

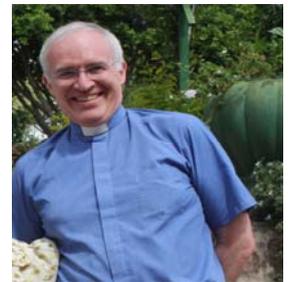
PARTNERPLAN

Ken Ross - Malawi January 2022

Zomba Theological College
PO Box 130
Zomba
Malawi
kross@churchofscotland.org.uk

Dear friends,

A high point in the relations between the Church of Scotland and the CCAP in Malawi is the periodic visit of the Moderator of the General Assembly to Malawi. Hence there was much excitement about the visit of the current Moderator Jim Wallace (Lord Wallace of Tankerness) to Malawi at the start of this year. You have guessed it – Covid intervened. The appearance of the omicron variant shortly before Christmas and the UK's decision to assign Malawi (temporarily) to its “red list,” put paid to the plans.



However, we have had to learn during the pandemic not to be defeated by such setbacks. So, on Friday 14 January, Zomba Theological College welcomed the Moderator virtually and through Googlemeet he was able to deliver his lecture on “The Cross at the Centre of the Marketplace,” a profound reflection on the nature of politics and on political service as a Christian vocation. On all sides it was a bittersweet occasion – everyone would much have preferred to be physically together but nonetheless it was a very meaningful exchange, rich in content.

This inspiring event helped to get the new academic year off to a strong start. Malawi too has had its share of omicron so mask-wearing, distancing, ventilation and hand-washing are all still part of the daily drill. But we are grateful that the College can be fully operational. Besides offering the well-established undergraduate programmes, it is hoped this year to introduce postgraduate studies. Last year we worked hard on designing an MTh in contextual theology and our aim this year is to launch it. I have been asked to take on the new role of Dean of Postgraduate Studies, with the initial assignment being to get the MTh off the ground. With the Covid situation often inhibiting wider travels, I am looking forward to working on this at my primary base in Zomba.

Working between the local and the global is one of the joys of my current situation, well-illustrated by two events towards the end of last year. The local one was in my congregation at Bemvu. It is one of the oldest congregations in the Synod of Blantyre but, unusually, it never had a European missionary in charge of it. Instead, the Blantyre Mission sent the best of the first generation of African church leaders, Harry Kambwiri Matecheta, to start a church in what was then an entirely new area for its work.

This was no small ask since Matecheta, as a Yao, had been on the receiving end of Ngoni raids in his young days. Now he was asked to go as an evangelist to the heart of the Ngoni area. He reflected that the Ngoni had brought fire and death to his village; now he was bringing the gospel of peace to their villages. Eventually he was ordained as the first African minister of the Synod and went on to serve for many years in the Bemvu area, becoming a father figure to the entire community.

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In our Presbyterian modesty we are not very good at recognising saints. But for the people of Bemvu they look back on the life and service of Matecheta, with the realisation that someone very special has been among them. Though he died in 1962 his memory lives on and continues to be inspirational. When some of the early Scottish missionaries died in service, their colleagues erected brass plaques in their memory in the cathedral church of St Michael and All Angels in Blantyre. The people of Bemvu decided to do likewise for Matecheta so, very unusually for a rural congregation, they had a brass plaque on the wall of the church. Unfortunately, owing to some mix-up, the dates of Matecheta's life were incorrectly inscribed on the plaque, which was an ongoing source of dismay. It was therefore a great event when the faulty plaque was replaced with a new and accurate one. It is a small gesture but full of meaning. (If you ever get a brass plaque inscribed, please get it right!)

My "global" event took me for a week to Geneva, thankfully at a time when Covid seemed to be receding – somewhere between delta and omicron! I was there for a centenary event, remembering the foundation of the International Missionary Council in 1921. This was the first organised attempt to develop cooperation and unity among churches on an international basis – a forerunner of what we know today as the World Council of Churches. The original meeting took place in upstate New York, at Lake Mohonk, and it was planned to return there for the centenary. Again, with Covid, it was not to be. Instead, we had just a small organising hub of five people in Geneva, with others connecting remotely from all over the world.

Feeding into the conference were fifteen study centres, widely dispersed across the globe, and the wonders of the zoom platform enabled an interaction that could hardly have been more international. The centres brought the fruits of nine months of reflection on what the IMC had meant in their area – for some it had been inspiring and empowering while for others they had felt excluded and ignored. The question of where power lay in a colonial age loomed large. Now in the next nine months the centres turn their attention to the present and future. Whatever its flaws, the IMC represented a quantum leap in the development of fellowship and collaboration among churches and missions. What steps are we called upon to take in our time to be true to Christ's call to mission and unity? We hope during 2022 to be able to offer some meaningful answers to this question.

As I describe my own regular resorting to "Plan B" in navigating the pandemic, I am all too conscious that for churches in Scotland too there have been many difficult decisions and frequent rearrangement of plans. May God be with you in 2022, that out of what have been dark times the light of Christ will shine ever more clearly.

In friendship,

Kenneth Ross