

Malawi Externship Report
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
May 29-November 11, 2006
Emma Hayes

“Joy and sorrow are never separated...Joy is hidden in sorrow and sorrow in joy.
If we try to avoid sorrow at all costs, we may never taste joy,
and if we are suspicious of ecstasy, agony can never reach us either.
Joy and sorrow are the parents of our spiritual growth.”
-Henri J. M. Nouwen

It is nearly impossible for me to sum up my time in Malawi. I fear that my experiences will eventually become reduced to the pat answers that I give people when they ask what it was like: “I have no regrets about going to Malawi. But it was also one the most challenging and difficult experiences of my life. I learned a lot about myself and also made many wonderful friends.” This is all true, but my time in Malawi was also so much more than that. It was filled with laughter, frustration, awe, anger, anticipation, and tears. I was sustained only by faith in God and the work of the Holy Spirit in my life. I am so thankful for my parents, who spent hours on the phone with me and sent me anything I needed, for the church family, who prayed for me, wrote to me, and sent me gifts of books, and my friends in Malawi who wanted only the best for me. I took my role as an ambassador for and representative of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church in Malawi seriously and contemplated the implications of my actions as that person and not only as an individual. I hope that BPC will continue to have a presence in Malawi and that we will grow to understand the complexities and richness of that place even more deeply. We take a leap of faith when we follow God’s lead to an unfamiliar place to do work we aren’t quite sure we understand. Let us make good on our promises not to forget our friends in Malawi and allow the Holy Spirit to penetrate our thoughts and guide our actions as we move forward to the next chapter of this partnership.

May 29-June 30 - A Month of Shock and Awe

Events:

The journey from Virginia to Malawi began early on Memorial Day, as Alex Evans, Mary Denson Moore, my father, Dave Hayes, and I departed Roanoke Regional Airport bound for South Africa, and then on to Malawi. Our trip was a safe one and after a day of touring Soweto and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa, we arrived in Blantyre, Malawi. Reverend Joel Sherbino, a pastor from the Presbyterian Church of Canada, met us at the airport, assisted me with paperwork for a work permit, and spent a lovely afternoon chatting with us about his work as associate pastor in a large church, Saint Columba, in Blantyre. He gave us lots of insight about the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), particularly that it is not very democratic in the Presbyterian sense and that it still struggles to openly discuss AIDS. My experience would later confirm both of these observations. We also met with the Reverend Daniel Gunya, General Secretary of Blantyre Synod who thanked Blacksburg Presbyterian for its relationship to the Synod and shared some of the struggles that church faces, such as a shortage of pastors. We then proceeded to meet Dr. Sue Makin at Mulanje Mission.

At the Mission, Armstrong Khoza, one of BPC’s main contacts in Mulanje, took us around to see the sights. We visited the MM Primary School during the feeding program and

were greeted by literally thousands of children holding plastic plates and spoons who wanted nothing more than to be in our pictures. My dad tried to ask some of the children what was in their exercise books and the little boy who showed one to him presented half of a book: an exercise book ripped right across the middle. He still had some work in it, but this was a startling reminder that children here do not have many materials to work with as they try to learn.

We also visited Apatsa Private Primary School, which would become my school later on. The children met us at the road singing the song “Welcome our visitors, welcome.” We sat on wooden benches while they performed skits, songs, and acrobatics. The three head-teachers at the school explained how they had started Apatsa school in 2001. As retired teachers, they had been unsatisfied with retirement and saw a need in their community for a high-quality school with a Christian focus, particularly one that could serve the needs of the many orphans living around Mulanje. They began the school with only a few students and it has grown to over 100 pupils in just five years. Seeing this school and feeling the love of these three women was a strong contrast to the environment at the Mission primary school. The women told me that they would be my mothers while I was in Malawi and indeed they lived up to that promise. At Apatsa, I “felt at home,” as the Malawians like to say. Armstrong showed us the field of (tiny) eucalyptus trees that funding from BPC helped provide and the latrines that the church also funded. These trees are supposed to grow quickly and then can be used for wood, a constant need in this country.

After a morning of visits, we sat down with the Mission’s Partnership Committee, which has been established to work with churches abroad who are in mission relationship with the schools and church here. We agreed to become official partners with the Committee and presented some school supplies, a check for \$2500 to MMPS, and \$700 in cash from friends of Charles Good to be used as the Committee saw fit. We also brought up the issue of sexual abuse of girls in schools, which had come to the attention of BPC members as a very troubling problem in Malawi. Everyone said that such things did not occur at schools on the Mission. I tried to ask what the procedure *would be* for dealing with a problem *if* a girl reported it. They informed us that if an issue came up, it would be brought before a disciplinary committee, of which one of the women at the meetings was chairperson. If the accusations were found to be true, the teacher would be dismissed. Although we knew that their response of denial about the abuse was likely untrue, we were pleased to hear that at least a system was in place to deal with disciplinary problems of teachers in the school. This issue needs further attention, but also careful planning about how to approach it in a meaningful way.

We spent our last two days in Mulanje taking a short hike up the mountain to a waterfall and attending church on Sunday. This particular Sunday was designated as Paper Sunday, or a fundraising day. Alex preached a sermon that reminded us that God does care what we do with our lives, both how we treat others and how we spend our money and that we are a community of believers who take part in the Christian life together, no matter where we live. Then followed the “paper Sunday” part of the day, which does not feel quite so much like worship. Different groups are called forward to come and present their money at the front of the church, while dancing and celebrating to the sounds of a live band. But it is not a one-time offering. Individuals remain at the front, flicking off the smallest bills possible for the longest amount of time possible. A “bank” collects money and people go up to it to have their larger bills changed into smaller ones. We broke out our best dance moves and were called up several times to put our money in the plate. Worship and the Paper Sunday lasted well over six hours and were experiences to remember. This was my first look into the church’s immense focus on money.

