

Ken Ross - Malawi

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Dear friends,

I am glad to report that I am safely back in Zomba after my 3-month spell in Scotland. Malawi has closed its borders in June as a covid prevention measure but fortunately my work permit allowed me to return. Travel is different to what we knew before the pandemic. Airports and aircraft are much quieter and there are new protocols and procedures to be observed. Life in Scotland also was very different to what I knew before, though there were some moves towards a return to normal life before I left. For our family, we were delighted that we were able to have a holiday together in Ross-shire, which had originally been planned for a year earlier. Otherwise, my contacts were within rather a small circle and I was not able to physically visit any partner congregations. On the other hand, we have been developing new capacities to connect digitally and this has been a revelation.

In some ways the situation is quite similar back in Malawi. I returned to sharply rising covid numbers and a pattern of life that is geared to covid resistance. Though the official numbers are only a small fraction of those that have been recorded in the UK, we are mindful that we have much less testing and anecdotal evidence also has its value. More than 100 students at the University campus just down the road have tested positive and day by day we are receiving news of illnesses and deaths within the CCAP networks. It is not always clear whether or not covid is a factor but it seems reasonable to assume that it is taking a toll.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that until now covid has been much more prevalent in the urban than in the rural areas. Urban people are also much more aware of the risk and more likely to take preventative measures than their counterparts in the countryside. It has been suggested that the current upsurge is driven by the so-called delta variant, which takes us into uncharted territory. One thing that becomes ever clearer is that there is shocking inequality in terms of how well countries are resourced to combat the pandemic. When I was in Scotland, I witnessed an amazingly rapid and successful roll-out of the vaccination programme. In Malawi, at the current rate, it has been estimated it will take 57 years for everyone to be vaccinated. Another vivid contrast is that the UK has the NHS available to anyone who falls seriously ill with covid while in Malawi the health services are dramatically less well resourced. How could the UK Government choose a time like this to cut back on its international aid budget?

Another sharp contrast is evident in the so-called "digital divide." In affluent countries many people were able to deal with the pandemic by moving their work and even their social life to online platforms. This is also technically possible in Malawi but issues of infrastructure and affordability mean that in practice the average person has a lot less internet access. The University of Malawi has just attempted to move its classes online but has discovered that less than half the students have the wherewithal to be able to connect. If this is the case with the students at the premier

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University, it is safe to assume that most of the rest of the population have even less opportunity to be online. Again, there are issues of justice here that are not going to go away.

Meanwhile I keep my head down and do not often venture far from base. Classes continue at Zomba Theological College under the recommended covid protocols. Students are masked and spaced, I wear my vizor, we keep the room well ventilated and hand sanitizer is applied regularly. Such are the times. My connections in South Sudan and Mozambique as well as elsewhere in Malawi are currently dependent on online interactions. These still allow much to be done but where the culture of presence is strong, they have their limits. We hope that greater freedom of movement and interaction will become possible again but we have to admit that it is a journey into the unknown.

I am fortunate that the core of my project is the development of theological scholarship in Malawi and elsewhere. So there is much that I can do without leaving my desk. It does sometimes feel rather incongruous to be sitting grappling with theological issues when there is so much practical action needed to counter the pandemic and address the many poverty-related issues that present themselves in Malawi. On the other hand, many Malawians look to their faith for resources to engage the challenges they face. And theology is simply a matter of unpacking the content of faith. Though it might look as if it is far back from the frontline, it is hopefully creating the critical apparatus that will equip the troops for the battles ahead of them.

If the covid situation permits, plans are maturing for a major theological conference in September in Mzuzu, in the north of Malawi. The aim is to bring together all the universities and colleges that are engaged in theological education to form a national theological academy. We hope that such a collaborative enterprise can raise standards, provide opportunities for faculty development and cultivate active research programmes. It has caught the imagination and has a dynamic committee driving the preparations. Also, on the drawing board is a Master's degree in Contextual Theology being planned at Zomba Theological College as a key element in its journey to becoming a University. The goal is to launch in 2022 so I expect it will be high on my agenda for the rest of this year.

On a domestic note, an ominous report on my return to Zomba was that Mungo the cat had disappeared just the week before I got back. We were hoping that he might still show up but as time goes on this looks more and more like a forlorn hope. Likely we will never know what became of him but we know there are many hazards that can imperil venturesome cats. Sorry to end on a sad note.

Wishing you well for the summer season in Scotland,

In friendship,

Ken

Prayer Points

- All those in Malawi who are impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- All who are taking responsibility for measures to counter the pandemic.
- Educational institutions struggling to deliver their programmes.
- Churches offering pastoral care and spiritual nurture.
- Development of theology to serve the needs of church and nation