

Four Hours in Church



Choirs from five different congregations performed at a joint worship service in Chilembwe, Malawi

I had a choice between sitting through four hours of church and a voters' meeting or attending a four hour long worship service. Since moving to Malawi's capital city of Lilongwe nine months ago I regularly attend the English language worship services held at Crown of Life Lutheran Church on the campus of the Lutheran Bible Institute. I am thankful for the the opportunity to gather weekly with my fellow missionaries and the members of the congregation to hear encouraging messages from God's Word. The style of worship is familiar to any member of the Wisconsin Synod. We use the

WELS hymnal Christian Worship to sing hymns and psalms, accompanied by an electronic organ. The student choir of the Lutheran Bible Institute performs 3-4 glorious anthems in the Chichewa and Chitumbuka languages. The congregation also holds separate Chichewa language services that starts later in the morning. Once a month Crown of Life holds a joint English and Chichewa language service that can last up to two and a half hours. And just like many WELS congregations, Crown of Life also has (long) voters' meetings.



Children and infants receive faith, forgiveness and eternal salvation through the sacrament of Baptism

It just happened that I got invited to attend a worship service in a rural congregation outside of Lilongwe on the same Sunday as the voters' meeting. The Vacancy Pastor is only able to visit this area once a month. He usually takes his motorcycle, which is able to negotiate muddy roads and narrow trails. This time we took my car - it wasn't raining when we set off, but I kept my eye on the skies the entire time. There is a new tarmacked (asphalt) road that we followed for about a half hour, then we turned onto a dirt road which grew progressively rougher and narrower. At one point we were following a cow path through a cornfield. Thank goodness for four-wheel drive! We asked numerous people for directions because Google maps doesn't tell you when roads are washed out.

Our destination was the village of Chilembwe, tucked inside the elbow of the Bua River. There are no bridges across the river or any main thoroughfares that pass through this part of Malawi, and I did not see any high wires connecting the village to the power grid. We arrived to discover that the church's walls had collapsed due to the rains. The local Presbyterian congregation let us use their building, and they worshiped elsewhere. It was a very charitable offer, considering that congregations from five different villages came to Chilembwe for a joint worship service.



Rev. Medson Mitengo is the very energetic vacancy pastor for this parish union

We started about two and a half hours late. People continued to trickle in during the entire service which, as I mentioned earlier, lasted four hours. I had a front row seat to a dozen different choirs, each performing 2-4 songs apiece. I witnessed 22 children and 4 adults become heirs of God's kingdom through the sacrament of Baptism. I heard the Confirmation vows of 35 youths and adults to remain faithful to Christ unto death. I watched 167 people receive Jesus' real body and blood in Holy Communion for the forgiveness of their sins. I heard the pastor preach two sermons - one was centered on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the other was about using gifts of time, talent and money

for God's glory. At one point during the service the ushers came around with 2 bowls of raw corn, and to their dismay I tried snacking on a few kernels. My wife correctly observed that everyone else took a kernel from one bowl and put it in the other, as a way of counting those in attendance. The final number announced was 467, give or take a handful of corn.

After the worship service we introduced ourselves to the group in Chichewa and listened to various church elders introduce themselves. It took some time to shake everyone's hand on the way out of church but we felt honored. The Pastor spent another hour teaching advanced Bible classes to three men who are preparing themselves for entrance exams at the Lutheran Bible Institute. Our hosts graciously prepared a lunch of nsima and chicken for us, then we started back with about an hour and a half of daylight left. We got directions for a better way to travel by car

which, although longer in distance was much more suitable than the way we had come and eventually led us back to the tarmac.



Music is an important part of youth ministry in the LCCA

It's true here and in the United States that country life is much different the city. 80% of Malawi's population lives in rural areas, some more remote than others but most with limited access to medical care, good roads and electricity. Most of the pastors of the LCCA Malawi live in the same rural communities as their members, in order to serve them better. This spring, five Malawian men will graduate from the Lutheran Seminary in Lusaka, Zambia. Perhaps one of them will be assigned to serve the five churches of Chilembwe, Chingwakwa, Msokoneza, Kamwaza and Yotamu but it will not be easy for the congregations to support him. But what I observed during that Sunday in

Chilembwe shows me that God's Spirit is actively working in the hearts of these people, who biked or walked many miles to receive the comfort of the Gospel. A lot happened during that four hour church service, but a lot more is happening out of our sight.

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. Learn more about our mission fields in Africa and how the Holy Spirit is working faith in people's hearts at <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa>