Update from Malawi- June 2019

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After moving to Malawi in February 2019, we settled into the capital city, Lilongwe, and faced the many joys and challenges of moving to a new place with a new culture. As you may know, we did not go to plant a church, but to facilitate relationships between the partnering Four12 churches, training pastors and their wives. We have experienced such a sense of the pleasure of Jesus in the obedience to His call, knowing His Presence as we go about loving people.

The first thing the Holy Spirit began to do was to deal with our own character issues that would hinder the work of the Lord moving forward. There is nothing like village life, living with bare essentials, and living in close quarters with a team, to bring out the things that God needs to deal with. We had to get beyond irritation and deal with these things with real honesty in order to find unity (James 5:16). Only then could God command His blessing (Psalm 133:1-3).

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We soon found that each member of the team needed to maintain intimacy with Jesus through personal devotions. If we lost our closeness with Jesus, how would His presence manifest when we were ministering in the churches? We also found that worshipping together freely in English helps to compensate for the special worship times we were used to in our churches back ‘home’.

Another thing that became very real to us was that Biblical culture should over-ride our own

culture, and it must bow to the Lordship of Christ. In Malawian culture, where intimacy is often lacking in personal relationships, we have observed that fathers are often absent, distant or harsh, and because of this, people struggle to encounter Father God. This also affects the communication and closeness between husbands and wives. Their relationships with God are characterized by one-way communication. Prayer may be a long shopping list with little attention to what God is saying. Worship is often lively and musical, but the songs are about the person of Jesus, not directed towards Him. We have found that we need to demonstrate getting lost in His Presence (because what they haven't experienced, they can't walk into). To model this, we have translated some English worship songs into Chichewa. After five meetings with the same group of ladies in Lilongwe, we finally experienced the presence of God in worship – it was like tasting honey!

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We also began to find our giftings in working together in another culture. This requires ongoing practice, evaluation and re-training. This we continue to do during and after each church visit, as well as during group training and prayer times in the morning. For example, there is a great need here for foundational doctrines to be taught in all the churches, particularly to the leaders. We sat down as a team to discuss each doctrine and how we could use illustrations which could be applicable in Malawian culture. You simply cannot reference the Western media or any city landmarks in a remote village in Southern Malawi. The Bible's rural stories have become a great resource in this farming culture.

The realisation that we have a tremendous amount to learn from the people here has impacted us greatly. We ask a lot of questions whenever we are with someone that can speak some English, especially the church leaders. A key has been 'listening to the heart' and not just the words spoken. Consulting key Malawian leaders and praying with them about every major decision enables us to make directional choices that the local Malawians own and to which they commit.

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We try to learn a new word or sentence in Chichewa every day, so that we can communicate better. 'Lost in translation' is a real issue here – sometimes we hardly know if the message we

wish to convey is reaching the listeners. In Malawi, Chichewa is the lingua franca (main language), but dialects of Tonga in the North and Sena in the South make it difficult for Malawian translators. Furthermore, customs may differ from village to village. Translation takes more time, and we find we need to stop more often to apply or discuss concepts. The culture here involves much group discussion, so that is a good way for the grasping of concepts. This worked well until we found that more personal topics, like marriage, were seldom discussed in public!

Culture shock is a real experience, and I think this has challenged us mainly in the areas of comfort, convenience, time and honesty issues. We found that we missed our soft mattresses, easy shopping facilities, good roads, running water and electricity. Anyone moving to Malawi will tell you that you often only get one thing done during a day out: traffic jams and queues are related to extremely inefficient systems. We might arrange for a meeting at a certain time with pastors, and some will arrive an hour late. On the positive side, people will start up a conversation anywhere at any time; a great advantage in sharing the gospel on the streets. In a culture where telling the truth is often avoided in order to save face, it is difficult to negotiate truth. The deep-rooted issues of pride will take time to deal with: right now, we need to have grace for each person and see them as Jesus does.