

PARTNERPLAN

Ken Ross - Malawi April 2022

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Dear friends,



At our congregation at Bemvu hundreds of young people gathered in the open air on the night of Easter Saturday for a “revival” meeting. It was a perfect moonlit night, offering the conditions in which African communities have gathered for evening events from time immemorial. Under a big sky, the young people preached and prayed, they even had a showing of the *Jesus Film*, but it was in music and dance that they were really in their element. In the African setting, there is nothing incongruous about dancing in a worship setting. In fact,

dancing before God and the ancestors has always been central to African worship throughout the continent.

When Christianity was introduced by European missionaries, there was much that was attractive about it but also some features that seemed strange. One was the idea that you ought to be motionless while singing the praise of God. At first it was accepted because it seemed to be an essential feature of the new faith. Only gradually did it become apparent that it was a European peculiarity that Africa was not obliged to adopt. With their post-Enlightenment tendency to compartmentalise life, Europeans had consigned worship and dancing to two different departments – one for the sacred and the other for entertainment. The African outlook is much more inclined to look on all of life as a whole, with no division between sacred and profane. In that case if it is good to dance, then it must be good to dance before God.

So, beginning with African Independent Churches, dance found its way into the expression of Christian worship. By now, it is featuring in the services of almost all the churches. And they are making up for lost time! It is abundantly clear that most want to experience and express their spirituality not through meditating passively but rather with their bodies in dance. Inner spiritual feelings are expressed more through the gestures and activities of the body than through wordy statements. For an old Scots Presbyterian like me, this is a bit of an adjustment. But there is no denying the vitality and vigour of worship such as that of the young people gathered under the moonlight at Bemvu to celebrate Easter. They are discovering what the Kenyan church leader John Gatu described as being “joyfully Christian and truly African.”

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Meanwhile, back at base in Zomba, we have been engaged in another kind of dancing – an intellectual one, as this semester has seen the introduction of the new MTh in contextual theology. A group of twenty-one are

the first postgraduate students to be enrolled at Zomba Theological College and they are highly excited by the opportunity. It is a part-time programme, so they come for four residential weekends and one full week each semester, with reading and assignments to complete in between. So far, they are highly motivated and have quickly created a collegial atmosphere – promising for the journey ahead.

Rather like the question of dancing, in theology too, a model was imported from Europe that did not quite fit. The curriculum and the methodology that had been formed over centuries in Europe had many virtues, but often lacked any clear connection with the African context. As the insightful missionary to Uganda, John Taylor, once put it, “Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of adoration and prayer of historic Christendom... But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem humans as Africans understand them would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable?” These are the kind of questions we seek to address in the new programme.

For many of the students it is quite a shift of gear to begin to do creative theology in relation to their own context, but the attempt is generating much positive energy. After an extended theological introduction to the Malawi context in the first semester, it will soon be time for the students to embark on their own projects. So far as we know, the programme is a first for Malawi and it carries the excitement of breaking new ground.

Meanwhile the MTh, along with the rest of the College programmes, is going through the process of accreditation with the National Council for Higher Education. It plays a key role in setting and maintaining standards across the sector. With a proliferation of Universities and Colleges appearing on the Malawi context, NCHE has plenty of work on its hands. To ensure an even playing field, the long-established institutions have to go through its rigorous processes on the same basis as the new ones. So, our College too is being kept on its toes.

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Though Malawi might seem far removed from the war in Ukraine, it is not unaffected. Even before the war there was much concern about the increasing cost of living. This has been exacerbated by the war in Europe, with flour for example steeply rising in price. Thankfully, most people in our area are enjoying a successful harvest. After a late start to the rainy season and a highly destructive tropical storm in January, since then steady rains have enabled the crops to mature nicely. It means a lot to gather in the harvest and to have confidence that there will be food for the family in the months ahead.

May the joy of Easter remain with you in all the days to come,
In friendship,

Kenneth

Pray for:

- Young people who are working out what it means to be “joyfully Christian and truly African.”
- Students on the new MTh at Zomba Theological College, that they might develop into the contextual theologians that Malawi needs for the future.
- The poor and vulnerable who are often the hardest hit by global tensions arising from the war in Europe.
- A swift end to hostilities in Ukraine, and a just and lasting peace.
- The message of Christ risen to bring hope even where despair prevails.