

Towards 2010 Conference – Root and Fruits Northern Malawi by Eric W.S. Jeffrey.

I went out to Northern Malawi in 1954. It was a time of tremendous change, socially and politically. Here is an example of each.

a) Chiswakata Mkandabire, a greatly loved Elder in Livingstonia, tells how his grandfather used to hide in caves behind the waterfall at Livingstonia to avoid being captured by Arab slave-traders and taken to the slave market in Zanzibar. Then he said, " And my grandson is studying computers in the University of Malawi. " Here is a man who, as it were, has come from the stone age, through the agricultural and industrial ages, to the IT and computer age in his life-time.

b) Politically Sir Harold MacMillan's apt phrase ` the wind of change ` was sweeping across Africa. The British Government had drawn Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe into a Central Africa Federation. Although it might have had some advantages economically, it was fatally flawed. Malawi and Zambia were British Protectorates i.e. they were administered by a Government department in London with the clear objective of bringing in African self-rule at the earliest opportunity. Whereas Zimbabwe was under the Colonial Office in another building in Whitehall with no guarantee that independence would come quickly. Malawi and Zambia wanted to speed on to self-rule. The link with Zimbabwe was broken. So, in this climate of rapid impending change, how did missionary work cope in the three Scottish traditional avenues of service - Ministry, Medicine and Education? Since I am a minister, I'll deal with the first.

The Ministry:

All Scottish ministers in Northern Malawi were made managers of schools in their area. Of course they didn't confine their work to educational administration but, of necessity, it took up a lot of time. They were also hard at work training Malawians to become managers, efficient administrators and trustworthy handlers of finance. Even our highly respected senior minister, Rev. William Watson, the Convener of the Mission Council which oversaw all the administration, was the general manager of schools in the Northern Region.

There was one exception, myself. The Mission Council, with the blessing of the Synod of Livingstonia, had set me apart from admin. duties. The purpose was to enable me to go to the African ministers in their country areas and help in the evangelistic work, the training of Elders and Deacons (some of whom conducted services in surrounding village churches), teaching the Faith in courses for the new Christians of all ages and sharing work with the marvellous Umanyano or Woman's Guild - a wonderfully warm, loving and caring group which you would find wherever you went.

It is clear from that job description that my first priority was to get a grip of the language. The Tumbuka language was a minority language. The official languages are English and Chewa. Malawi is about the same length as Britain and, in my humble opinion, was also like Britain in that the farther north you went, the better it got! So the language I was learning was the equivalent of the Gaelic of the land.

Fortunately Loudon was an encouraging place to start. I was boarding for a year with Rev. Vernon and Edith Stone while my fiancée did a full academic year of notice as a maths teacher in Ghana before flying to Malawi and to our marriage in Loudon church. The Stones were keen on the language so progress was made apace.

For the next two months or so I went about Loudon mission speaking to builders, carpenters etc. and causing much hilarity with my stumbling Tumbuka. But the humour was good-natured and great encouragement was given. During this time I was able to bring in change on a personal level. I began by telling Malawians not to call me Bwana. Bwana wasn't spoken in a cowed way or with a servile manner. We would call its use today politically incorrect or even racist. Malawians saw a white face and immediately said Bwana. They needed more self-confidence.

"Well what should we call you?" said the workers. "If you want to be formal call me Rev. or Mr. As you get to know me then, as you do with your mates, use the family name Jeffrey. (Incidentally being

country folk and therefore rather conservative, it was polite to use the surname. First names were only used when addressing children.) And when you really get to know me, you can call me Dada as you call all other men Dada (Father), even although I am not a father." They laughed and agreed.

But it took much, much repetition. I would say something and then ask someone, "Is that OK?". "Yes, Bwana" was the reply and everyone would roar with laughter except the embarrassed speaker.

After two or three months Vernon Stone decided that I could be let loose among the citizens in the district. So I prepared for a short trip by lorry and then a walk to meet the local minister, congregation, teachers etc. The outing would last for nine days covering two Sundays.

