

## Reflections on Malawi

Jayne Harris (*below centre*), March 2007

It is over three months since I returned to the UK following what for me was an amazing 6 month short term assignment in Malawi. I had a very strong conviction that Malawi was to be my destination — however for several months it was unclear if there would indeed be an opening for me. After a great deal of prayer and clinging tenaciously to the conviction that Malawi was where I should be — I arrived.



I was met at the airport in Blantyre by Heidi Hannah the field administrator; I was jolly glad to see her, especially as my luggage hadn't seemed to have taken the same route as me. Heidi knew exactly what to do, paperwork completed we headed off. First impressions — I was struck by the mountainous terrain (not literally!) the heat and the myriad pedestrians carrying overly large loads, the plethora of roadside coffin makers and a rather incongruous 'football shaped' house! The Hannah family welcomed me into their home and there I stayed for a few days getting to know their 3 children — who happily regaled me with stories of black & green Mambas' and other such snakes that roamed the vicinity, the huge spiders that were commonly found and the various and sundry wildlife that I would undoubtedly come across!

My orientation was both theoretical and practical — I was given the use of a vehicle and after a couple of outings I was let loose on the Blantyre roads an altogether different experience, supplied with a detailed map and contact numbers — should I require rescue. I was introduced to the SIM missionaries based in Blantyre — I was made to feel very welcome and soon realised that any aspirations I may have had to lose weight (low on my list of aspirations!) paled as I was invited to join the various families for meals.

My time in Malawi was a time of testing the water so to speak, I held the conviction that this is where God wanted me for at least 6 months and I was also probing potential long-term options. My time was divided — I worked alongside Ryan & Heidi Hannah helping with administrative tasks, this gave me exposure to the work of SIM Malawi and a greater understanding and appreciation of the role of administration as service, enabling facilitation and mission building.

The rest of my time was taken up with Home Based Care (HBC), part of the Hope for Aids initiative rolled out by SIM. I worked with Mike & Jacky Hammond who are the project managers for HBC in Malawi. As a nurse I was keen to get involved and found myself working with Helen Fazakerly a British Nurse who has lived in Malawi with her family for 13 years.

Like much of sub Saharan Africa, Malawi is reeling under the impact of HIV/AIDS with a population of 12.9million and an HIV infection rate of 14.2%; the suffering is enormous. Classed as the tenth poorest nation in the world the effects of poverty are stark — HIV/AIDS impacts the most economically productive members of society, having no respect for poverty, wealth, position, gender or age it decimates communities, leaving in its wake an increasing population of orphans, an increased burden on an already overstretched health care system and a sense of hopelessness.

SIM Malawi works in partnership with the Africa Evangelical Church — the HBC programme draws volunteers from the local church equipping them through an established training programme. The volunteers identify people in their communities who are sick and in need of support; the positive effect of the HBC within a community has given rise to hope. I regularly visited a well established HBC programme in Noatcha a township on the outskirts of Blantyre, built in the foothills of a mountain; houses can be seen dotted in clusters on the elevation of the mountain. It is possible to get a vehicle to the village, once there the mode of transport changes requiring a good pair of walking shoes and the determination not to be left behind, move over Julie Andrews — climb every mountain took on a new meaning for me!

As Helen and I visited with the volunteers, I remember having a real sense of what it may have been like for the disciples' as Jesus sent them out in twos to minister his love and share the gospel. Maybe there was a mix of nervous excitement and a sense of adventure, I am sure there was also some doubt thrown into the mix and a feeling of inadequacy for the task, but I stepped out, as the disciples stepped out, knowing who it was that sent them and from whom their authority came.

It was an enormous privilege to work alongside the volunteers, to be invited into people's homes to share some of their story. Often the stories were heartrending; the hardship brought about by sickness and poverty the sense of despair was only too apparent. Into these situations the volunteers visit, they minister life and hope. Praying with people sharing from God's word it was evident that people were comforted; the sense of renewed hope was tangible in the lives of some of the people we met.

Life in Malawi was full of surprises; many Malawian people were fascinated with my single status, I was often asked why I wasn't married or on a couple of occasions did I in fact leave my husband in England, I am sure that I wouldn't be as careless as that! On one memorable occasion I was introduced to a group of trainee volunteers as ... Mayi Jayney from England ... she is very fat. This was a great compliment I was considered blessed and healthy; from my point of view the observation was the result of over indulgence in chocolate and a distinct lack of exercise — this lack was remedied somewhat by regular walks up a mountain to visit with the volunteers.

I have to say that although I met much suffering and I shed many tears this was balanced with a great deal of laughter, the warmth of the Malawian people is overwhelming. The SIM missionaries I met displayed commitment, hard work, generosity and a great sense of humour, a prerequisite in my opinion to life on the mission field. My time in Malawi has had a deep impact on me — I had a sense that I was in the right place at the right time -I felt at home.

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## Urgent Prayer Need

Pray for the country of Nigeria - for peace to be restored, and for the Lord's comfort for all those affected by the recent violence.

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