

Isaiah 44 Project Newsletter



August 2024

I will pour water on the
thirsty land and streams
on the dry ground...and
people will come to say
'I belong to the LORD.'

Contact Information:

Fr. Robert Holet - Coordinator
434-987-8170
fr.r.holet@uocofusa.org

Pani Christine Holet - Administrator
434-960-4566
panichristine@yahoo.com

129 South Keswick Drive
Troy, Virginia 22974

Funding Account:

**Make checks payable to: checks di-
rectly to: St. Nicholas Charity Legacy
Fund: Account SN-00**

Mail to:

Greater Horizons Attn. Donor Services

St. Nicholas Charity Legacy Fund
1055 Broadway Blvd., Suite 130
Kansas City, MO 64105
Check Notation : **Is. 44 Project - Wells**

Greater Horizons Help-Information
Phone: 866.627.3440
Email: support@greaterhorizons.org

To Donate ONLINE

<https://greaterhorizons.kimbria.com/gh>

Facebook Page:

www.tinyurl.com/bdfdm587
or on Facebook search - 'Isaiah 44 Project'

Website:

www.Orthodoxsteward.com

This Special Edition of the Isaiah 44 Project newsletter is a Part I of a summary of Fr. Robert's trip to Malawi (July 2024) and summarizes the daily parish visits and other meetings and activities made available through the hospitality of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Malawi.

Exploratory Mission to Malawi (Part I)

Three years ago, since my first encounter with the Malawian people and the Orthodox Archdiocese of Malawi, there has been a lingering thought in my mind - *Why not visit Malawi?* Being a practical sort of guy, the reason to do so was obvious - to *really* understand who the people are, what the nature of their life and culture is like, and how the Isaiah 44 Project can make a difference!

But, the reasons not to do so were also pretty obvious. I hadn't traileed overseas since the 1980s and being older, I wondered how well I could hold up under it all in a third world country. But with the support from my wife, Christine, and with the encouragement and prayers of a lot of people in both America and Africa, I boarded Ethiopian Air flight at Dulles airport on July 8th for a 24 hour flight to the other side of the world and life.

After about 24 hours worth of travel, having successfully navigated the chaos which is Addis Adaba airport, by the grace of God and the prayers of the multitude, we touched down in Lilongwe, Malawi, after a short stop in the Congo. (Why not visit the Congo?) I was greeted with great enthusiasm and joy by Fr. Nikodemos Chilembwe who helped me navigate the baggage issues and custom declarations, and then convert some currency to the Malawian *kwacha*.

The next visitor I met would be Suleman - who would serve as driver for our expeditions. After a day of riding shotgun for Sulemon, I became absolutely convinced that he was a man gifted by God to do superbly what he was doing. Sulemon usually drives for Archbishop Fotios and visitors as well - and I can understand why. Pulling out of the airport parking he began his mission - zigzagging around every obstacle that presented itself on the road - from mothers walking with children



Continued, next page

Mission to Malawi!, cont. from p. 1

and carrying water pots, goat herders scrambling to keep their animals out of somebody's market booth, chickens narrowly escaping a certain end to their life, bicyclists whose primary use for the bicycle was as a beast of burden to haul wares to the marketplace, motorcyclists who could well be clergy on mission to serve their church faithful, or jam-packed taxi vans. Not to mention people seemingly just hanging out with friends, looking for food, or maybe begging. It was a strangely manageable chaos - which Sulemen navigated with an uncanny intuition and saintly sense of purpose and quiet. I would have been popping nerve pills after 15 minutes trying to navigate the Highway of Chaos.

But as dusk settled, we arrived a beautiful lodging that would serve for my overnight stay. Make no mistake - this was not down and dirty missionary work but more akin to 'mission-tourism.' I figured that it had to be at least for this trip. The last thing the Malawians needed was to have me crash and burn due to jet lag or catch a knockout disease while I was on their turf - but God spared me of that - through your prayers.



Driving by, and sometimes, through marketplaces. Note the meticulous care in stacking tomatoes to add to the market appeal!



The local tribal chief

Getting rest and settled was Fr. Nikodemos's wise suggestion; it was a good move because every day of the trip would be full to the brim!

Lilongwe and Points South

When the rising sun of the Malawian dawn awakened me, I knew my biological clock was way off, *but it was time to get moving*. Greeted warmly by my Malawian friends we began our first day of church visits. Being in Lilongwe, we first headed west to a Church-mission that was established over a decade ago - the site of a *new borehole* that the Malawian faithful were excited about. Fr. Nicodemos was very diligent in setting up a schedule of visits, that would include a gathering to welcome us, followed by a talk in the Church building about the importance of the borehole and the church in the lives of the people.