Zomba was our next destination, where we met with William Susuwele, Edith Mmela, and Wotchiwe XXX, some of the first Malawian students to attend BPC during their time at Virginia Tech. They took us to Mulunguzi School, which was just completing two beautiful new school blocks (classrooms) with assistance from BPC. These children also performed a lovely song about how they had been studying under a tree but BPC had “saved their souls” by sending them more classrooms, read us poems, and presented us with a banner of Malawi to hang in the church. We met with the all the teachers and discussed what the school’s next priority was in terms of infrastructure and programming. They agreed that, although latrines were needed, more school blocks were most important. Again we brought up the issue of sexual abuse of girls, and again we were greeted with the same response: it doesn’t happen here. We tried to persuade a more nuanced discussion of the topic, telling them that such abuse also happened in the U.S. William reported that his workplace, the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), is working to provide in-service trainings to teachers on these issues.

Our time in Zomba ended with a visit to MIE and Domasi College where William, Edith, and Wotchiwe work. We especially took time to tour the library and heard many requests for new books. Indeed, the collection was quite old but many students were still using the library to study and complete work. My dad will look into possibilities for supporting the library in partnership with the education department at Radford University whose students spent the month of July at Domasi.

The four of us headed out to Liwonde National Park and the luxurious Mvuu Camp for a few days of enjoying Malawian landscapes and wildlife. We saw many animals on the safari and something like 62 varieties of birds! We also slept very close to the hippos who were soundly snoring outside our chalets. After the safari, we met up with Sue who was taking me on a short trip to the north. It was a difficult goodbye. The three others then went to Mangochi with Ndalapa Mhango who gave them a tour of his hometown and showed them a glimpse of Lake Malawi. They proceeded back to Blantyre, spent an evening with Edith, and then flew home.

Sue and I traveled to Nkhoma and Embangweni Mission Hospitals, which are each maintained by the other two Malawian CCAP Synods. I met two other PCUSA mission co-workers who serve as doctors at each hospital. At Embangweni, I spent one day with other Presbyterians, mostly from Lynchburg and Roanoke, who were on a mission trip to the northern region. We fitted many people with eyeglasses donated to American Lions Clubs at a small rural clinic. I also met Reverend John Gondwe, who visited the Presbytery of the Peaks in March, 2006 with his wife. It would be lovely to get in touch with these congregations in our area and build deeper relationships with others who are serving in Malawi. I enjoyed getting to see more of Malawi and found out that, while it is a small country, it is very, very long! The drive was at least 10 hours in total. We returned to MM on June 13 and I went to my first day at Apatosa on the 14th.

At school, we first decided that I would be teaching in the two oldest grades at the schools, Standard 6 and 7. I would teach English for both, and science for Standard 7 and Social Studies for Standard 6. I spent several days observing the regular classroom teachers before diving into teaching. Four weeks remained in the term of school, so I spent those weeks sticking closely to the textbook curriculum. We focused on grammar and reading comprehension in the English classes and worked through issues of not understanding one another.

Observations:

“My dad reported after returning home that each day will be a challenge for me, and that is so true.”

“I’m beginning to infuriate myself with my endless self pep-talks, thinking about how I will make it through this experience.”

“I discovered a cookbook today at Sue’s house. Seeing the possibilities reminds me of home, but also makes me feel like I’m in control of something and can take charge of one aspect of my life.”

“Maybe the reason I’m here is to experience real hardship, loneliness, and sadness, so that I will be better equipped to help people who feel this all the time once I am in professional ministry. I don’t know yet, but maybe.”

Although I had spent many hours hovering above my open suitcases contemplating the merits of two long-sleeved t-shirts versus three, I do not think that any amount of contemplation or preparation could have prepared me for my experiences in Malawi. It is not as though my life here is so very different from home. I still take a shower everyday (just about), eat three meals a day, try to get some exercise, have work to do and spare time, but it is so difficult to describe why it still feels like worlds away. I think it is one thing to come here for a visit and return home bubbling with the joy of the people, their hospitality, and our hopes to help even more, but it is quite different to make a life here. I was terribly homesick during June! Because I bought a cell phone, I was able to talk to my parents but had to hold back tears every time the phone rang. Some other events of security problems around the Mission also made me question my safety and what it would be like to live here for five months.

Looking back, I think the hardest part was a feeling of aloneness and not understanding how to adjust to the cultural interactions that I faced when I stepped out the door each day. Even though I knew there were tons of people praying for me and people here to help me, nothing could seem to take away the fear and sadness I felt. During this time, I learned what it was to pray, to really pray for just one thing that would help me to feel secure. At the beginning I prayed for strength to get through each day. I truly relied on God to help me and indeed God did. As I sat playing hymns one afternoon on Sue’s piano, I was flooded with a sense that it was going to be ok. Not easy, but ok.

For future externs, I would advise them to be prepared for these feelings and to find some outlet for emotional support. Although certainly everyone would be different, I think this is a necessary component of planning for this mission experience.

July – Dealing with People

Events:

- At school, I embarked on a unit to teach my Standard 6 class the history of their very own Mulanje Mission. They had been studying different missionaries who came to Malawi, including Dutch Reform Christians and Scottish Presbyterians, but it seemed like a perfect time to include a unit about the developments in their own community. Armstrong Khoza has written a thorough history of MM, so I used this text as a guide to teach about how the missionaries first encountered hostility from local chiefs, located the mission at the very base of the mountain for security, and eventually moved to the present location. Mr. Khoza then came to the class as a guest speaker. I hope that this study moved the students’ learning from abstraction to a concrete understanding of how history affects their own lives. At least that was the goal!