When I reached the lorry I got a shock. My camp bed and mosquito net were loaded but so also was a tent, a folding table, a Tilley lamp, a hurricane lamp, food in a box which Edith Stone had packed, porters to carry the stuff and a personal cook. It was like something out of the 19th century. After several trips like this I reviewed the situation. If ever I was going to get alongside people, I needed to eat with them. There was no shortage of food in 1954, indeed Malawi exported food. So I trained myself over several days to eat the local sima - maize which had been pounded down by women or ground down by machine and boiled into a lump of dough which was then taken with the relish of the day, vegetables, meat or fish. And from then on I ate with the people.

As for sleeping, the camp bed and mosquito net were light and portable. My hosts were very sensible. If there was the possibility of an encounter with unwelcome guests of the insect variety; I was given a classroom or vestry to sleep in. So there was no more need for tents and porters.

Now, of course, I don't wish to imply that I was the only one seeking to make changes on a personal and social level. My Scottish colleagues were busy training leaders and invitations to tea or supper were increasingly given. As mutual trust and friendships grew, first names began to be used. Where there were groups of Scots, for example at Livingstonia or south in Blantyre, this happened naturally and easily. But in my case I was usually the only Scot around, so Malawians were more reserved and comfortable keeping to the family name. But eventually we reached the Dada stage!

Having tackled the personal and social side of things, the next consideration as a minister was how to lead the people in worship? And here, to my joy, I discovered that there was already in place a rich treasure-store of songs and tunes. In the early days of the Church in northern Malawi African leaders told the missionaries, "We want to worship God with the music, harmony and rhythms of the people. Some of the songs are very suitable. Others are pagan and totally unsuitable. But we'll just change the words and within a year the people will have forgotten the old words and we'll sing the Christian words instead."

And that's exactly what happened. Indeed there was a further twist. In the early history of northern Malawi the Tumbuka people had been conquered by the Ngoni people (a branch of South Africa's Zulus). Indeed in the 1950's the Ngoni chiefs and sub-chiefs still had local courts to settle disputes. And the Ngonis had their own language and music. There was a different harmony, particularly in the contralto and bass parts, which was distinct and attractive.

So what happened? The knee of the woman was stronger than the spear of the warrior. The Tumbuka women, who had been taken as wives by the Ngoni men, spoke to their children and told them stories in Tumbuka when they were at their mother's knee. In time the Ngoni language began to fade away and the early African Christians took the tunes, the harmonies and the rhythms and changed the words. Marvellous!

This was a real head-start in worship. I remember on one occasion that I had been invited to preach in a district church. The minister was away at another church and the Service would be conducted by an Evangelist. Evangelists were partly trained as ministers - more so than the Elders who conducted worship in village churches. Indeed this particular Evangelist took further training and became a fine fully ordained minister. His family name was Ng'oma.

Now Ng'oma means "drum". So I asked him about it. He said, "We are a branch of the Ngoni. We are the drummers of the tribe. Drums were used at weddings, funerals, to call to a meeting or to gather for war." I asked, "Do you know any of these calls?" He said, "Yes". The church had a bell and, an hour

before the Service, it was rung a few times every ten minutes to call the people from the surrounding villages to worship. He said, "I'll stop the last bell and use the drum instead. I'll beat the call to come to a council of war!"

So he started to beat. Down the village the people looked up a bit startled and then smiled. At the far end pupils from the school were coming. The youths dressed in white shirts and dark trousers, some carrying a Bible, the girls in dresses - anything in fact that wasn't school uniform. When the boys heard the drum they quickly formed ranks of four or five abreast in the middle of the road. The girls went on either side laughing and ululating. They all sang - in harmony of course - a marching song. Right into the church and that's how the Service began! No problem with worship.

