

Mark the date:

Elephant Stampede

Sunday, Sept. 17th, 1:00 p.m., Magnuson Park!

News from Namitembo

September, 2006

Editor's Note: This year we at St. Bridget celebrate our 10th year as a sister parish with the people of Namitembo. As so many of our own children and teachers begin another year of studies, it seemed appropriate to present this brief snapshot of **three Catholic teachers** from Namitembo, who are also Catholic *leaders* in the very best sense. This newsletter is dedicated to them: to their faith and joy amidst the daily struggles of life in rural Malawi, and to the future of coming generations, both here and there.

Mr. John Ghocho, Headmaster Namitembo Secondary School

Mr. Ghocho has an easy, warm smile, and it was a pleasure to share time with him, though I know he was a bit nervous when I told him I would like to "interview"



him. He had graciously translated for me when I first arrived, when Fr. Owen called him forth at Mass to help me say a few words. I met him again, along with his wife Margaret, at the 50th birthday party for Mr. Chipeta, the Trade School Administrator, and still again when Fr. Owen and I toured the changes at Namitembo since my last visit. As I caught him in his office on a Saturday, he was at first reluctant to have me take his picture, as he was without his usual suit! He has been "vowed" [Church marriage] for 17 years, and has four children, ranging from a senior in high school to a 3-yr old. He had turned 40 a few days before this interview.

Mr. Ghocho is from Mwanza, in the southern region of Malawi. The eldest of eight children, he passed his secondary exams at 19 and then studied two years for his primary teacher certification in Lilongwe [the capital city]. He taught primary school for four years before being posted to teach secondary school for another three years, without certification [not uncommon in rural Malawi, with its shortage of teachers]. He returned to school for two years for his secondary education certificate, and resumed teaching in 1997 for five years, being promoted twice before going to Chancellor College for his bachelors degree in education, with a specialty in linguistics.

Mr. Ghocho has been the Headmaster of the Namitembo high school for the past two years. Four years ago, St. Bridget had just finished helping build a large classroom block that included a science lab; since then the school has expanded the original classroom block and added still another classroom building. Two years ago the enrollment was about 40, and there was difficulty getting teachers; now the school has over 200 students at present, a testimony that things are going very well indeed. To give a concrete example: on this beautiful Saturday morning, at least 60 of these students are attending a optional session on writing and composition, given by a special visiting instructor.

What are the difficulties of motivating students? "I have a desire for them all to pass, and even qualify for the University of Malawi! But this is a small school in a remote area, and most only know a rural way of life." He meant, without saying, that secondary education seems for many an unaffordable luxury of time and cost [the state fee is about \$25 a year]. "High school age girls, in particular, are expected to work at home, or expected to be married." Still, he has encouraged students to study in the school on their own, without teachers, introducing special afternoon studies, even weekends.

On a couple of occasions, in walking the school grounds at odd times, I've encountered students in the classroom, reading or working quietly. "I've also tried forming discussion groups outside of class, and our teachers try to help one another."

I asked Mr. Ghocho his **biggest challenge as Headmaster**. "To run a school is difficult – shortages of finances, materials, human resources. Many students have no shoes, come to school in slippers [flip-flops]. Much poverty. So much has been done here, but there is still a lack of teaching materials – only 5-10 books per class. Some teachers are very hard working, but teachers are in such short supply. We need good teacher's houses to help attract them" [they have six, with plumbing and electricity, a rarity in rural Malawi]. Having fully qualified teachers would be my happiest moment!" Not all the teachers are certified, and of



those that are, not all are for secondary school; and teachers have responsibilities for subjects for which they are not qualified. "The school holds in-service training in different subjects. The government doesn't do it; we assist each other.

"To be a Headmaster, you need to be patient. You may be frustrated because of differences among the staff. It's difficult to please everyone, and you need to meet your institutional goals. At the end of the day, you have to achieve what you are there for. You have to be a good listener, and you get a lot of advice, but sometimes the pieces may not be right. Frankness is good. If something goes wrong you have to say so!"

Your life as a Catholic, and involvement in the community? "My mother was a strong Catholic, my grandfather a Church elder. Here, I'm the co-chair of the Christian Family movement for the overall parish. Our role is to strengthen families, to encourage them to get vowed [meaning, married in the Church]. We meet with families, encourage them. We may give advice on

how to help the marriage stay strong." He also serves as the secretary for the diocesan Christian Family movement, with monthly meetings in Zomba; sometimes he will visit other parishes in that capacity. "I serve as an usher, and a lector for Sunday Mass. I also chair the Parish Affairs Committee [a new group in charge of finding ways for the parish to generate funds]. I'm also in our own small Christian community, but am just a member there because I'm too busy for other responsibilities."

Final comments? "Life in Malawi is hard. Even for those of us who are working, the cost of living is rising. Professional people in Malawi will often choose to migrate, to the U.K. or other places – but we need our people to stay! The people in Malawi, though, are kind, good people. Friendly, generous. We have a few who are 'rough' but these are maybe one in 500. We are a peace-loving people."

Mrs. Agatha Kalawa, Secondary teacher Social Studies and Chichewa (language)

I am sure that everyone who visited Malawi with our youth four years ago will remember Agatha. Her smile is beautiful, her laughter infectious, and she loves spending time with youth. She grew up in Zomba [closest "big town" to Namitembo], and was married at 25 yrs, after graduating from St. Joseph Teacher Training College in Dedza [central Malawi] with a primary certification. She has been married 14 yrs to her husband Emengildo, and though she has no biological children, she supports three children and her widowed mother, and provides for two other girls from a poorer family. She invited me to her home for the interview.

Because of the shortage of high school teachers, the government switched Mrs. Kalawa there from Namitembo primary school, even though she did not feel as prepared as she wanted to be. I asked her the **hardest thing about teaching**. "The lack of resources, surely. There are a lot of materials in the training schools, but in the field, no. Few books or writing materials. The government may move you without much notice if there are problems or if there is a shortage somewhere else. The government



changes the syllabus often, trying to introduce new subjects and upgrade the schools, but without training or orientation. They may provide some training for one teacher or supervisor who is then supposed to train all the others, but it's insufficient."

OK – so what do you like best? "I enjoy the interaction with our young ones. I keep updated with the life styles – it's different from our way [as teachers]. It seems so many people know me! I have new friends all the time." I knew Agatha ran the Youth Center 4 years ago, and she still does. "The youth of Malawi are very active, but not very active in the Church. In Namitembo, even, there could be more who are active. We have many who are altar boys, the young dancers, those in the choir. Our youth have their own small Christian group named St. Egidio, and they help the needy. But many drop out when they get a little older. Most of the youth are not educated. They may even follow in schooling after 8th grade, but they too easily drop. They might say it's because of [high school] fees but some youth drop after 4th or 5th and that's free." **So, why do they drop out?** "I don't know! Maybe some see other graduates without jobs...but most are probably just from poor, uneducated families who do not encourage them. Teen pregnancy is common too – perhaps not at age 12 but it is very common at 14."



Mr. Foy with the Namitembo Parish Council Executive Committee

What is it like to be a woman in Malawi? "Our culture tells us that a woman is there to obey what a man wants or needs. A woman's role is to see that everything is in order in the home. Officially the government promotes human rights for women, but culturally it is very different."

What about as a woman in the Church? And what is your role? "I was born and raised Catholic, with dedicated Catholic parents. I enjoy my faith; my parents taught me to pray when taking food, when going to sleep. Before rising from bed, I give a thanksgiving for the life of the day ahead. I am secretary of both our Church Council [which meets monthly – there is one for

each of the 'outchurches'] and the overall Parish Council [meeting 3-4 times yearly]. I am also a member of the Catholic Women's Organization, a national group with members in every small Christian community. It exists to promote the role of women in the Church [there are many women in leadership roles in the Catholic Church in Malawi, and many women lead their small Christian communities]. There are diocesan representatives, and a yearly National Conference. At Namitembo we meet every Wednesday, and the other outchurch groups also meet; the parish group meets monthly. Being a Catholic woman in Malawi is a big task – you are expected to have the primary responsibility for the children being brought up in the Christian life, especially if you are not employed outside of the home. You have to be focused in your faith life, and know how to perform your duties. It gives you less time to do bad things, which can make life full of woe! You also have the responsibility of advising men, beginning with men in the family. So many men do not go to church, or are concerned with worldly things."

I've always found Agatha to be a remarkable person. While there, Mike Foy and I met with the Pastoral Council Executive Committee, of which she is secretary, for a 2+ hour meeting over a range of topics. At the meeting, Mike gently raised the topic of AIDS, which can be a very sensitive, taboo topic. Agatha was the primary spokesperson on this difficult issue, and spoke softly but with unflinching conviction about the need for compassion – a difficult stance for many to take even here in the US, but especially so within Africa, where culturally the victims are often shamed and shunned.

**Mr. Vincent Gama, Headmaster
Namitembo Elementary School**

My wife Joan and I both enjoyed meeting Mr. Gama two years ago, not long after he had been named Headmaster of the school. He showed a good deal of interest in Second Step, a curriculum Joan promotes that is used at both ASB and Villa. That kind of interest fits with his overall attention to the school – which is amazing, considering they have over a thousand students for only 8 teachers! St. Bridget will be helping Fr. Owen with the 2nd half of the expansion/renovation project for their school building this fall, before the Malawian rains start. Mr. Gama is 43 years old, and married his wife Mary in 1990; they have 4 children.

With 20 years of experience as a teacher and 9 years as a Headmaster, Mr. Gama has the most practical experience of these three featured teachers; and with over a thousand students to lead, every bit of that experience is needed. He graduated from the Chiradzulu Teachers Training College near Zomba, taught by the Montfort brothers [the same religious order as Owen's]. I asked him about **why he became a teacher, and what the**

difficulties were. “When I was a young boy, during my primary years I very much admired certain teachers – especially Mr. Maere in 8th grade. That was over 20 years ago! He was so inspirational – and I got the idea to follow in his footsteps, he became my mentor.

“It is very difficult both to teach and to deal with administrative issues. There are no extra benefits for being a headmaster. You need to be devoted to the love of our land, and the love of our children.” **Is it fulfilling?**

“We just thank God we are alive!” Mr. Gama was most happy with the numbers – and percentage – of 8th grade children that are graduated and being selected as eligible for high school. “We have 48 eight graders this year. The last two years we had 94% and 80% of them pass their exams and get selected for high school. They have achieved; this is outstanding!” I could not help looking at the numbers, in 1st through 8th grades, noting how the



numbers went down as you went on, and the ratio of girls dropped: 185-157-142-146 for grades 1-4 (in their terms, “standard 1-4,” after which they must pass a government exam)... then steadily downward: 124-75-60-48. In “standard 8” there were 32 boys and 16 girls. And yet, I knew he spoke the truth — these results *were* very good, compared with other rural areas in Malawi. “It is hard to motivate the students. In standard 1-4, often they are motivated by food [NGOs in some places provide snacks to the early elementary students]. You have to work to make the lessons interesting. But those early classes are the most important – if they get behind, they will not stay.”

With so many students per teacher, you must have to motivate the teachers too. “Frankly, this can be difficult. Some people become teachers because they have nowhere to go in life and just need a job. We are very lucky with the teachers we have here at Namitembo. For instance, we have excellent accommodations here – in so many areas housing is very dilapidated.” [I noted the importance of St. Bridget’s early focus on building teacher housing here.] “I treat them all as equal. We are all teachers, we need to interact. When someone has problems, we need to solve them together. We have frequent staff/teacher meetings.”

How about the involvement of the parents? [I had a reason for asking this question. On my first visit to Namitembo, Mary Jo Gasparich and I were surprised that this school was in worse physical condition than the rest of the elementary schools. Fr. Owen helped us pull together a meeting with the parents, and they promised to

provide bricks for renovations.] “The parents are very cooperative now. For instance, the renovation. The parents decided that they should assess themselves each 60 kwacha per child for bricks — even if they have 5 children. They are poor but they are doing it. And if a child has problems – say, they are absent for two weeks – I call in the parents, and we deal with it together.”



With all those responsibilities, what is your involvement in the Church? “I have various duties. Right now I serve as vice treasurer for our Church Council and chairman of our lectors. I also am the president of our small Christian Community -- we usually meet Mondays [I had seen them meeting earlier]. My parents were very strongly religious.”

Any special message for our people at St. Bridget? “I love it here at Namitembo, and my family feels the same way! We love our home [teacher housing provided by



St. Bridget] and I want to thank St. Bridget for the renovation project. As you can see, my office is very spacious, far better than most!” [True, by Malawian standards...]

Help support our sister parish!

Donations of \$500, \$1,000 or more will go to match a special “Challenge Gift” of \$20,000!

Several other articles and newsletters are available on our web page. See www.stbridgetchurch.org and click on Namitembo Mission, under Parish Outreach.