

MALAWI: THE WARM HEART OF AFRICA

(Richard Underwood, General Secretary, FIEC)

Blantyre International was sheer bedlam when we touched down on a sunny afternoon at the end of June. The broad smiles on the faces of the welcoming party were ample evidence that we'd landed in Malawi – the warm heart of Africa.

Tim and Pansy Alford, formerly of Africa Inland Mission and veterans of ministry in Africa, and I, had been invited through Pastor Training International and Zambesi Mission to speak at two pastoral refreshment conferences – one based at the Evangelical Bible College of Malawi in Blantyre, the other in rural Kande Beach on the shores of beautiful Lake Malawi. Tim had planned to teach the NT letter to Titus; I was scheduled to share some lessons from the OT life of David. Our hosts throughout were a remarkable Nigerian couple I had first met during my ministry in Cambridgeshire – Abraham and Ruth Folayan, now living in Blantyre and working at the Bible College.

Within hours of touching down, I found myself sitting with the church elders on a concrete bench at the front of Ndakhota Evangelical Church. Ndakhota is a tiny village 30 kilometres north of Blantyre. As the Mission 4x4 edged its way along a narrow dirt track, my spirits sank. Who on earth would come to church here? Imagine my surprise when we drove into a clearing and discovered a knot of thatched mud huts, a very primitive-looking school and a large church building shimmering under a rusty tin roof. And people everywhere – a youth choir under the direction of an incredibly lively conductor... the ladies fellowship choir... a third choir, all practising for the forthcoming service.

The service lasted three hours with what seemed to be the longest set of church notices in history! I was given the privilege of preaching – with an interpreter. There had been so much to assimilate and the whole experience seemed so overwhelming that I can only hope the interpreter got tired of my pathetic sermon on the Prodigal Son and preached a cracking sermon of his own from Romans 8!

The two four-day conferences saw nearly 150 church leaders from an impressive array of denominational backgrounds travelling long distances to listen to the preaching of God's word, engage in energetic doctrinal debate and meet fellow workers in gospel ministry. I never ceased to be impressed by the vibrancy of their worship and their capacity to learn. The days were long and packed. At 9 o'clock at night, long after the sun had set, these guys were still passionately debating the doctrine of eternal security.

No lack of appetite there, then. And speaking of food, chips for breakfast made for a promising start. Sadly, it wasn't chips with everything. The staple diet for breakfast, lunch and supper was nsima, maize porridge eaten by rolling it into balls with one's fingers and dipping it into tomato sauce. I'll never complain about my wife's fish pie again, honest!

The highlights of both conferences were the presentation ceremonies when each student was given a set of devotional and theological books and commentaries. The smiles were so broad it took a wide-angle lens to capture them! Those smiles said it all and made the whole trip totally worthwhile.

What went through my mind as I settled down to sleep on the South African Airways flight to Johannesburg? These people were my brothers and sisters. We were heirs together of God's gracious gift of life. I loved their worship... I loved their passion for the Lord Jesus... I loved their longing to see their friends and neighbours saved. If heaven was going to be anything like Africa, it was going to be a lively place! I'd certainly need a redeemed body if I was going to move it and shake it like my Malawian brothers!

The challenges? For them – learning to handle the Bible with a surer touch... to break the stranglehold of a deeply anti-Christian culture... to raise up gifted young men and women from among their own ranks so that they don't have to rely on imports like us. The challenges for me? Appreciating afresh that material possessions totally subvert my sense of dependence on God and delight in God... expecting to be able to talk openly with people about God... not feeling totally bound by the timepiece strapped to my wrist!

As I returned to my desk and looked at the backlog, wasn't the Malawian trip just a bit of spiritual self-indulgence? Possibly. But possibly not. So what are the benefits? I'd put them into three categories:

- **Giving** – Christian ministry is a sacrificial response to God's self-sacrifice in the gospel. The God who loves, gives. And he calls us to do the same. So, the churches of the New Testament were expected to be sacrificial in sharing their resources for the good of the gospel. FIEC is not a church but we serve churches and should adopt a church ethos as far as we can. That may include 'offering up' some of the General Secretary's time.
- **Modelling** – every local church needs to have a world-wide vision. The word 'parochial' is so utterly unhelpful when we talk about church. FIEC exists to promote and model this kind of 'wide-angle' thinking and to assist churches in sending gifted people overseas, whether as career missionaries or on short-term projects. It helps us enormously to promote this kind of ministry if we ourselves are seen to be part of it.
- **Learning** – the 'decline' of the church in the West and the appearance of vibrant Christian witness in other parts of the world has at least one good outcome – it has helped us Western Christians to get a taste of what God is doing so powerfully elsewhere. Our own understanding of the gospel is deepened and our faith challenged. We get to tease out the cultural baggage from the heart of the gospel. Any of us involved in leadership should seek to expose ourselves to as many different expressions of Christian witness as we can – especially as the storm clouds gather over the church in the UK.

So, would I consider going to Malawi again? By all means if the opportunity arises. Why don't you think about coming with me?