

News from Namitembo

Greetings everyone! We've only been five days here in Namitembo, and it has been so full of experiences that it seems like five weeks. The Mallahan family, Mr. Mike Foy, and my son John and I all arrived in Malawi last Saturday afternoon, at two different airports, within a couple hours of one another. We've been treated to two large parish Masses, tours of several of the grade schools and both high schools sponsored by Namitembo parish (school classes are still in session here), a visit to the local market, a trip to the city market in Zomba, gatherings (and Mass) at four different small Christian communities, a visit to the local health clinic run by a community of sisters in neighboring Chipini, and a guided tour of the Agricultural and Trade School by Administrator Rex Chepeta. On top of that, Jim Mallahan and I even managed time yesterday afternoon for a brief round of golf with Fr. Owen in Zomba!

There's so much to tell -- and we'll have plenty of stories and pictures to share, when we get back. For now, I'd like to just share a couple of tidbits and one larger item.

***The roads here in Malawi are "very interesting." In the towns, the roads are two-laned, and very crowded with people and some cars. Between the towns, the highways are still two-laned and very good actually -- especially compared to Kenya, where potholes seemed as big as craters, and you often had to drive around them. However, there are no paved roads around Namitembo; the nearest paved road is about an hour away, via a one-laned dirt road, usually with deep ruts and huge rocks -- often impassable in the rainy season. In fact, we have driven by with much amusement the spot on the road where Fr. Owen got stuck with the Wickstrands, during their visit in March! The worst road, though, is the road down the plateau from Zomba, which in places is at a thirty degree pitch, and full of turns, boulders, and gouges! People walk everywhere -- even on the highways between towns, you'll find plenty of people of all ages walking (and many on bikes), usually carrying something on their backs or heads. You'll regularly see young boys selling "roasted mice on a stick."

***This is Malawi's winter, meaning also that it is the dry season: fewer mosquitoes to worry about, usually bothersome only at dusk and dawn. We usually put on repellent when we go outside, and of course we all take our anti-malarial medicine and sleep under mosquito netting. The temperature has been cool of late -- I think down to the fifties at night, but ranging into the sixties and seventies during the day; it hasn't been hot. The daytime is of course shorter at this time of the year, around 11 hours or so; but since we're not far from the equator here, winter daytimes are much longer than those in Seattle. But when the sun goes down it IMMEDIATELY GETS DARK.

***The economy is very fragile. Two years ago the local currency, the Kwacha, traded at 89 to the dollar. Now it's 142K to the dollar, meaning it would buy 40% less in US goods. The dollar goes a long way -- the three of us played nine holes of golf yesterday at a scenic course, with caddies, for a grand total of about \$10. The local (bank) interest rate is over 20%. There are few Malawian exports, with some tea, maybe some maize this year; but their tobacco market has collapsed. Most people (90-95%) are subsistence farmers, including nearly everyone around Namitembo. This past year's maize crop (the national staple food), just collected within the last few weeks, was thankfully their best in a few years.

The Schools

St. Bridget's primary focus over these past nine years has been assisting the people of Namitembo parish in developing better education, and our delegation can report that all the schools are much improved over this time, with significant new construction and much other renovation. During our visit we saw new construction taking place at St. Bridget High School and more renovations will take place at Namitembo primary school, during the dry season (there is a huge pile of bricks ready in the school yard.) That having been said, there are still way too few teachers; at Luesi grade school, for example, there were 760 students being taught by 4 teachers and with few books. We sat in one first grade classroom with around 200 students, while the teacher taught English words on a blackboard. All all the children were very mannerly and attentive; but under these conditions learning is difficult, and absenteeism is a problem, with the later grade classes becoming progressively smaller (though still with high teacher/student ratios, by our standards). To maintain quality, there is also a government exam that students must pass at certain levels, for students to continue to progress.

High school attendance is more problematic still, as the youth are older and both more able (and needed) to work in the fields and more ready (especially the girls) to marry. Since there are class fees (about \$25 a year), parents often choose not to send girls to high school. In response, Fr. Owen has established a couple of funds to provide scholarships, one of which is earmarked for girls.

I know that Mike Foy will have much more to add about these schools when we return, as he has seen them all, has had lengthy conversations with the headmasters of both high schools, and is scheduled to have plenty of time with the headmaster of the Namitembo primary school in the coming days.

The Agriculture and Trade School is the most ambitious project yet, and is finishing its second year. At this time there are facilities for computer training, carpentry/joinery, masonry, and tailoring, plus two homes for faculty. The school currently rents two other living areas for tutors, and there are two duplexes near completion for the faculty, with two others on the drawing boards. An irrigation pump with a water tower has been constructed to provide running water for the school. Interest in the school continues to be very high, as well as the number of applications, but the actual enrollment is lower than was hoped for by this time. Two factors are the cost of tuition (about \$125 a year) and the need for construction of living areas (dormitory), to allow students from beyond walking distance to attend more readily. We have been exploring that situation with Mr. Chipeta, along with his plans for the Agricultural phase of the school, the next phase of its development. We did survey the huge amount of land that is available for this phase -- seemingly enough to be able to provide a productive base to help sustain the school while providing quality instruction in agriculture and animal husbandry. *More to come...*

I'll write again next week. Everyone in Namitembo is praying for you!

Deacon Denny Duffell, from Namitembo, 7/6/06