- I began to assist the head-teachers at Apatasa with their finances and budgeting for the upcoming year. The school provides a great service by accommodating orphans for free, but

with already low tuition fees, they are having difficulty paying all their bills. Teachers' salaries and a feeding program drain their funds. I spent time coming up with rough figures and presenting various options for how they might increase their income and thereby, also pay their teachers a better wage in 2007. With Anne van de Ven, the medical director's wife, I also began working on a pamphlet to promote an Adopt-an-Orphan program at the school. This program would allow donors to pay about \$100 per year to cover all the costs of tuition, feeding, clothing, and school supplies for one orphan. The pamphlets will be distributed in the U.S. and Europe.

- I attended meetings for both the Mvano, CCAP Women's Guild meeting, and the Health Christian Fellowship (HCF) group at the MM Nursing School. The Mvano meeting was conducted in Chichewa and therefore difficult for me to understand, but it was good to observe the women in their own setting. There is a great focus on money, as each woman must present her weekly offering to the treasurer who keeps track in a book and writes the woman's donation on her card. I met another woman who said she had stopped attending these meetings because she could not donate. I found this very sad and disturbing for her and for the group as a whole. I struggle to understand this public focus on money, but have come to think that because there is so little money, the issue takes on a strong focus.

The HCF meeting was lively and the students were very welcoming of me. It was an experience of worship and fellowship unlike any other I have experienced. They sang and then broke into spontaneous prayer, each person shouting or speaking aloud their prayers simultaneously. I maintained my own silent prayer, but adjusted to this style after several meetings. The group has an evangelical flavor and unfortunately, I began to feel that I could not participate fully because I could not comfortably respond to questions about being born again, how many people I had converted in the past month, and how I interacted with people who are not born again. I enjoyed my time at these meetings but felt that I could not authentically express my own faith and stopped attending in August.

- George Glasson and his group from Virginia Tech and Radford University visited MM during the weekend of July 8-9th. It was wonderful to see them, particularly because all the other Western people were away from the Mission throughout this month. Ndalapa and Absolam Phiri were also working with the group and it was great to have more time to chat with them. We toured a tea plantation, the Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust, and I arranged a hike for them on the mountain during which George and I were able to connect about church issues and my life here. I felt blessed that the 20-some students were so interested in my life and work here and they understood that it was difficult but also rewarding.

- School released for a two-week break between terms on July 14th. For the first week of break I went on a trip to Nkhata Bay, a lakeside town for vacationers in the north of the country. I traveled with Eva van Velsen, a young Dutch doctor who was Sue's houseguest until August and two other young women from Norway who serve as radiologists in Mulanje and Blantyre. The three others partook of a SCUBA diving course during the week, while I relaxed and enjoyed the scenery. It was kind of a retreat for me and I was especially grateful for the opportunity to visit Lake Malawi.

Observations:

"I'm trying to be open to what God has set/is setting before me. But I also keep saying that I haven't fallen in love with Malawi...maybe I find it too risky to fall in love because it will ask me to change, to live differently here and especially at home and I don't know if I'm ready to do that."

“What is the right way to deal with the endless greetings and hello’s of people? It seems wrong to ignore them and I’m not sure that’s any easier than just saying hello. I think this is important because it is a choice I make on behalf of my church, not just myself.”

“We laugh a lot about what we see as the incompetence of people here, which is both a relief and another source of pain for me. I want to see how some Malawian ways of doing things are good, too, but it all just seems so ineffective for really improving things here.”

“I’ve never so deeply depended on God answering my prayers or sustaining me. I don’t know if that’s my reason for being here, or if it should be, but it’s still a powerful, transformative experience.”

July was a month of continued adjustment and also much frustration. I think I often compound the initial frustration with external events by being frustrated with myself about how I deal with them. I have to remind myself that I can be nowhere else than where I am emotionally and it is only more damaging to be hard on myself for feeling like that. One of my greatest struggles was learning to interact with people, particularly as I walk to school or during hour-long walks in the afternoon that I like to take for exercise. EVERYONE, and I do mean everyone, says hello to me. I get stared at, laughed at, told “give me five kwacha,” asked how I’m doing, where I live, or where I’m going with what feels like every step I take. The inability to have privacy and be anonymous has been one of the absolute most difficult things for me. I inquire of others how they deal with these interactions and several people said that they just ignore people because it is too tiring to respond to everyone. But the people don’t give up either. Children will scream at you for minutes as you continue to walk down the road. It also does not feel Christ-like to ignore, but it is also exhausting and frankly, annoying, to have to repeat the same conversation over and over when you step out the door. Learning to cope with this in a way that I can live with and that also feels like a Christian way has been one of my major goals.

In daily life, it is also easy to observe the fact that people here are brought up with very different skills than in the U.S. As I worked with the teachers at the school on their finances, it is easily apparent that most people do not have a sense of how to step back and take in a broad view of a problem. They often lack skills for dealing with complexity, abstracting from a certain situation to a universal one, or prioritizing needs. Certainly not all Americans possess these skills either, but I think our culture often demands that we analyze and theorize about situations and problems. We must take into consideration the different ways of dealing with problems and of planning (particularly where money is concerned) when we consider how to donate money to different projects in Malawi.

My ears have also become accustomed to hearing the notion that a person cannot come to work in Malawi with the goal of “changing the world,” but must only come for one’s self. This has been repeated to me by several of the Western doctors, hospital staff, and a Peace Corps volunteer. As I seek to serve on behalf of the church in a mission relationship, this idea is very troubling. If the church is only here for itself, to make ourselves feel like we’re really involved in Malawi, then are we really doing God’s work? I think we are right to try to focus on the mutuality part of our mission by sending human resources instead of only money, but does this have a lasting impact? How much of mission work is about us, and how much is about the people out there? More about this in August.

August – Falling in Love

Events:

- During the first weekend in August I moved into Sue Makin's house, thereby stabilizing my living situation and bringing all my activities (eating, showering, sleeping, relaxing) into the same location. This was a relief, even though I had adjusted to moving between my guest room at the nursing school and her home. The lack of running water (most of the time) at the guest room was trying, however.

- Marquita Hill and her traveling companion, Diana, also visited Mulanje at the beginning of the month. We enjoyed fellowship together, heard about their visits with YWCA women, and hiked on the mountain.

Particularly interesting for me was a visit from a woman from the Women and Law in Southern Africa NGO. This woman was so eloquent, highly educated, and feminist to the core that I immediately wanted to spend more time hearing about her work. It was also very good for me to see a Malawian woman like this, since I have encountered few Malawians with such academic credentials and political involvement. She shared much with us about the new domestic violence law that Malawi has adopted and the long road to making it really serve women. I inquired about the church's support of her work, which generally seeks to empower and educate women. In general, she said that the church has been a positive influence, which I was happy to hear.

- August saw the beginning of a new 12-week school term. I took charge of my curriculum during this month and moved away from some of the textbooks that I found unhelpful. In my Standard 7 English class we began trying to do more reading practice and work with reading comprehension as they had previously been studying only grammar. We read a non-fiction book about the history of chocolate and the process behind making it that my parents had sent. This of course meant that we got to eat some chocolate (which I'm not sure if the kids had ever eaten before) and the highlight of the unit was bringing in the ingredients to let the kids make brownies after studying an English recipe. In science, we did a three-week unit on HIV/AIDS, using interactive lessons provided from my friend Erin, a local Peace Corps volunteer. Although the lessons were designed for secondary students, I adapted them to fit our needs. The lessons focused on making bridges to the future and using the ABC bridges (Abstinence, Be Faithful, Condoms) to get there. I was slightly unsure of how to deal with discussions of sex and condoms, but just ploughed ahead and spoke frankly about it. The headmistress gave me advice, saying that we should only promote condom use in the context of marriage when one partner is HIV positive, but I could not in good faith follow that advice. I simply taught that any sexual act outside of abstinence or sex with ONE partner should include a condom.

In Standard 6, we read several picture books that told very simplified versions of Bible stories (Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son). My goal was to work on reading comprehension and understanding the concepts of main characters, setting, and a story's beginning, middle, and end. Then I challenged the students to write their own story. After looking at several Bible stories, they voted on the Christmas story. We did different activities to get a complete text, some where they edited incorrect sentences, filled in blanks with appropriate words, and finally wrote the last sentences themselves using verbs and nouns that I provided. Each student illustrated a page, though since most students had rarely seen a picture book, the concept of illustrating the sentence that was on their page escaped some of the students. Social studies was my most difficult subject as it is hard to make interactive and to translate such abstract concepts into words they can understand. We attempted to learn about the structure of Malawian central government and

development projects but I am not confident that the students took much away from these studies.

- Ted Wright, the PCUSA regional liaison for Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique visited Mulanje. His job is to oversee interactions between American congregations seeking to engage in mission work in the region and the communities on the ground who must also help coordinate these efforts. We had very interesting conversations about the new direction of mission work, in that individual congregations tend to initiate such involvement, whereas previously most of the work was done through the denomination. He spoke of a 5-year cycle of this involvement due to the short term nature of the American attention span. It begins with excitement and exploration, moves to projects, and then disappointment when things don't work out or aren't fixed. Then the work often disbands unless there is a push for sustained involvement in the face of the difficulty. People like us really want to fix things and see tangible progress, but that isn't always realistic. I wonder how or if we will try to fight this cycle as our time in Malawi progresses?

- I spent a weekend at Edith Mmela's home, getting to know her family and see her life. I discovered how much time and work goes into cooking, but it was also fun to learn about Malawian meal preparation. I wanted to see how everything was done and learned about cooking whole fish and the typical vegetable preparation: everything with tomatoes and onions and little curry powder. I am still not sure I have the technique for nsima down, though! Her children and nephew wanted to know lots about American culture and they could not get over the oddity of the fact that only three people live in my whole house, since I have no siblings. "What about the maid? Where does she live?" Alas, there is no maid!

Observations:

"I can't get over how special it is to me when the [Malawians] give me fruits and vegetables. It's so simple and so real."

"It's funny, the lessons that I think will succeed often fail and vice versa. Plus being creative is tough when I don't have many resources."

"I came across this idea of the weakness of God...God became human – a humble form, to be sure, and then died for us, which is perhaps the highest form of weakness. The writer also said that we pray for so many things, yet maybe all God has to offer is God's self. Maybe that's enough?"

I spent lots of time pondering my ability/inability to fall in love with Malawi: "Love takes time. Love doesn't happen immediately – that's passion and lust – and love usually makes us struggle and cry and decide if that's really what we feel. I'm not certain I'm in love with this place yet, but I don't think it's just me *choosing* not to love it as I thought at first. I should take time, so I really know it and understand it. I guess that's why we say we *grow* to love things."

