

STORIES FROM MALAWI

A Symposium Of Changed Lives

by Penny Hunt and Laurie Mitchell

When the women from San Marino Community Church walked into the Malawi Women's Symposium, we expected to educate these women about the Bible. What we didn't expect was that many of them appeared to know the Bible more thoroughly than many of us, despite the fact that some did not personally own a Bible. Even more surprising was the empowerment generated in the meeting – for the Malawi women, and for ourselves.



The Nkhoma Synod of Malawi has recently approved the ordination of women as elders and deacons. Previously, the one leadership role for women was as members of the Women's Guild, which is a very prestigious organization performing many of the congregational care roles that are filled by deacons in the USA. On her 2010 trip to the USA, Phoebe Chifungo, who is the wife of the minister who heads Nkoma Synod, asked that we might use our experience as deacons and elders to help the Malawi women transition to these new leadership roles.

We arrived in Malawi – after 36 hours of travel – on Friday, and the Symposium started bright and early Saturday morning, 90 minutes from Lilongwe, the Malawi capital. Karen Berns was asked to be the speaker for the whole session. Surprisingly, we found that many of the 30 attendees (who came from up to 200 miles away) did not know the purpose of the meeting until they arrived. They had simply been told by their pastors to show up... and did so.

Beginning with Genesis, Karen focused on the women leaders of the Bible, explaining wording that is often poorly translated or misunderstood. While some of the women spoke English reasonably well, some did not, so Phoebe did an immediate translation into Chichewa after each sentence. We occasionally broke into small groups to discuss what we were learning – we found that many of the women identified with the hard-working women of Proverbs 31: women in Malawi rise at 4 am to attend to their devotions before a long day of work.



One of the delights of the Symposium was listening to and participating in the music of the women of Malawi. Whenever there was a break in the action, someone would start a hymn in Chichewa, and all the women would join in. The voices were simple, rich, and beautiful. Oh, that we would show our hearts in song the way they do! *“God is good. When? All the time!”*



For most of the women, and for most of us, the most poignant part of the Symposium was on Sunday afternoon, when Karen addressed a number of Paul's troubling remarks from the New Testament about women. She explained the context of Paul's statements that appear at face value to be very negative toward women. Paul seems to suggest that women should not speak in church or take on leadership roles... but his remarks were specific to certain problems that were occurring in the Church at that time, and were not intended to be blanket statements. The translators were so excited they translated this explanation twice, to make sure the women understood the context. The women responded with audible expressions of pleasure at understanding these texts more effectively. An “a-ha” moment!

At the end of the Symposium, we were pleased to offer each of the participants a Bible in Chichewa, funded by Penny's small group and a larger women's retreat group at SMCC. They were absolutely thrilled. Each of us tied friendship bracelets to the wrists of each of the women. In return, each of the women tied a cloth skirt printed with pictures of the Synod on each of the SMCC women and we danced together. It was so touching for each of us – it felt like real sisterhood.

Best of all, we received the following remarks in thanks after our return to the United States: *“The response of women is so huge. Those women are no longer the same. Nobody can challenge them any more with I Corinthians 14 and that of Timothy. God really used you to equip them. Your coming here was timely. Some of them have already started teaching women groups at their various congregations. It's amazing what the Lord is doing here after your teachings. Glory be to God!”*

Penny Hunt has been a member of SMCC for 30 years. She has served as a deacon, Sunday School teacher, VBS volunteer, and has been the member of several small groups throughout these years. This was her first overseas mission trip to Malawi following trips by her husband, Roger in 1994 and her daughter Heidi in 2002. She was part of two Presbytery mission groups to Mississippi to help with clean-up and rebuilding after the Katrina hurricane. Roger and Penny also have two sons: Paul, who helped with the computer project for Malawi 2011; and Aaron, who was part of the second Presbytery trip to Mississippi.

Laurie Mitchell has been a member since 1993, and has served as an elder, Foundation director, cooked many Union Station dinners, in a small group for 15 years, and volunteered in many roles with kids. She and her daughter Katie experienced the Malawi adventure together.

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