About 1957 an event of deep significance occurred. Willie Watson as Convener of Livingstonia Mission Council had been trying for some years to allay suspicions of the Synod of Livingstonia that missionaries were trying to keep or extend power in the Church. It was the aim of the Church of Scotland that the two churches should be sister churches and not a mother Church of Scotland and a daughter C.C.A.P. (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian).

The efforts being made to make Malawians more self-confident and the growing partnership and trust now evident in many ways were at last bearing fruit. He persuaded the two natural leaders of the Synod, Rev. Alfred D. Mvula of Loudon and Rev. Kauta Msiska of Livingstonia to approve the following actions:

The Mission Council would be dissolved

All Scottish personnel would leave the Church of Scotland and become members of the C.C.A.P.

They would not become a financial burden to the African Church e.g. salaries and travel on leave to Britain would be paid by the Church of Scotland

In all other respects they would come under the authority and guidance of the Synod of Livingstonia.

There was a very moving Service in Livingstonia church where all ministers and elders formally left the Church of Scotland and were welcomed into the C.C.A.P. For probably the first time in all of Central and Southern Africa, Africans had authority over Europeans. The trust was in the belief that they would use this new power responsibly. We were not disappointed.

I believe that this event made a real impact not only in church circles but throughout Malawi and beyond as the implications of what occurred sank in. The Church was demonstrating the wind of change not only to the authorities in Malawi but also to the British Government in Westminster. It made the movement towards independence and self-rule much smoother than it might have been.

On our return to Malawi, Carol and I discovered that the Synod of Livingstonia had appointed me minister of Mzuzu congregation. We lived in an African minister's house. I had an African Kirk Session and a small charge. There were 8 churches in it. That was small!

This was a privilege indeed. An illustration of growing trust from African Church leaders. I was the first Scot to be responsible under God for the spiritual health and growth of the African community in Mzuzu. Mzuzu was the British Administrative capital of the Northern Region. There was also the Government Secondary School for boys and girls. All boarders. I was not only the Chaplain there but taught Religious Knowledge for the Cambridge Overseas Exams for Form IV and Form V. I did that for nine years.

This appointment to an African church was a privilege indeed which I will always treasure. The giving and response of trust became complete when, in less than a decade of that 1957 coming into membership of the C.C.A.P. the Synod of Livingstonia elected a Scot to become Moderator.

Since my work began by learning the language, I'll end with a story. Sometimes things are not as complicated as they appear to be. Part of my work was across the border into Zambia because it was a Tumbuka-speaking area. I had been away for almost a month and, on the agreed day, cycled to a large village and was met by our esteemed senior Rev. Willie Watson. He had come in a 3 ton lorry which was loaded with educational and medical equipment and now carried my battered bike and lots of people clambering on the back to be taken back across the border to Loudon and beyond.

A group of people were waving and saying goodbyes in various ways and in various languages. When we moved off I sat between the Malawian driver and Willie Watson. Willie said, " Eric, among the farewells there I heard a man speaking a word which was quite strange to me `Tataku` ". " Yes, " I said, " I heard it too. I wonder what it means? " He said, " It isn't Tumbuka, nor Chewa. It doesn't sound like a Zambian word. " We discussed for some time different roots and phrases. Then it dawned on me. "Willie," I cried, " it isn't an African word at all. It's English! "

" ku" means "to " as in "we're going to Loudon". Unfortunately it can also mean " from". So we don't quite know how to translate the Beatles' song *With Love from Me to You!*

" This man, " I said, " has probably worked in the Copper Belt or South Africa with a European family. After a children's party you'll say to little ones, " Bye bye " or " Ta ta ", so he's saying to his friends on the lorry from me to you, " Bye bye - Tataku. "

At this we both slumped forward with our foreheads on the padded dashboard, helpless with laughter, tears streaming down our cheeks. And the Malawian driver wondering what on earth was going on. So there it is. Thank you for listening. I shall now say farewell in the only Tumbuka which most of us will ever know.

" Tataku - and stay well."

Eric W. S. Jeffrey.