

Digital Bookmobile



L-R: Pastors Matope, Chipembere and Petro serve churches located in rural areas of Malawi

Imagine for a moment that when you switched on your 52" flatscreen last Sunday to watch the Super Bowl, the screen remained blank. As your frantic calls to your cable provider meet a busy signal, now imagine steam coming out of your ears. You are missing out on the biggest sporting event of the year - not to mention the commercials, the halftime show, and the always entertaining commentary by Jim Nantz and Tony Romo.

Since I didn't have a dog in this fight, and I live on the opposite side of the globe I set my alarm for 4:30 a.m. and tried streaming the fourth quarter of the game through my TV's Roku player. No luck - my broadband connection wasn't broad enough. Such is life in a developing country, where a majority of people still lack access to more basic necessities like clean

drinking water, electricity, and adequate medical care. The digital itch isn't getting scratched in Malawi.

Our church body, the WELS, produces high quality, gospel-centered tracts, books and DVD's. How can the One Africa Team facilitate the distribution of this great content to our target audience, the majority of whom live in remote rural areas? As mentioned in last week's post (<https://welsfriendsof africa.com/the-gospel-keeps-moving-forward/>) distributing literature by car or truck in this part of the world poses a significant challenge. On one of my latest deliveries the cow path I was following took me to a twig footbridge across a stream. For only the briefest of moments I considered proceeding forward, but the mental image of a truck nose-first in the water wouldn't let me go. The pastor I was travelling with had to carry the books the last quarter mile to his home.



Distributing Christian literature in Malawi is challenging, but is greatly appreciated. For the record, a car isn't the most efficient means of travel in this part of the world. Neither UPS nor Amazon make deliveries here. The majority of Malawians travel by foot or by bicycle - tried and true means of transportation, especially during the rainy season. Minibuses connect the villages with the major towns and

cities, but how many books can a person carry at once? How far can you distribute your printed materials when your world only extends as far as your feet can carry you in one day?

It's interesting to note that the invention of the printing press and the development of the printing industry coincided with the Lutheran Reformation five hundred years ago, when the transportation network of central Europe was certainly at an even less developed stage than what exists in Malawi today. Those early Reformers were able to spread their messages quickly across the continent by relying on an extensive network of printers, who produced books for local consumption. Maybe we need to go back in time to crack the nut of distributing our materials in Malawi today. There are no local printing presses operating in Malawian villages, but the LCCA has a network of local pastors equipped with laptops and cell phones who can help distribute content digitally.



L-R: Pastors Yohanne and Lusio use laptops to access digital books from NPH
There are a few hurdles to clear first, however. Many

pastors live in villages that have not yet been connected to the power grid. Through the generous donations of WELS members, the parsonages have been equipped with solar panels and a battery that provide enough electricity to keep their devices charged. The local telecommunications companies have established a fairly reliable (if slow) cellular data network in the country, and it's not uncommon to see people in the village chatting away on their phones. However, the cost of connecting to the internet still remains outside the grasp of most individuals and institutions of learning.

In Malawi, we have begun experimenting with a battery-powered, offline local server to help us distribute content to pastors. In essence, this is a digital bookmobile. The device, called LightStream, allows us to share digital content without using an internet connection, by connecting the pastors' laptops and phones directly to the LightStream device via a local wi-fi connection.

WELS Multi-Language Publications provided both the Malawi and Zambia missions with a LightStream kit that includes the device, the battery and charger, cords for charging a variety of phones and micro-SD card readers. The most recent version of this device retails at about \$80 apiece. WELS Multi-Language Publications has also secured copyright permission from NPH and other WELS entities to share their great materials with our gospel partners all over the world.



The LightStream device is a self-powered, offline computer server that we are using as a Digital Bookmobile

This is how it works: I upload digital files of books, music and movies to the device and charge the battery at home. I bring the device with me whenever I attend a pastors' gathering – circuit meetings, regional conferences, synod convention, boards and committee meetings, etc. I invite the pastors to connect to the LightStream device with their phones or laptops, to browse the available content, and to download whatever they want to their local devices. Pastors can then access their downloaded content without requiring an internet connection, whether it's People's Bible Commentaries, Sermon helps, Bible Studies, music files, or Bible-based movies. Pastors can also share this content with their members who own smart phones by using the app ShareIt, which creates a peer-to-peer network for transferring files between a variety of devices and operating systems.

It is a bit of a learning curve for the pastors, most of whom have only started using a computer within the last five years. Thanks to Stateside donors, the pastors of the LCCA Malawi and Zambia have received laptops and smartphones. Some of those laptops are starting to show their age, but they are still in working order for the most part. There is a huge need in the developing world for access to the digital age, and many other agencies are

working hard on solving this issue. For example, there is an NGO in Malawi called ShiftIt which uses USB memory sticks loaded with a Chrome OS (cost: \$7) to give Malawian students in remote areas access to their own “computer,” called a “Keepod.”

It's not just Americans that crave digital entertainment.

There is a real hunger for intellectual stimulation in Malawi. Unfortunately, not even the remotest corner of the world is safe from the devil's handiwork. One Africa Team is partnering with local pastors by putting in their hands digital tools they can use to keep fighting the good fight. Electronic gadgets are fascinating, but technology alone isn't enough to win the hearts and minds of people. That's why we are giving the LCCA Christ-centered, Biblical content in both electronic and printed form. As it is written, *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.*

On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” (2 Cor. 10:4)

Missionary John Roebke

lives in Malawi and serves as the Communications Director for One Africa Team

Please

pray for those working in fields that are ripe for harvest. Share their story, engage with future news and receive updates. Go to 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>

External links:

For more information about the LightStream device and other solar-powered electronics visit www.renewoutreach.org

For more information about Keepods, RACHELs and digital libraries in Malawi visit www.shiftit.co.za