

A New Resident in Our Father's House



Evangelist Chiumia's casket covered with a "chitenje" of the LCCA

Evangelist Gibson Chiumia faithfully served God's people in various congregations of northern Malawi until his retirement from active ministry a decade ago. Last week I had the privilege of attending his funeral. As a new missionary in Africa, this was my first funeral and it made a striking impression on me.

The trip

I live in the capital city of Lilongwe, located in the central region of the country. Even though it is only 220 miles to the village where Evangelist Chiumia's funeral was held, it took about seven hours to get there. We drove for five hours on the country's main highway - a paved road in pretty decent shape, but not an express highway like the interstate system of roads in the United States. There are no suspension bridges or tunnels in Malawi, even though the country straddles Africa's Great Rift Valley. The highway snakes through the mountain gaps and dives down through the valleys, requiring the driver to maintain constant vigilance.

After we picked up a passenger in the northern town of Mzuzu, we began the most

challenging leg of our trip. It took us an hour and a half to cover the final 30 miles to the village of Mpherembe as we drove on a steep dirt road. I should say “mud road,” because it is the rainy season in Africa. In one spot we had to cross a “lake” that spanned the entire width of the road and was about 30 feet long. I give thanks to God and to the WELS for providing us missionaries with heavy duty vehicles that can handle these challenging roads. One of my passengers told me later that many Malawians drive light passenger vehicles on these roads, but they don’t look the same after a year’s use.



The Toyota Prado is a popular vehicle in Malawi

I share this information with you so that you have a better idea about the challenges that the pastors of the LCCA Malawi face. Most of them serve multiple parishes, which they visit once a month on a rotation. Some pastors have been provided motorcycles, many use bicycles or rely on local taxis. None of them have a personally owned vehicle. The majority of the congregations of the LCCA are located in rural areas, so it takes days of travel for pastors to attend conferences and board meetings. Keep these men in your prayers as they labor under most difficult circumstances!

The night before the funeral

We arrived at the home of Rev. Brester Msowoya, who serves the church in Mpherembe. The name of the congregation is “Wisconsin Lutheran Church.” I did

not see any cheese curds or Green Bay Packers jerseys, so no doubt the missionary who founded this congregation was a native son of the Badger State. However, I did feel quite at home because our host gave us a very warm welcome.

The inhabitants of northern Malawi are from a tribe of people called Tumbuka. They speak a language that is considerably different from their countrymen in the rest of the country, and some of their customs are different too. For example, whenever you meet someone for the first time in their home, you do not directly begin talking with them. Instead you must be introduced by a third party. As we were unwinding from our long trip in Rev. Msowoya's home, several visitors arrived at his door and the introductions began:

"Who are these visitors?"

"They are from Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Salima."

"Are they good people?"

"Makola chomene!" (very good)

After a tasty meal of nsima (boiled maize flour) and chicken, we went to the church where (I thought) we were going to settle in for the night. After we unrolled the mattresses and laid out the sleeping bags, at 9 p.m. the Malawian pastors told me there was going to be a vigil at the home of Evangelist Chiumia. They had pity on me and let me sleep off the long drive, but they did not get to sleep until 1:00 a.m. I heard singing all night long, coming from the family and friends of the deceased. It reminded me of Paul and Silas singing hymns during the middle of the night in Acts 16:25, praising God for his mercy and love and giving comfort to one another.

(<https://youtu.be/0hVuutLVGzA>)

At the home

After a quick breakfast of bread and tea (Malawi is a former British colony), we drove to the home where the funeral proceedings began. The ladies' choir from the local church were marching outside in a circle and singing. With me were Rev.

Stanley Daile of Lilongwe, who gave the funeral address; Rev. Msowoya, who presided over the service; Rev. Chiumia (a distant relative of the deceased) who came all the way from the seaside town of Mlowe; Rev. Patrick Mugumbo from Salima, who is also the Vice President of the LCCA; Retired Pastor Akim Daile, who served at Wisconsin Lutheran for 18 years and now resides in a nearby village; Rev. S. Phiri who serves congregations in the northern region; and Vicar Frank Mukwoya who is currently assigned to St. Michael Lutheran in Mzuzu. I represented the WELS Mission.



5 active pastors, 1 retired pastor and 1 vicar attended the funeral of Gibson Chiumia

The men had gathered outside the house. The family had set up an area with chairs and tarps to protect them from the elements. The women were all sitting on the floor in a room inside the house. The pastors entered the room which contained the casket of Evangelist Chiumia, enthusiastically singing in Chitumbuka. After about five or six hymns and a prayer, we exited the house and the pallbearers brought the casket outside for people to pay their respects to the deceased. In addition to the pastors, there were other important guests in attendance like the village's traditional authority (chief). Evangelist Chiumia's grandson, who is currently studying for the ministry at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Lilongwe, was there along with 28 other grandchildren and family members who had returned to Malawi from other countries for the occasion. After everyone passed by the casket, it was loaded onto a large pickup truck and we proceeded to the church.



The funeral was held at Wisconsin Lutheran Church in Mpherembe, Malawi

The funeral and graveside service

Upon arrival at the church I found standing room only. A local musician had been secured to play pre-service music on his keyboard, along with a PA System and generator. (Power outages are common in Malawi.) The text Pastor Daile chose for his funeral address was from John 14:2-3, where Jesus says: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." The largest cathedrals and most lavish of funeral parlors cannot even begin to compare with the splendor of our Heavenly Father's dwelling. The evidence of the power of God's Word to conquer fear and wipe away tears was in plain sight during the entire day. I thank God for the privilege of being a witness to it.

At the conclusion of the service, we processed to the village cemetery. Many mourners rode with the casket on the back of the truck. Many more walked on foot. By my estimation about 500 people attended the graveside service. I have never seen anything like this at any of the funerals I conducted in the United States.



Many more people attended the graveside service

The family had prepared a very deep grave, about 7 or 8 feet down. Later on, one of my fellow missionaries explained that the deeper the hole is, the greater the respect they are showing the deceased. After the body was lowered into the ground, several choirs performed songs. The lead singer of the choir from Mzuzu was so enthusiastic that an elderly gentlemen began dancing alongside of her. Vicar Mukwoya delivered another sermon at the gravesite, and Pastor Mugombo presided over rite of burial.

(<https://youtu.be/eUq24u0MTBg>)

The family members literally covered the grave with bouquets of flowers. Then they read out loud the names of all the people who had given money to the family, along with the amounts they gave. Although this might seem bizarre to a Western audience, in this culture gifts of money are an important way for people to show their respect and honor. The gifts are called “pepuketsa” (literally “sorry money”) and are meant to convey condolences to the grieving family members in a very practical manner. The gifts were of differing amounts, from a few dollars up to hundreds of dollars. Two cows were also donated and served to the hungry guests afterwards. I enjoyed eating “family style” with the other pastors - no plates or utensils, just one heaping pile of nsima and another big bowl of stew meat. The pastors put a serious dent in that nsima - they had worked up a big appetite for sure.

Even though I did not understand the language people were speaking nor the significance of all the traditions and customs, I can easily say that the Spirit of God was active in the hearts of my African brothers and sisters in Christ. Although this funeral was so very different from every other funeral I've ever attended, our Savior Jesus' words give all of us comfort and peace in the face of death. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and it holds residents from every tribe, nation, language and people on earth. By God's mercy and by trusting in Christ's words, Evangelist Gibson Chiumia has found his place. And one day we too will find ourselves the newest residents of our Father's house.

Missionary John Roebke lives in Malawi

Please pray for those working in fields that are ripe for harvest. Share their story, engage with future news and receive updates. Follow this link to learn more about our mission fields in Africa and how the Holy Spirit is working faith in people's hearts <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa>