

Dear Friends of Namitembo,

I just want to give a quick update about what's new here in Namitembo.

For the last few weeks, the men, women, and children of Namitembo have been harvesting the last of this year's maize crop. The harvest here coincided with the 2-week school vacation at Namitembo Primary and Secondary schools; this Monday, April 7th, marked the start of the second term of the school year.

The trade school, meanwhile, is on break until the beginning of May. We'll have three new tutors at the trade school next term. Two are replacements for tutors whose contracts expired (the carpentry tutor and computer tutor), and the third is filling the new position of assistant tailoring tutor. As of now, they have all arrived, have moved in, and are preparing their lesson plans.

As for myself, I'm quite busy these days. In addition to my regular classes at the primary school and the occasional extracurricular math classes for Standard 7 and 8, I'll be taking charge of a few extra activities. I'm chairing the Quiz Club (academic competitions held between student teams every two weeks, for a grand prize at the end of the year) which should begin on April 21st. I'm also introducing a Book Club at Namitembo Primary. Last month, I organized the primary school library along with Katie Borg, a visitor from England who took off for further travels at the end of March – and now I'm determined to make use of it. The book club will be open to students in standards 6 through 8, and will meet every two weeks to discuss the books we're reading, and identify new vocabulary words from our reading. The real incentive, though, will come from the one-on-one book chats. After a student finishes their book, I'll be sitting down for a one-on-one chat to determine how well they've absorbed it; if I'm satisfied, I'll mark down the number of pages read in my log, awarding prizes to the students after they meet certain benchmarks (something like, a pencil for every 50 pages read, a pen for every 150, and a set of colored pencils for every 500 pages. Reading is not too strongly encouraged in the primary school yet, and that's a trend I'd like to turn around).

Katie and I also noted that the library, which has an incredible selection of books thanks to Erin Harvey, is still a bit bare as far as decorations are concerned. We'd like to make it more inviting and colorful, somewhere that the students will be eager to spend time. I think the best way to do this will be to allow the students to make the decorations themselves. Therefore I'll be organizing occasional activities with the students to create posters and other decorations to hang around the library, as well as the school hall and classrooms. Katie has also paid the head carpenter here at Namitembo to make a nice, big reading desk for the students' use in the library.

Some of the most exciting news involves the installation of the new satellite dish at the trade school, bringing the arrival of the internet. This will obviously be a big deal for the students in computer classes – but it will mean a lot for the community of Namitembo as well! Beginning May 3rd, I'll be teaching a 4-week computer course, 2 days a week for 8 classes in all, to members of the community (each month we'll start over with a new

group of people). The course will begin at a very basic level (use of the keyboard, mouse, etc) and as we move through the weeks, we'll work our way through Word and Excel, as well as internet and email. I'll also offer set up web-based email accounts for all the graduates of the course. For the first month or two, this course will be open to any interested staff members from Namitembo Primary, Secondary and Trade Schools (25-30 people). Next, we'll open the course to all staff members of the other schools in the parish. Eventually the course will be open for anybody in the community who's interested. After a few months of classes, we'll be ready to open the computer lab to the community twice a week (Tuesdays/Thursdays) as an internet café. Think about it, ten years ago the idea of an internet café in the Shire Valley would have seemed outlandish!

Finally, two points of interest to folks who are planning on visiting Namitembo this year, or who are mulling over the possibility of a visit, as well as those who are thinking about considering the possibility of reflecting on planning a visit.

First of all, I've put together a basic "guide to Chichewa" in MS Word. I've attached it to this email. Just print it out, double sided on letter-sized paper; if done correctly you should be able to fold it in half to make an efficient little pocket guide!

Second, is the question of "what to bring." When it comes to your personal belongings that's not too difficult, but I do have a few reminders: I would suggest a nice warm sweatshirt, since there may be some cold nights and mornings alongside the warm days...I'd also say that we are fed quite well here, and if you're thinking that you'll need to stash some granola bars in your suitcase because there won't be enough to eat, you are quite mistaken (though Father Owen is partial to Stilton cheese and definitely wouldn't say no if you brought some). I'm sure you're making the necessary arrangements with regard to vaccinations and the like; I'd suggest, in case your doctors haven't, that you get a prescription of Ciprofloxacin in case you fall victim to a nasty stomach bug. I'd also suggest asking your doctor to prescribe something that will "firm up" your stools in case of severe diarrhea (you'll probably thank me later). You should also make sure that you start on your anti-malarial meds the day before you arrive in Africa. (According to Mr. Nkhoma, the admin of the trade school, the real secret to avoiding serious illness when moving from one place to the other is bringing a bottle of water from home, to mix with the local water at your destination in order to get acclimatized. I'm not so sure about that one.)

Mostly what I'm talking about is this: You are probably thinking that your baggage allowance is far more than you need, and maybe it's occurred to you that you could bring some donation items for the schools and the various projects here. I went through a similar packing dilemma before my trip out, and in hindsight I could have done a better job.

This list is lengthy, and some of the items are sort of high-ticket, so it might be advisable to present this list to the entire parish to see if anyone has some of these items already in their possession, and would be willing to donate them.

Possible ideas of what to bring:

Educational DVDs, especially English language DVDs. However, the DVD players here are British in origin, and will not play discs from the "region" supported by American DVD players, so this one is probably out.

3x5 index cards. Strange but true. I've found a thousand uses for these in my classes and I'm sure I can find a thousand more. Lately I've been making decks of flash cards (just math so far, but I could easily use them for other subjects) and lending them out to my students for studying. Unfortunately, index cards are outrageously priced here, so now that I've used up my supply from home, I'm at a bit of a standstill. Rest assured that I can make good use of them – whether you bring 5 packs, or 10, or 50.

For that matter, if you have any old flash card sets, those would also be quite useful!

Educational posters or world maps. If you can fit these in your luggage somehow, these are always a big plus. If you look around in town you can sometimes find maps here, but other educational posters are extremely hard to come by. (Sometimes magazines like National Geographic, Sky & Telescope, Smithsonian, et al. have nice fold-out posters inside; check if you have any lying around!).

Disposable surgical gloves. If you are bringing these, it might be a good idea to bring a few different sizes.

Mercury thermometers (not digital). These should display Centigrade temperatures.

These and the disposable gloves would be used for the home-based care projects.

USB Drives. Otherwise known as memory sticks, flash drives, and jump drives. These are much, much, much cheaper in the US than they are here; a 128 MB drive costs more here than a 512 MB drive does in the States (about \$10 if you know where to look; 1 GB drives can be found for as low as \$15). Once we start the internet café here in Namitembo, we'd like to sell blank CDs, diskettes, and USB drives – at cost – to anyone who needs them.

Fun odds and ends. Sheets of stickers, rub-on letters, temporary tattoos – these have great potential as prizes during class activities in the schools, or just as gifts for the kids. These particular items have the benefit of being flat, for compact storage.

Music CDs for the youth centre. There's a wonderful youth centre here in Namitembo, with a good stereo system – and about 3 CDs that are blasted out of the speakers a few days a week. I imagine the kids are getting a bit tired of the same music over and over (frankly, I am too). Any kind of dance music or club music, maybe with an electronic or reggae feel, would be a winner.

What you don't need to bother with:

Pens and pencils. True, the schools could use them, but there's nothing to be gained by buying them in the States and flying them out here. Pens and pencils cost pretty much the same here as they do back in the U.S., so you'd be better off bringing money with which to buy stationery here, if you're interested in doing so.

Clothes for donation. The same holds true for clothes as for pens and pencils; actually, used clothes are probably cheaper here than back in the U.S., and they take up too much suitcase space anyhow. No need for these.

Electrical items. This goes for donation items as well as your personal items; Malawi's sockets are UK standard, and the voltage is different between UK and US appliances.

Medicine. Some medical items can be useful (i.e. surgical gloves and mercury thermometers, as mentioned above), but medicines are not necessary as donation items, for two major reasons: 1) you might have some trouble proving they're for your own use when clearing customs, and 2) medicine is not expensive here, since medicine is generally very well subsidized by foreign governments and the like.

"Maybe" items:

Books. The used book shops in Zomba and Blantyre provide some really great novels, textbooks, and so forth, at good prices, so it's not strictly necessary to bring more for donation purposes. However, maybe you've got some books that you feel would be particularly great additions to the libraries here, in which case, bring 'em on! (Feel free to email me if you have any questions about what would make a good donation book). I'm just saying that there's no need to fill your suitcase completely with random books for the libraries.

That's all I have for now (and it ought to keep you busy for a while)! Please feel free to send along your questions, thoughts, what have you.

Take Care!  
John