

Water for Roots and Fruits



Wives of seminary students during a Bible study

Imagine you go to church. You know it is time for the Psalm, but in the bulletin you see the heading: **Salimo 1**. Under it, you try to solve the new puzzle of a new language.

**Ngwodala munthu wosatsata uphungu wa anthu oipa,
wosatsanzira mayendedwe a anthu ochimwa,
wosakhala nawo m'gulu la anthu onyoza Mulungu,**

**koma wokondwerera kumvera malamulo a Chauta,
nkumasinkhasinkha za malamulowo usana ndi usiku.
Munthuyo ali ngati mtengo wobzalidwa m'mbali mwa mtsinje wa madzi,
ngati mtengo wobereka zipatso pa nthawi yake,
umene masamba ake safota konse.
Zochita zake zonse zimamuyendera bwino.**

As a person thirsty for knowledge, these words challenge you on many levels. Questions without easy answers swirl in your mind: *How can I deal with not knowing the language I see in front of me? I see everyone else seems to take it in easily...Do I feel intrigued by this situation? Or frustrated by it? Or overwhelmed by it? Or curious how to pronounce the letters which are also used for English? How in the world do people say “wobzalidwa” without breaking out into a sweat? Why is there a little arrow on top of one “w” but not the other?*

Also how can I spit out “**nkumasinkhasinkha**”? What can such an unusual word (to me anyway) even mean? Why does “**malomulo**” remind me of the word “marshmallow”? How many words start with Mm: “**munthu, mayendedwe, m'gulu, Mulungu, malomulo, malamulowo, munthuyu, mtengo, m'mbali, mwa, mtsinje, madzi, mtengo, masamba**”? And then that last line all starts with Zz: “**Zochita zake zonse zimamuyendera bwino.**” (Why not “**zbwino**” too? Why does this all of a sudden seem all “zithery bwithery” like a great Dr. Seuss book?)

Am I just tired and ready to give up without a fight that learning these words would require me as an adult? I must have done this to learn English but as a kid it didn't seem so embarrassing to not know! Beyond just looking at the forms of the words on the page, maybe I should wonder about the message? How can I learn more about what God has to say when His Word is comprised of words that baffle me?

But then you realize that the Bible has been translated into many languages including English. The Chichewa language is spoken by millions in Malawi where you have just moved. You see that it is from the part of the Bible called “**Masalimo**.” Someone leans over to show you “**Masalimo**” means really does mean “Psalms.” Now you have a key to understanding quickly because you can open up your English Bible to find the correct Bible book and verse so you can glean what

the letter combinations mean. Oh...Now you can see it in English immediately. With time and study, you can learn to connect word-to-word or phrase-to-phrase these first three verses of Psalm 1 in Chichewa.

“Blessed is the **man (munthu) who does not walk (mayendewe)** in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of **sinners (m’gulu la anthu onyoza Mulungu).**

But his delight is in the **law (malomulo)** of the LORD, and on **his law (malomulowo)** he **meditates (nkusinkhasinkha)** day and night.

He (munthuyo) is like a **tree (mtengo) planted (wobzalidwa) by (m’mbali mwa) streams (mtsinje) of water (madzi),** which yields its fruit in season and whose **leaf (masamba)** does not wither. **Whatever he does prospers. (Zochita zake zonse zimayendera bwino)”**



Seminary wives studying the psalms

So through reading English even while hearing Chichewa you get the gist of the sounds. Your ears hear the tongue-twisters that give you hardly any clues. You hear the vowels as “ah,” “eh,” “ee,” “oh,” and “oo.” No sounds connect to a word you can recognize, except for one...the last one “bwino” sounds a little like “bueno” from Spanish class. Maybe that means “good” - you hope?!!

But only your eyes can help your mind connect these new words to images or experiences you already know. You need to read it in English to understand what is happening in this part of the worship service.

Just as you picture the image of a beautiful tree that is deeply rooted next to streams of water and produces fruit, this moment is over! So much to practice in order to master a new language!

How can you worship God when you do not understand the language that is spoken or read during the service? That was my situation just over half a year ago. I was hearing the whole service in Chichewa but not really comprehending much. I am better at it now than I was then. I use a bilingual approach to understand the messages in God's Word. My husband and I mark the Scripture lessons in our Chichewa Bibles ahead of time and we consult our English Bibles to prepare for Chichewa worship services.

On Sundays we attend an English service at 8:30 AM and the Chichewa service at 10:30. Knowing the Bible and also knowing where to find the verses is the key to following the service. Because we know the names of the books of the Bible in both language, we can understand what is happening around us. We add to our understanding one word at a time. We need to repeat words again and again so that we don't forget them.

A few months after we arrived in Malawi, a new group of students began their studies for the ministry at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Lilongwe, Malawi. They brought their families with them, and it became apparent to me that the wives were also adapting to a new language. Many of Malawian students' wives only know how to speak Chichewa or Chitumbuka (another language used in Malawi). Some of the Zambian students' wives puzzle over written Chichewa, since in their country the schools teach with English much more than with local languages. Many of the wives feel overwhelmed by the English worship service.

My hope is that all of us will be like a **tree (mtengo) planted (wobzalidwa) by (m'mbali mwa) streams (mtsinje) of water (madzi)**, which yields its fruit in season and whose **leaf (masamba)** does not wither. **Whatever he does prospers (Zochita zake zonse zimayendera bwino)**. A little practice will go a long way to help us appreciate God's word in either language.



Studying the psalms in multiple languages prepares these women for future lives of service to Christ's church

That's why the student wives and I have begun meeting every Monday to study the Psalm which we all will sing in English the following Sunday. I want to help them study with each other during the week. They know each other well because they live on the same campus, their children play together, and they go to choir practice together. They sing enthusiastically in Chichewa, but not much in English. So we play learning games together to connect the unknown with what is known. Every week we try to master singing the Psalm refrain from memory, without looking at the words. But my desire for them is what I also desire, namely that we learn God's Word in a new language using the language which we already know.

We encourage each other in our roles as Christians and (future) called worker spouses. We learn how to use the hymnal and to recognize its distinct parts: "Liturgy," "Psalm," and "Hymn." Instead of rote repetition, we use interactive ways of learning and teaching. This will help these young mothers teach their own

children, and help these future pastors' wives teach other women in their churches someday. We see that learning is important for adults. As I want to master a new language, so also they can improve how they express themselves.

Images in the Bible are reinforced in our minds here in Malawi every day. We see many beautiful trees here, but they need water to bear fruit at the appropriate time. So also we believers need to be rooted in God's Word so that we give him thankful service at every stage in our life's journey. "Blessed are they who hope, who hope in the Lord!" echoes through the church, promising us blessings from God's Word as Lutheran women here in Malawi.



A ripening orange in the Roebke's backyard

I have seen orange papayas in July, purple Jacarandas and black mulberries in September, yellow bananas in November, and green mangos in December. During the next few months I am looking forward to lemons, oranges, and guavas. So too, I look forward to seeing the fruits of faith that are now developing in these future

pastors and their wives. Their lives will be a great blessing to both current and future believers as they continue to grow, deeply rooted in the Word of God.

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[*https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa*](https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa)