

**Interviewee: Brigitte Beck-Wörner**

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### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

First Malawi Trip

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We came in at the very beginning, in the beginning of 2005.

Dunblane cathedral had very active youth work at that point. And it was decided that the young people would be helping to make a decision who the next mission partners were. The young people researched three different communities and projects where we could maybe work with them in a partnership. And Likhubula stood out, partially for the infrastructure, because Likhubula House was there and ready. So they came and presented to Kirk session and Kirk session agreed that Likhubula would be it.

And then the planning began, who's going to go out? And how is it going to shape? So, Jonathan volunteered from the youth group, so he had to have an adult, so I was asked, and I was able to make the time because I was working for a university. So I had time in their timeframe. And we set to from that point, and I think some of the other youngsters would have liked to have gone but the parents had no holiday available. And so we went, quickly got all our vaccinations, and we had no idea where we were going or what we were walking into, that was actually the best bit about it in a way because we were just open to whatever.

We had a lot of preparation meetings, and we learned about, you know, the landscape and culture. Yeah, so we had two days in Blantyre, just orientation. And then we went up the mountain. And the welcome was just totally overwhelming. At the outskirts of the long drawn out village, this group of women greeted us dancing and singing. I had never seen anything like it. And Jenny, Jonathan and I have were given a small chalet, so we were independent, but in the grounds, and that worked out really well.

And so we started with the school and the church, and we just walked everywhere, which was extremely helpful, because people could just see us walking along the dust road, and we would, you know, turn our back when the Coca Cola lorry came just the same as them. I mean, we had shoes, they didn't, but that was about the major difference, really. I mean, we wandered down, we were in school all morning. And we were accessible because we were always fairly visible. But from all the settings or dwellings, the voices would come out, Jonathan! Jonathan! which was absolutely great, because he just focused that attention. So that was a good thing.

We helped with the teaching. Very poorly equipped. Hardly any paper, I was shown the plan, lesson plan, and it said needlework, but there was no needles and no cloth. Geography, one could have worked, you know, it was about erosion and things like that. And it was a lecture and I thought, can we look outside? So I don't think the teachers had terrifically good training but it was obviously a good and steady job for them.

In the church, we were sat at the front and everybody could see us. And these services went on for three, four hours, which took some getting used to but the children were running in and out there was dancing and so on, and we couldn't understand enough Chichewa so someone, usually the headmaster, Charles Chiromo, would translate quietly or give us the gist of it.

So one day there was a preacher from South Africa, and she was very ferocious. I don't know whether she spoke Chichewa or her own language, but very ferocious. And it went and it went and went. And at the end, the headmaster just said, she does not agree with sin.

And then we were just handed round basically. And sometimes at school, if I wasn't going to a particular lesson, I would just sit in a chair in the courtyard, and somebody would come and talk. And you know, some of it was English. Some of it was hands and feet. I mean, originally, I'm, I am or was a social worker. So I could see, you know, family structures that were quite loose, I could see a lot of kinship care if the parents had died with usually HIV AIDS. I could see the children some of them had the sort of lack of protein visible in their tummies. I could say it was very, very existence at a subsistence level, but there was very little inequality, which, in a way, appeared to make it more tolerable. I mean there was nobody running around in a Porsche or any of that. We saw some of that in Blantyre, the sort of 'golden youth' who were showing their wealth and they did come sometimes at the weekend to have a picnic down by the river and you know, they were dripping with gold and big 4x4s and radio and so on. And I thought this is the contrast in this society, and in town, you know, you couldn't move for people asking you for money and things so.

In Likhubula itself, yes, people had hopes and expectations, but you weren't pushed, and we tended to rather buy things, products. There was a lovely lady who made these baskets. And I asked her for a round one, and she made a round one. And then I came to pay. And it was her husband wanted the money. And I pointedly gave it to her. She had done the labour and he had a professional job. He was an accountant for the Forestry Commission. So I wouldn't have expected he needed extra. But he obviously felt that was his role.

So a very unequal society, from gender point of view. A lot of the men were sitting under the trees in the shade playing or cards or some game or just chatting, talking and not doing very much. And the women were carrying the wood and cooking over smoky fire and doing everything. And that's not quite, you know. It's difficult because the girls get married off so young. And that was very visible in the higher classes, even of this local school, there are fewer and fewer girls, and they're a cost factor. It's a very, very agrarian society still, and I think with the partnership, the bursaries, where some children who are able to do the work then get the funding for high school, that really is the key for girls. Cos if they go and get married at 12 and 13, their life is over, unfortunately.

The first visit, and before, with the preparation, it was really just learning, hearing, seeing, communicating, just being there. So we had no fixed agenda, these are the 17 points that we need to do. We were fairly clear that it wasn't, obviously there was an imbalance, but there wasn't any point in even wanting to impose anything. So we were just there, which is a very nice way of learning about people. We were learning about things that were happening. The World Food Programme were out, this and that. And, you know, we came back with ideas what might be helpful, like freshwater fishponds, the goat scheme - that all comes much later - but there was a sort of awareness that some of the agriculture could be done more effectively. Because fresh water was coming off the mountain, it wasn't arid.

It's very difficult to know how support can be given in a way that's empowering and not prescriptive, but also grows into something bigger. And I don't quite know how these things now work. We did see the big secondary school in Blantyre, the Henry Henderson Institute flagship boarding school, top school, all the rest of it. And in computer lab, all the computers were dead. In the domestic science place, all the cookers, you could actually have a history of cookers, are dead. So there wasn't the skill set. So everything had to be done in a different way in a way that gradually equips and is more self-directed.

And I think with the water that works and with sanitation, which is why we got very involved with Mary's meals, because we felt that model puts the onus on the local community to make the food and to dish it out. And also, it gets purchased in the country. So there's as little top down as can be done. People were very keen to hear and see what we had experienced. The letters writing between schoolchildren started quite soon after that. It intensified after the youth group had been out because they had been a real motivation as well. The high school got extremely involved, and still is, and I think that is probably the way forward is to have the youngsters in both countries benefit the most. People have been generous with funding for the bursaries. I think the high school also with the curriculum, where they need to show social engagement, it's a good one for them to focus on.