I struggled a lot with the impression I gave some visitors early in the month. I was so concerned that they would take home the message that I hated being here, which simply was not true. Certainly every minute is not wonderful and there are many ups and downs, but I did not want anyone to think that this was a wasted effort toward mission. All along, I have tried to be honest with anyone who asks about my feelings and the difficulties of being here. But I also reminded myself that I can't be in any other emotional place than where I am and being upset at being upset never makes things better. I think this was the beginning of a turning point at which I began to feel more at ease and comfortable in my surroundings.

I started receiving postal mail from BPC members this month. Although I'd rather not name those who wrote, I was so deeply moved by the honesty of these letters and the connection

I felt to these women (indeed, all were women) who shared their lives with me. I cried upon reading one of the letters and realized that for the first time since being here, perhaps, I was not crying simply for myself, but maybe crying tears that encompassed a deeper pain that the whole world feels.

After the visit from Ted Wright, I pondered the involvement of BPC in Malawi, particularly the way we frame the relationships in our work. I often wonder if we are truly the ones who need to establish this sense of relationship, as in, how much of this is for ourselves to lessen the guilt of being the ones who have money? There is a strong “give me” culture in Malawi, which means there is no shame in asking for, or even expecting to be given, money. This is distressing to see and makes me wonder how mission dollars fit into such a culture. So although I am not sure if the relationships we cherish so much provide as much benefit to the people here as we would like to think, I do believe that our approach of really being with people through the externs is different. And by being different, it has possibilities for encountering the “give me” culture and rearranging ideas around it. The bottom line is Malawi still needs money to lift itself up and will need it for a long time to come. But combining sustained giving with daily interactions is a new formula that is different from mission trips and writing checks or hosting a meal for visitors and then using their money to build a school.

After one tough lesson at school, I pretty much had to end class because there was so much misbehavior in the room that I could not put an end to. One of the children, who lives with the headmistress, reported this problem and several children were punished the next day. They were brought up in front of the whole school and everyone was told that they needed to respect me because I came from so far away to teach them. Then the two boys were taken into the office and “talked to” until they were both in tears. I was horrified at this, but didn’t know what to do to stop it. It broke my heart to see the kids crying and it felt very much like it was my fault. I tried to explain that I know how difficult it must be for them to have me as their teacher but that we all needed to work together to pull it off. I hope that my contributions to their learning are helping and not hurting.

September – The Journey Continues

Events:

- During the first weekend of September I preached the sermon at the Mulanje Mission Church’s English service. When I had initially asked to preach on that day they had said it would be Women’s Sunday so I joyfully proceeded with a women-themed sermon. All of the other elders and readers were women on that day, which was wonderful (and rare) to see. My sermon discussed the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 38-42) and tried to strike a balance between affirming women’s roles as well as challenging women and the community to step outside the usual expectations. I tried to wrestle with the text, showing that Jesus does not in fact dismiss Martha’s hospitality – women’s work – but rather expects us to keep our eyes open to the presence of God in our midst even as we serve. I also called on the culture to account for collective sin in which the expectations upon Martha may have kept her distracted by cooking and serving so that she was blinded to the presence of Christ. These ideas came out of my experiences of many group lunches in which women do all of the preparation, serve the food, and then often eat nothing themselves until after everything has been cleaned up. There are also physical divisions between men and women, even though or particularly because, these are church events. I attended one event during which men tend sat in chairs on one side of the lawn while women sat on mats on the ground on the other. My sermon then asked the congregation to

see the story that just precedes the one about Martha and Mary, the Good Samaritan. I used this story to show that God calls us to *do* with our hands, as the Samaritan helps the hurt man, and God also call us to listen, learn, and think as Mary does at the feet of Jesus. We have to discern the where and when of these actions, all while trying to stay awake and alert to God's presence with us. Frances Taylor Gench's book *Back to the Well* was extremely helpful in preparing my sermon.

I had trouble determining the congregation's reaction, as they gave very few facial or verbal expressions. But later, many people told me that they enjoyed my preaching and I was also asked to give the sermon again during the Chichewa service (using a translator) in October.

- School lessons continued well during the month. Apatso received a gift of dictionaries from Whiteabbey Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland which was wonderful for me. Earlier in the term I had tried to teach about dictionaries but only had a few to hand out, which were difficult for children to use and the unit generally exploded in my face. But, these were simple dictionaries and having one for each child to use made all the difference in the world. I went back and re-taught the concepts that had flown by the students the first time and this time they were able to figure it out! It still took a long time for many of the students to find the words, but most of them could find words, understand whether the word was a noun, verb, etc., and read the definition. We continued using the dictionaries for about 3 weeks as I pushed the students to USE and UNDERSTAND the words they looked up, not just write definitions. We tried to write sentences using the new definitions of words and replace an unfamiliar word with a simple definition. It was wonderful to see the children acquire a skill and improve their abilities with it. I hope that the dictionaries will continue to be used after I leave.

- Sue and I hosted Amy French, an American OB/GYN who was working at the hospital during September. She and I were great friends and were able to take several trips together. We spent a weekend at the base of Mt. Mulanje with Sue and another mission doctor from northern Malawi. This was a lovely retreat and another space in which it is so easy to focus on God, God's call for our lives, and the beauty of creation. Amy and I also took a weekend to hike on the mountain. It was a grueling hike, made easier by the fact that we took a porter/guide to carry our bag. We spent the night in a hut at the top of the plateau and cooked dinner in the fireplace. Feeling the physical limits of one's body is both astonishing and exhilarating, at least after your thighs stop aching!

- I made my firsts sustained minibus trip to Zomba to visit William and Esther Susuwele and their boys. After picking me up, they said they needed to buy some chicken. Indeed, we purchased several live chickens that rode all the way home with us in the backseat and were promptly butchered once we arrived at their house. How different an experience than I would ever have at home! William commented on how odd it had been for him to see people taking dogs on the bus in Blacksburg. I enjoyed talking to William about the challenges of education in Malawi, the necessity of good leadership, and the progress at Mulunguzi School. Esther also shared with me her photos from the U.S. and we chatted about what it is like to live in a place very different from your home. Having not really known William or Esther during their time in the U.S., it was exciting to hear about all that they did and the people that we both know there. I was also impressed at Esther's life while she was there, particularly working jobs that many of us would refuse, but doing so joyfully and remembering her time in those places fondly.

Observations:

“I decided that I hadn’t much analyzed these women (the head-teachers at my school) but I would certainly call them feminists! They recognize their womanhood and...Unlike women at home, I think you can’t hide from your gender here. You can’t say ‘I don’t represent women’ or ‘I’m not a testament to women, I just work hard.’ The culture very much knows you are a woman, so what you do, you do as a woman.”

“I feel like I’ve let a lot of that stuff (work with budgeting, planning etc.) slide because it doesn’t seem most important – pick your battles. I started following some advice I heard that says just be with people because no matter how hard you work to change the machine, the changes won’t last once you’re gone. Maybe that’s too defeatist, but it seems so true.”

Just as at any school, there were many intense highs and lows this month. I thoroughly enjoyed a “home economics” lesson in which the children cooked rice, vegetables, and eggs at school. They were all eager to show me how to do things in the best way and to sample their food at the end. It was so much fun to feel like a real part of the action. On the other hand, discipline problems grew to be more of a problem during my teaching. I felt like I had much less authority than a “regular” teacher, and did not know what to do to punish children. Mostly they were too talkative, not paying attention, etc. I know that these problems are no different from any classroom at home and generally chose to deal with them leniently or not at all. I decided that my goal was more to be an encouraging factor for the kids than a disciplinarian. And my punishing a student was not going to change their behavior in the long run. Outside the classroom, I grew to love the three founders of the school even more. I decided that they are truly feminist women, even though I don’t think they would label themselves that way. Two of them are widows, and all take care of several orphans in their homes, work all week without pay, and are incredibly active in church life. And they do not hide behind men or anything else. They are proud of their school and know that they work hard.

During the month I felt less need to be working on other projects and more of a need just to be with people. Although I continued to help the school periodically with their finances, I realized that I probably did not have enough expertise to really change the way they run things. And they would often tell me how important my facts and figures were, but then the papers would end up in the back of the drawer. The changes they did make were small but they appreciate advice nonetheless. I felt like it was more important just to talk with people, to gain their perspective and understand their lives. Maybe that’s a cop out, but after asking myself many times why I was called to Malawi, I decided that it was to learn and demonstrate the sense that we are one body of Christ, but not to fix problems.

As I found myself more at home, I also found it more difficult to pray. It’s strange how we can often feel closest to God and most comforted by that relationship when we are most in need, but when things are good we seem not to need God as much. I look forward to seeing how my faith develops from this experience after returning home.

Work continued on the Apatza Adopt an Orphan project. I wrote the text for the brochure and Anne van de Ven formatted and added pictures. We presented it for the first time to a group of visitors from the Presbyterian Church of Canada. One man was very excited about it and offered \$200 to sponsor two orphans. I welcomed this, but then found myself dealing with all the expectations of a donor. He needed names of the specific orphans, photos, and was even confused about which children he would be sponsoring as he had wanted it to be two who were not eligible for enrollment in the program. This was frustrating and an eye-opener about what’s it’s like to be on the other side of the donor relationship. Sometimes the donors are an annoyance because they demand so much information. The man had envisioned our tiny

school's program as something like a World Vision program, but spending money for photos and correspondence would eat up the donation. It reminded me that we should not be blind to the difficulties of funding projects so far from home without oversight, but that we must also trust our friends here. We may often be fearful of how our money is spent or feel powerless, but we must also keep in mind the abilities of our partners to provide us with information.

October – How Bittersweet It Is

Events:

- During October, I developed a friendship with Steve Lignos and Stacey Xander, two young people about my age from Pittsburgh Presbytery. They were also in Malawi to teach and build up partnerships. Their Presbytery has an extensive and deep relationship with Blantyre Synod. It was wonderful for me to have some other people my age to converse with, particularly people who were asking similar questions and experiencing similar ups and downs. Steve is planning to attend Pittsburgh Seminary this fall, so we had good pre-seminary conversations.

The three of us traveled by public transport to Liwonde National Park for a long weekend in October. That was my longest trip by minibus and one I don't wish to relive. But being together, we felt as safe as could! We enjoyed the wildlife and the company and the break from our usual teaching routine.

- Teaching finished up during the first week of October and exams began thereafter. Because I finished much of the curriculum, I was on my own to create new activities to do. I chose not to take the advice of other teachers, which was simply to start again at the beginning of the same textbooks. In social studies, I made use of the world maps the church had donated and an atlas from my parents to begin a unit on geography. When kids have never seen a map before, you truly have to start at the beginning. Some of them picked it up well, and others struggled to understand why Panama City was not in the southern United States even though it was at the bottom of their map. I think it was good to show them the vastness of the world and to familiarize them with something they might not otherwise see until secondary school.

In science, I was reaching for things to teach after the curriculum ended with a study of simple machines. We did some "fun" experiments: the classic baking soda and vinegar volcano, which they got a kick out of, and also some after-image viewing with colors. I tried to demonstrate that science can be a lot of fun and promised not to test them on any of that material.

As usual, there was little instruction about when to conduct my exams but eventually I took charge and they went off fine. Some of the students' work was disappointing but the performance of a few students was quite impressive. In my standard seven class, the students wrote well in very decent English. That was encouraging and I knew that all was not lost. All my students were promoted to the next standard (grade).

- Sue, Steve, and I traveled to the south of Malawi over the Mother's Day weekend, mostly with the goal of hitting the golf links! We stayed in Nyala Lodge in Lengwe National Park. During that weekend, a conservation society was conducting a game count inside the park. Therefore, instead of doing a driving safari around the park we chose the walking one. It was quite a walk through the brambles, but eventually we ended up at a hide where the animal viewing was excellent. There, we saw nyala, a kind of antelope in its northernmost African habitat. We also visited the exquisite golf course at the Sucoma Sugar Estate. The Estate is a surreal place, made of up nice houses in neighborhoods and the full country club experience. It

seems very out of place in Malawi. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a good round of golf and a traditional South African braai or barbecue.

- I preached at the Chichewa service using my same sermon from women's Sunday. It was much more difficult through translation, but we all survived. I was hopeful that the message was also well received among many of the non-English speaking women for whom it may be most important. Steve and Stacey came for the weekend and to hear my sermon. I appreciated their support and friendship.

- The women at my school hosted me for a goodbye lunch. We ate and then traveled to visit each woman's home. It was nice to see where they lived and meet some of their family members. They also reminisced a lot about what the land used to look like and who used to live where, much like we do in this country when we look at our shopping malls and housing developments.

- Armstrong met with me about the progress on building latrines for teacher houses at MMPS. They were using money that had been donated by BPC in June for the construction, but ran out of money before they could purchase the iron sheets for the roofing. I felt that this was a worthy cause, and therefore donated the \$300 that had been left for me to distribute when the other church members returned home. This donation allowed the roofs to be finished before the rains and I took a "tour" of the completed structures along with the headmaster of the school. Unfortunately, I heard that these structures did not withstand the strong, first rains of the season, which hit Mulanje the week after I returned home.

- I hosted a celebration for my two classes at Apatsa just before the end of the term. I baked chocolate cookies, peanut butter preacher cookies, coffee cake, and a candy concoction for the kids. They tasted all the "American" foods and thought they were pretty interesting! They had a chance to ask me questions that they had not found answers to before, such as what kind of music I liked and how many brothers and sisters I had. I also presented them with the box of books from the 3rd-5th grade Sunday school class at BPC. I told them to remind their teachers to let them use the books often. Finally, I shared a big poster of pictures of my family and my church family with them. Anne Campbell had sent me some photos of the church from different seasons (snow, fall colors, etc.) that they enjoyed looking at. It was a wonderful event that helped the students really understand who had sent me to be their teacher.

- On my last day of school there was a big celebration in honor of the kids' hard work during the term and my departure. Many community members attended, including representatives from the church and the Teachers Development Center, as well as parents. The head teachers gave speeches and the students had written several poems and songs that they performed for me. Some of the girls sang this song: "Emma, Emma Separation. We want to stay with you but time don't allow." A student from each class came up to thank me for teaching them certain ideas. I think learning how to use the dictionaries had a major impact on them. I was asked not to forget the community because it has many needs. The women also presented me with a Malawian outfit, which I immediately changed into and modeled for the crowd! Afterward, there was much picture taking and dancing to tapes of popular music in the classrooms.

- After the end of school, I traveled to spend a few more days with the Susuwele's in Zomba. I set up a tour of the Zomba Theological School with Steven McCracken, an Irish pastor who serves as the dean of the school. He was a great guide and provided me with more information on why pastors must be married before they can be ordained and how the school works to support the whole family while one parent/spouse is studying.

•I traveled to Chiradzulu to visit with Reverend Lau Makata, whom Alex had introduced to us in June. He and I had some good conversations about ministry and the challenges he faces serving in a rural environment. I enjoyed those conversations, but was uncomfortable when he asked me directly to find him a sponsor in the United States. I did not feel the request was appropriate since it seemed to be simply for living money. I wished that I could help in some other way, but financial conversations are common and always uncomfortable.

•I ended my travel in Blantyre where I stayed at Canada House, Reverend Joel and Rebecca Sherbino's home where Steve and Stacey also lived. I got to be present for the dedication of the new Multi-Purpose Church Hall at St. Michael's and All Angels congregation. It was quite the to-do and even President Bingu wa Mutharika was in attendance.

•A few days after coming home from these travels, I hosted the three head teachers for a thank-you/goodbye brunch at Sue's house. I served quiche, lemon muffins, roasted potatoes, and fruit salad. I then showed them a presentation of how to check their new email account that I created for them and presented them with picture books sent for the school by Barbara Sinha.

Observations:

During Steve and Stacey's visit to Mulanje: "The best part was that we had enough running water to last us through the weekend and everyone got to bathe! Pretty exciting! It's gone today, of course, but you can't have everything."

"The women continually express their gratitude for my presence here. I said that someone once told me that if all we ever said in prayer was 'thank-you,' that would be enough. Now, I'm not sure that's entirely true, but for all the good things God provides, how can we ever really express what we mean beyond those words?"

After visiting the women's homes, I was so struck by the fact that Malawians feel no shame about their homes. "They do not fear you will judge them or look down upon them or be repulsed by the dirt. They simply want you to come. It would only be shameful to *not* invite you." I think that many of us can take a cue from our Malawian friends about this. We should feel pride and joy in opening our homes to our friends, no matter where or how we live.

