administer the system, it is really run from Likhubula. They have the criteria, which involves bright pupils that have shown promise, but have need within the family. And they have - although their national exams that will give an indication - they have their own bursar exam that helps to highlight those who are going to be the best beneficiaries. What we have recognised as time has gone on is, let's make sure we give them all the tools they need to make the most of this opportunity. So, getting kitted out includes a backpack and it includes your stationery, and it includes a pair of shoes for walking to school. It now includes a bag of maize meal for the family. And part of that deal is that if the family is benefiting to some extent as well, then perhaps these young people, before they've got this long walk to school, don't have to spend a lot of time doing chores as well. Solar lamps for studying, a bursar monitor who helps with a library of books and encouragement and can keep an eye as well. If things are not working out, he can step in at an early stage. So, it's taken a little while for that to be well refined, but I think the elements are there that have made a difference. And we're seeing it in the fact that more students as they graduate are graduating well, and quite possibly getting opportunities then for tertiary education or for more training. As people graduate, we like for them to write us a letter if they can. And some of the letters have been so incredibly moving.

I was delighted to be part of the partnership from the early stages. I've taken one sabbatical of a couple of years, somewhere in the middle. And I think if you're going to keep involved long term, sometimes that's important. And when I took the sabbatical, I wasn't sure if perhaps I would move into a different area. But I missed being involved and was delighted to come back on board once I felt refreshed, and I'd got my energy back.

There have been so many moments, I can say '...', which means, I fell in the river. And that was my attempt to go up Mount Mulanje. And I had a very excited guide, who was so pleased to have me with him, but didn't realise that if he asked me to jump with a backpack on from one big rock in the river to the next, I might not make it...and I didn't... and nor did he as he tried to hold on to me. But the reason I had to say it to the church was that the whole community appeared to know, as I'm walking towards the church, there was a lady washing her clothes in the river. And she pointed to me, and she pointed to the water.

There was a little moment, well, two moments, actually, I would say, I did make it up, I had a rest after falling in the river and then started out again the next day. And I did make it to the CCAP hut and slept there overnight. And you're on this wonderful plateau with this incredible view in front of you, and I'm feeling on top of the world. And I'm thinking, I'm in this remote area. And there was just a little night watchman who was tending a fire for us. And just as I'm having that thought this little voice goes, Jenny Barr, Jenny Barr. It turned out that his grandson had just come up with supplies, and recognised me because I'd been visiting the school. And there was a moment in Mulanje, that I was walking with someone else just in the street, and it's a busy street. And these two girls in a school uniform I didn't recognise, presented themselves in front of me with glowing faces looking so proud and obviously expected me to be proud. And I realised that they would be our bursars who had done well, were in this uniform because they had made it to the Mulanje school. And it was lovely just to be able to congratulate them and and see how delighted and proud they were with what they're achieving.

I'm watching a climate that in the UK I think has changed, you know, and I fear at the moment, but I am aware there are so many different groups asking for money, and people are having to look after their budgets in new ways. And therefore, you want to be cautious, you can't always be going and asking people for things. I rather think it's time to perhaps expand a little further, maybe drawing some of the small communities that are around or adjacent to Dunblane. I'm now in a church in Bridge of Allan, more local to my own house, and they would be interested in doing something. So rather than then reinvent and go somewhere else and have many years of learning, I think there would perhaps be an aspect of the partnership that they might want to pick up some support for. So, it will take a little bit of creative thinking and good networking on our part. But I think we need to find ways of thinking in fresh ways.

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I've been looking at other charities that are similar size, and I think some of them have got much more organised in fundraising in UK and have certain people that are fundraisers really or ideas people on their committee. They're not looking to visit the country, but that's the contribution they've got to make. I think we're at a stage now that if we had funds, we could be funding more people through tertiary education. And the more successful they've been in secondary school it's dashing hopes if we can't then help. And what we're finding from

Malawi is it's often at the 11th hour that suddenly an offer is made, and the start date is going to be quite soon. And we're not sitting with extra funds. And the tertiary budgets are much higher, they're more costly. But if I were to dream big, that's the area that I would like to be able to go on. We've got an email this week that's come from the partnership saying, with these two offers of training places that have been offered to these two people, they would be guaranteed a job if they can complete this course. And it's very hard feeling that if we say no, at this stage, we're making that more difficult. And I spoke about partnerships before. It's about partnership going up the way, but Nansato Nursery Trust, we facilitated its birth. It was a volunteer who had been out in Malawi and wanted to plant something that was going to be lasting. And she used Mr Chiromo's visit to Scotland, and we invited her down, she was able to meet with him. And that brought the nursery education that is also supporting the primary education of the young people as well.

Because it's 10 years since I've been out there. I'm almost left feeling that I might like to be interviewed briefly towards the end of that visit, because I've probably got hopes that I haven't fully articulated yet. But there are also question marks in terms of where are we at? It's not just our personnel that have got older over the years and moved on, a lot of our key people, in fact, the more talented they are, the quicker they might be to be taken elsewhere in Malawi, and to leave that area. But equally we've watched some young men in Malawi - I remember one young man who arrived back on a subsequent visit, and his voice had broken. And I could see that I think I thought I knew this person, but he had definitely changed. But some of them are proving real ambassadors for their country and we saw that with cyclone Freddie that they were in the frontline of trying to bring rescue when roads were inaccessible.