There was a discernable pattern in these well organized gatherings which Father had set up. First, we would drive into the compound where the a small number of people were gathered. Everyone would swarm around the car and begin to sing and clap in their catchy, traditional rhythm, swaying to the music and expressing their hearts through

their song, words and gestures. I understood very few words of the Chichewa language they spoke, but their hearts spoke clearly and powerfully through their eyes, through their smiles and voices.

"Welcome - thank you for coming to us!" I had never been treated like a dignitary before so this was all so new.

Sometimes the church bells would be rung, but somehow even without them, more and more people got the word and would gather, as our Church sings at Pascha, *"From the East, West, North and South."* We were greeted by the local priest (or catechist if no priest was assigned there) and then be escorted into the church building/temple.

The music, clapping and dance would often turn into a religious procession of sorts and once seated in the front we would enter the altar to venerate the holy table then be seated at the *ambon* of the Church (eerily like a bishop) and



The men sing and dance too. Their

Exploratory Mission Continued, from Page 2

the program would commence. The pastor would welcome Fr. Nicodemus and me, and all who had gathered then proceeded with some introductions. Representatives from the men's and women's leadership groups, and sometimes the youth, would express their welcome with sincerity and love. Either Fr. Nicodemus or the pastor/leader would translate into English so that I could understand and I would try to make mental notes, while listening closely to what was said. Fr. Nicodemus, in his enthusiasm, did not just translate, but *interpreted*, the messages which much embellishment that made the meaning of what was said all the more powerful.

In the case of this first visit, we had a special visitor as well - the chief of the local tribal administration - who is recognized by the government as a key individual in maintaining the historical Malawian tribal integrity, but also serving as a liaison with the government's work. The tribal leaders have a major role in advancing the development of their communities by encouraging new projects from government, NGO, religious or other sources. They retain a special honor that is more than 'political' however, and this respect offered by the people made this a very special moment for me. Being an 'elder' in Malawian culture is what it used to be in the West, especially in the Church. The people showed great honor and respect for the elders of their land. I was also specially honored by the warm words of welcome that

were expressed in thanksgiving for the work of the Isaiah 44 Project which I represented by my presence there, to bring desperately needed water to the community.

Each parish visit during this week of Exploration provided its own memorable moments. At this first visit, the testimony of the representative of the Women's organization was especially meaningful. She spoke quietly, but with great sincerity about how her life had been changed by the presence of the borehole. Before it was drilled she would have to walk 7 kilometers to a river to fetch water for her family daily, then carry the water, as much as she could carry, the same distance *up the hill*, to make it available for their drinking and family needs. Immediately I was awestruck at how this simple installation of a single borehole could radically change this one person's life so profoundly. And it was not only her life, but that of her family and familial community throughout the entire area!

Fr. Nikodemus would then speak with great warmth, sincerity and spiritual power to those who had gathered. He would introduce me and the nature of my visit, but did so in the broader context of the blessings of God upon the Church as the people of God. In this case, my visit was an occasion to remember these blessings and celebrate them in thanksgiving.

Fr. Nicodemus would then be 'On' and On he was. He always spoke passionately of

Food Challenges in Malawi

The primary focus of the Isaiah 44 Project ministry is, has been, and will remain providing clean fresh **water** to local communities, working through the administration of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Malawi. But from the beginning, when word came of the devastation of Malawi by Cyclone Freddie in March, 2022, it became clear that the focus for the Isaiah 44 Project might also shift from time to time as special needs arose.

During the July 2024 visit with the Malawian Church, it became clear that the special gifts of Americans, and the American church could be brought to forward in dialogue with Malawians to meet the broader and deeper needs of the Church and society. The immediate need for food, especially for children, is acute. Recently, private funds were used to begin a test program called the **St. Christina Ministry**, in memory of Fr. Nicodemus's late wife +Christina. Before she died, she longed to feed the children of her neighborhood, using the church as a location. So private funds were used to support the effort, through the cooking efforts of women of the Holy Resurrection parish which Fr. Nicodemus serves.



Holy Martyr Christina

The response has been heartwarming and a small gesture in meeting the need for food due to the drought from absence of rain during the winter months and a stunted maize harvest.

Additional programs have been discussed, including support for construction efforts to build churches and provide vocational education to young men who desperately need training and employment.



If you have a special interest in the St. Christina ministry or another program to benefit the Malawians and their ministry, such as mission prayer houses, vocational development, health, etc. please contact Fr. Robert (*see front page - col 1*)

Exploratory Mission *Continued, from Page 3*

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!

our Faith in God, and how the Lord provides for his people, sometimes in unusual ways. Then he would prime the pump, so to speak, and enthusiastically lead what as English speakers could best be described as a *'Hip Hip Hooray!'* cheer. It was liturgically appropriate, as the first cheer would rise up for the Archbishop. Then he would invoke for the priest of the parish, and then for other leaders (like the tribal chief) building the enthusiasm with each cheer. Finally he would raise up his voice for yours truly. Followed by cheers and shouts all the more. It was as humbling as it was exhilarating - every time it started.



**Sprinkling /dousing with Water
Showered with God's blessing**

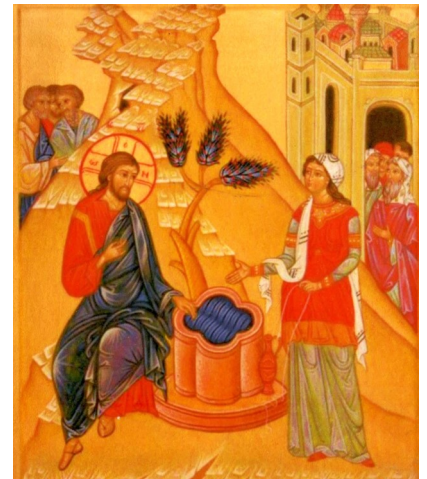
Following this ceremonial introduction, I thought I would try out my own *'liturgical cheer'* in some of the parishes if time permitted. So I explained to the people that in Ukrainian Churches the people traditionally did not merely greet one another with 'Hello' or something of the like, but they would do it as an expression of their Christian faith. So my goal was to teach them this custom (albeit in English) with the appropriate translation help from Fr. Nicodemus. So I would then say 'Glory to Jesus Christ!' and they would say in response, 'Glory forever!'. We would practice this again and again, and eventually try to increase it in volume to fill the Church. It was fun! But in doing this little exercise, it occurred to me how often our 'throwaway' faith words in American culture are deeply meaningful and to be cherished as they share the very message of the Gospel. Next time we'll try it in Chichewa. And maybe Ukrainian!

I would then offer some brief remarks, trying to be attuned to the people and the presence of the Lord in the midst of *His* people, reflecting on the Gospel, my experience with them of God's presence and

calling to know Him, love him and serve Him. Fr. Nikodemos, or the pastor or catechist would then translate what I had said into the Chichewa language for those who did not understand English well. In most cases, I would close my remarks with singing, in our traditional Ukrainian melody, the prayer that God would grant *Many, Blessed Years*, to Archbishop Fotios, the clergy and faithful of the Church, and to those in the community. It didn't have the same power that the *Hip Hip Hooray* cheer of Fr. Nicodemus, but it was at least from the heart.

Ukrainians Bearing Gifts?

Airline regulations and limitations being what they are, lugging around luggage was a necessity on the trip of course but only so much can be done. But we were able to print up several hundred icon holy cards for the Isaiah 44 Project, depicting the Samaritan Woman at the well which Fr. Nicodemus and I would pass out to the people as they came forward and we greeted each other. The Clergy received a printed icon of the Saints of Africa as well. Through the kindness of the clergy officers in the Consistory and St. Sophia seminary, as well as from our local Serbian mission in Hadensville, Virginia through the efforts of Fr. Djorge Tomic, a suitcase full of vestments was taken to Malawi for use by the clergy. The Malawian clergy were very thankful for this simple gesture. While our parishes in America are flush with multiple items to meet most liturgical needs, like chalices, discoses, censers, etc. But not have these - or new, bright or high value gold versions, the Malawians glorify God with solemn, divine worship.



The Samaritan Woman - Holy Card

At our first visit, on this church property, nearby, was a small, but empty building. The brick edifice was the symbol of a *Dream Not Yet Realized*. The missionary priest who originally established the parish had a dream that there would also be a **medical clinic** onsite, offering basic health care to the residents of the village and region. While there are many such clinics that dot the countryside, often established by NGOs or foreign missions, there was almost no available

healthcare facility in this area *for miles*. The need for simple health care would become painfully apparent to me as we visited many other locations as well. How many children receive little or no health care during those precious early years of their lives I wondered? It was the vision of the parish priest to provide this outreach ministry as part of their mission to the broader community. This spoke volumes to me about the nature of the Malawian Orthodox mission - being one of service to others in the name of Christ. They were, as yet, unable to see that ministry fulfilled but they had a ready-made ministry (and a borehole!) that they could share. And with the right combination of prayer, supplies, talent, organization and grace, they can make the parish medical clinic a reality. Perhaps, the *Isaiah 44 Project* can team up with this parish community to support their efforts in this worthy endeavor in the future.

In those parish sites where a new borehole was established, there was one remaining ritual - to pump the water! I admit to a bit of faithless angst here. *When I pumped the well handle, would anything come out?* And so we processed as always accompanied by songs of joy, to the shining well pump. And with a few strokes the water streamed down the spout in abundance - and the people cheered in their special African 'yodel' of joy. God delivered this to His people. The flowing water raised the singing and dancing to fever pitch, prompting the priest to take on the role of priest and take this 'holy' water and begin to sprinkle, or better 'douse' the people, including the clergy generously with it. As the groundwater became airborne, it was a powerful reminder of the simple words we offer on Sundays in the Ambon prayer - *'Every good and perfect gift comes from above, the Father of Lights'* God had visited us from on high and would remain with His people!



A Pastor and his spiritual son.



Always a song on their hearts!

As we left the church, I tried to process what had happened, and it brought a mixture of tears of joy, and also sadness. The joy of having shared even this short time and received their love and embrace in the heart, but also the sadness of saying *'Good-bye'* for a time. For me, there's one thing that proceeds in my mind and heart when I experience those two things in combination - **Resolve** - to continue the work of the *Isaiah 44 Project* as God leads and enables.

We slowly navigated our way through the crowd with Sulemon graciously assisting us to the car, having served as photographer, and part time watchman and bodyguard. We would continue our journey down the highway to the next adventures that awaited us. In travelling back toward Lilongwe, I asked Fr. Nikodemos where the river was, that the woman spoke about, where she used to get her water. After maybe 10 minutes driving, we went down a hill and saw the 'river.' In the dry season the water flow sometimes comes

to a halt and the river more resembles a ditch. The animals of the region will gather there as well as people fetching their water in buckets. And one can only imagine what would show up in a water analysis, for us western folk who insist that our running tap water isn't clean enough to drink so we need our bottled spring waters. But the Malawians are thankful for what they have, and even more thankful when the borehole makes safe water more readily accessible to them. And we should be too.

This first parish site visit served as a pattern of what would happen in various iterations for the next six days. With each day came new insights, and a glimpse of the profound challenges faced by the Malawians - as well as a clearer vision in the abiding faith of this people in Christ, *"the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (1Cor.1:23), upon Whom they draw forth their strength, daily, as they draw their water from the well. For me, I would try to gather the countless impressions and inspirations into something whole, that could be shared with others. This was the purpose of my visit,

and exploration, to try to catch a glimpse of Malawian life if but for a passing moment, on a dusty journey during the dry season.

Please know that your prayers and support render you present to the faithful of the Malawian Church as co-workers in Christ of their mission. Your faith-filled contributions offered in love and generosity water the earth with nothing less than God's grace. St. Paul's exhorted the churches under his care (see Acts, 2Cor, Rom. Etc.), to share God's blessings through almsgiving to those in need, especially through Paul's own 'Project' of sending funds to the distant lands of Palestine during the famine in his day. We can do no better than to imitate St. Paul and in doing so, experience what in Rom. 15, St. Paul described as a 'Communion' of peoples who share every good and perfect gift from above which they have received and in doing so experience communion in Christ. I hope to share more of these stories, that your joy too, may be full. (Jn. 15)

As the first weekend of the trip concluded, the swirl of thoughts, impressions and hopes about what is possible in Malawi was powerful in my mind and spirit. While the needs for the most basic of human needs cried out, the possibility of finding ways to meet those needs was all the more visible and present. For me, writing about the trip helps to stir these impressions, and more importantly, make concrete the thoughts into faith inspired plans for service in Christ. After discussion with Fr. Nicodemus, following the trip I asked him to delineate for me each of the parishes and their individual needs for boreholes. Reviewing this list, a goal has emerged.

The Isaiah 44 Project is committed to supporting the Orthodox Archdiocese of Malawi by assisting to secure a sufficient and safe water source at each Archdiocesan parish site in service of the people of the area served by those parishes.

In the next installment of this *Newsletter*, I hope to share more impressions of Malawi, her people, culture and the Church there so that you can gain your own insights into just how much is possible .



New Borehole Drilled in Southeastern Malawi!

In August, word was received of the successful completion and blessing of another borehole in Southern Malawi. The new borehole is located at site of Archangels Michael and Gabriel parish at Mpsa in Phalombe. Archbishop Fotios visited the church and blessed the new borehole, a ritual which has become something of a custom for the Archdiocese.

As the Malawian Church stewards the funds received from the Isaiah 44 Project, they are able to plan to drill boreholes in a timely way. For example, the seasons of the Malawian climate dictates when it is best to drill the boreholes. Hence, it is best to wait until the dry season to drill, so that the water table is lower and it is far more likely that the deeper well can sustain the population through future dry seasons, when the water table will drop again.

These boreholes literally become a life line for the local populations especially during the dry seasons.

It is anticipated that funds will soon be forwarded again to Malawi for additional boreholes to hopefully be completed before the rainy season begins. 