"The last day of school finally came and then I wasn't sure if I was ready. There were a few tears as I did my usual standing around watching the kids in the morning. I know I won't really see any of them again and that makes me sad."

It was so wonderful to host a brunch for the women at my school. These women became some of my closest friends in Malawi, even though they were more like grandmothers. They were so excited to learn from me and also so gracious and thankful for my presence. I could not begin to communicate that they had gifted me equally by sharing so much of their lives. They decided that the next home economics lesson at school would be to try to bake eggs, just like the quiche I served them. I was so worried that they would hate me food, but they really liked it! We had a wonderful time together and said our final goodbyes that day.

"The wives [of students at the theological school] must be present on campus because they take classes, too: theology, hospitality, sewing, cooking. There's also a Montessori school on campus for children. I like that it's a family approach, but it's still based on the male model family. I don't think they expect the husbands of any of their few female students to go through the same 'wives' classes."

"Things got awkward when he [Reverend Makata] started asking me to find a sponsor for his family. I certainly won't be doing that, but all I can manage to say is 'we'll see' or 'you never know,' even though I really mean, 'no, that's not something I feel comfortable doing.'"

As I heard more and more about Steve and Stacey's Malawi experience, I realized how much impact my location had on how I felt about things. By living in Blantyre, they seemed much more connected to the heartbeat of the church, which is the Synod. Everyone knew who they were and they had constant support from many Malawians. Although this was mostly due to the history of the Pittsburgh-Blantyre partnership, I believe the formality of that relationship made their stay a bit easier. In addition, their location in the city gave them access to a lot of things that I often longed for, particularly the grocery store. While I do not think I would have changed my experience, it was interesting to see how much location can affect one's stay.

This month was a whirlwind and although I was sad to say goodbye to my friends at the Mission, I also felt like I had some closure on the experience. Being able to stay through the whole term of school was important because it gave me a chance to take charge of my classes and to see the students through to the end. I also had enough time left to make some final visits to people related to BPC, which I felt was a good ending. There was a lot of joy and sadness about saying goodbye to my students, but I hope that collectively, our church made an impact on their lives.

November – The Road Home

- I left Mulanje for the last time at the beginning of November. I stayed a night with the Mmela's and then traveled to Lilongwe on my own. I took an organized group safari to South Luangwa National Park in Zambia. The heat was hot, but I had a great time seeing lots of animals at one of the best game parks in Africa. It was a good way to end the trip even though it was away from my friends in Malawi. I then traveled back to Blantyre where I stayed Edith and her family for one last night before they saw me off at the airport on November 11. An uneventful flight home got me back to Roanoke on the 12th, but a bit earlier than expected as my parents hadn't yet arrived to greet me. But better early than late!

- I was devastated to hear about the coming of the rainy season to Mulanje in the weeks after I left the Mission. Early rains tend to be heavy and the storms destroyed an entire block of classrooms at Apatsa, as well as new construction of latrines for teacher houses MMPS. Through a donor family at BPC and generous support from people in the Netherlands, enough money has been raised to reconstruct the classrooms at Apatsa. We can be thankful for this blessing, but the work is indeed never done.

Questions for BPC to ponder:

Where are our strongest relationships? How can we further strengthen these or others?

What relationships (people, schools, communities) would we like to further develop? Are there any relationships that we feel we need to pull back on? What is a responsible way of pulling back and informing our partners of this decision?

What does a relationship consist of? Is it always financial support or can other donations or means of support also be useful?

How do we envision our long-term support of projects in Malawi?

Can we avoid the five-year cycle as described by Ted Wright where we get bored or find new projects that interest us more? BPC's experience with Guatemala might be instructive here.

What kind of oversight is expected of the moneys we send?

We call our friends in Malawi our partners. What is expected of both parties in these partnerships?

We currently depend on Armstrong Khoza, but we also made our relationship with the Mulanje Mission Partnership committee formal in June. If Armstrong becomes unable to assist us for any reason, to whom would we turn?

Suggestions for planning for a future extern:

- Involve Blantyre Synod in some of the planning stages of sending an extern and make the relationship a formal one. This might increase the visibility of the extern and widen their circle of support and partnership.
- Arrange housing in advance, even though this is difficult and subject to change. I feel that asking Sue to house someone for such a long period of time may not be fair. If she would agree to have another person stay with her I strongly recommend that the church set up a monthly "rent" agreement beforehand. While my finances worked out, I think it is in everyone's best interest to know what is expected. I recommend a small monthly payment to Sue possibly in the range of \$50, and then allowing the extern to supplement that by helping with food costs.
- Schedule the visit based on the school term, assuming that the person will be teaching. Being present for the duration of a term is of utmost importance and is helpful to both the extern, students, and school administration. If the person will be teaching at the Mission secondary school (MCDSS) I do not recommend them being there for the third term (end of August – November) as this is when national exams take place and regular classes are rarely in session.
- Ensure that the person buys a cell phone. This is essential for keeping in touch with other Malawians who may not be in their area or even other friends they might meet. It is also good to have a way to call someone for any possible safety issues that arise.
- I think it will be important to reflect on the possibility of having a gap of time between externs. Since we may not send anyone during 2007, I think it will be a different experience for the next person to go. They may not be as easily associated with BPC, particularly if Alex is not present. I realize that he needs a break from this trip and I think it is wise to allow others to have the opportunity to visit. Nonetheless, it will mean something different for the church to be present without their abusa (pastor).

TRUST

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally,
impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip
the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown,
something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability --
And that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually --
let them grow,
let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time (that is to say, grace and
circumstances acting
on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that God's hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of
feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin