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## THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE IN MALAWI

by Esther et Matthias Chiwaya, Malawi

As we strive to grow closer to God and each other, we encounter various challenges that test our faith and resilience. Today, we would like to share with you about the fragility of life in our country, Malawi, where each day can be a challenge for survival. Malawi is continually ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. Generational poverty is a reality for most of the people in our country.

You will remember in the Road to Emmaus story, there are three people who walk together down the road. The two disciples are walking together and supporting each other in what seemed a hopeless situation. Then Jesus joins them on the road and gives them hope and inspiration. Today, everyday life for Team members in Malawi is very much like this.

Malawi has known poverty for generations, and recent world events such as the COVID pandemic, inflation, and global warming have only exacerbated the situation. Added to these events are the adverse impacts of recent cyclones, floods, a cholera outbreak and increased risks to food security. It would be easy for us to lose hope, given the extent of these problems. We hold on to the belief that God will not leave us alone in these trying times. Like the disciples on the way to Emmaus, we too are walking together along the road to Malawi's future, one step at a time.

Let us first give you some background about ourselves and our country.

We are Esther et Matthias Chiwaya. We live in Zomba, in the southern highlands of Malawi. Esther works as a teacher and Matthias has recently retired from an administrative role at the University of Malawi. We began our service as pre-region responsible couple for Malawi and Zambia in January 2023. We are fortunate to have good jobs, but this is not the situation for most members of Teams of Our Lady in Malawi.

The reality for most members is very different. The couples in Teams mostly live in the villages where there is little education and poverty is widespread. Life in the villages is very fragile for members of Teams of Our Lady. Couples must help and support each other if they are to survive.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) classifies Malawi as a low-income country in a fragile situation which highlights the nation's vulnerability. The recent 44 percent devaluation of our local currency, by the Reserve Bank of Malawi, follows earlier devaluations. It has had a profound impact on the lives of Malawians, particularly the ultra-poor. As the local currency loses value, the prices of essential commodities skyrocket. This places additional burden on the country, especially the poor living in the villages.

Even if people have a job, it does not guarantee financial security. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (Uneca), Malawi's working poverty rate is 70.18 percent, and is among the highest in Africa.

Despite the government's efforts in pursuing poverty reduction strategies, poverty remains pervasive in Malawi, affecting about 76 percent of the population. The current economic landscape is marked by unprecedented inflationary pressures stemming from global price increases for crucial commodities like fertilizer and fuel, coupled with a volatile exchange rate and depleted foreign exchange reserves. Corruption is a significant problem at all levels of government.



The consequence of all these factors is that a fragile economic situation is now far worse. Many Malawians struggle to make ends meet.

### Walking together in Teams and supporting each other

The life of Teams members in the villages is very difficult. There are many practical questions where we must find a specific Malawian solution.

- How can we have a shared meal when there is little to share, or when the knowledge of basic food hygiene is lacking?
- How can we meet as a Team when the homes have barely large enough space for our own families, and there is no running water or electricity?
- How can we support the movement financially when there is very little money in the entire village?

A simple answer would be to give up when the challenges are so great, but this is not our way. We find support and hope by walking our journey together, and the Lord can work wonders.

Team members in the villages have worked hard to improve both their own lives and the lives of others in their village. For example, during the recent floods, Teams members organised support packages to help the victims of the devastation. They were also able to distribute donations from Teams in other countries, particularly Great Britain and Ireland. Thirteen families who had lost their homes, received funds to help with reconstruction. In this way, the Teams could bypass the bureaucracy and corruption that can happen when funds are distributed in other ways. Teams couples in the villages who have so little, were very effective in helping others who had even less.

Team members have also been very successful in providing training. This of course includes training about the fundamentals of the movement, but it also includes training in the skills needed for survival. For example, on some weekend gatherings, team members were given instructions in food hygiene because this is a common cause of disease and death.

Team members have also been active in pooling their resources to provide practical support to lift their villages out of poverty. In Mangochi, for example, some members were able to pool their resources to raise goats. When these goats give birth, the young goats were shared with team members. In this way, everyone could benefit. A team in Zomba has a garden, about a hectare in size, and they work on it together. When the produce is harvested and sold, the profits are returned to the team. In another village, Teams members pooled what little money they had, to create a small "village bank" to support each other financially through small loans. These small-scale initiatives have not only been successful in improving the life of the community, but they also developed skills in financial management.

At Team meetings, we must be aware of the financial circumstances of each couple. Frequently, members cannot afford to provide food for Team meetings. Couples therefore bring what little food they have and share it with other members. These are important symbols of how we can support and encourage each other through the struggles of life.

Some Team members find it difficult to attend sector and regional events because they need to travel significant distances. Of course, you may wonder why distance is such a problem in a small country. However, when the only option for many is to walk, distances quickly become prohibitive. Many roads are dirt tracks, very dusty in the dry season and often impassable in the wet season. We are grateful for the support of our spiritual counsellors who sometimes have access to a truck so that we can be



transported to events in the back of the truck. However, even with this assistance, not all team members can come to an event. Some must stay behind to protect livestock such as chickens. These essentials can be stolen if left unattended. Without livestock, couples might have no food, and have nothing to trade for the other essentials of life.

### Walking together, accompanied by the Lord Jesus

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we need the help of Jesus to guide us in times of our own fragility. For us, generational poverty is not just physical poverty, but it is also a poverty of the spirit. Through generations of poverty, people can lose energy, vitality and hope in the future. Team members need spiritual food as well as food for our stomachs.

At every meeting we have bible readings, spiritual sharing and prayer. Spiritual counsellors have been invaluable in providing guidance, solace and a connection to something beyond the material world. We are also very thankful to the Transatlantic Super Region for producing newsletters containing spiritual guidance for the whole of the Teams year. Collectively, all these actions in Teams give strength to couples, particularly at times when faith diminishes.

We have had so many disasters in recent times, and the faith of Teams members is frequently tested. We take comfort that like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the inspiration of Jesus and the support of fellow travellers will bring us through.

