

# Mozambique: Opportunities Presented from the Mission in Malawi

Church History 3031

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The economic recession in America during 2008 and 2009 shed a large shadow over many areas of life. Retirement funds were depleted, there was an abundance of home foreclosures, and many people found themselves unemployed. Unfortunately, the economic recession also drastically effected the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). With the loss of principle in many people's portfolios, many of the funds that had been dedicated to the budget had to be withdrawn. Because of this, several planned ministries of the WELS had to be defunded. This is probably one of the most unfortunate things that can happen to a synod. When there are ministries or missions that have been planned, and the process has already begun for those ministries, when they have to be cancelled due to lack of funding, it is very disheartening. However, that was the situation that the WELS was faced with during these years of economic turmoil. One such ministry that had to be cancelled was the planned opening of a mission in Mozambique, Africa. For many reasons, people familiar with the opportunities that God had apparently presented to the WELS in Mozambique were very excited about this new world mission field. These people still hold out hope that, when the economy recovers, and the WELS has more money available for world missions, the opportunities to start a mission in Mozambique will still be present. Many of the advantages that people have found for starting a mission outreach in Mozambique stem from the WELS presence in Malawi, Africa for over fifty years. These advantages are what make Mozambique such an interesting and appealing mission field. There are several differences between Mozambique and Malawi, but it is the similarities of the cultures of these two countries that make the mission field appear to be so ripe.

Because economic considerations were the reason for postponing the WELS mission in Africa, it is only fitting that when exploring the conditions of many parts of sub-Saharan Africa,

one would begin with the economics of that area. Pastor Stephen Valleskey recalled his experiences as a WELS missionary in Malawi, Africa about thirty years ago, when the WELS presence in Malawi had existed for about twenty-five years. One of the things that he remembered most distinctly was the extreme level of poverty that the people of Malawi lived in, and how they expected the expatriate missionaries to live among them.

One thing we had to adjust to was living in a post-colonial culture where there were expectations about how “Europeans” (which is what all white folk, including Americans, are called) are supposed to live. The Europeans lived in comfortable houses and generally kept several servants, a gardener, a cook, a nanny for their children, a housekeeper, sometimes a chauffeur. In Malawi, this was a continuation of the old British colonial system.<sup>1</sup>

This was a very difficult thing for the WELS missionaries to deal with. They were familiar with the idea of the pastor as a servant. However, in this new culture they were expected to hire servants of their own. “Most of our missionaries were uncomfortable with this practice of multiple servants, but generally would give work at least to someone to cut their lawn and maintain their shrubs and flowerbeds, but would not keep a whole stable full of servants, which the British tended still to do.”<sup>2</sup>

There were many reasons that the WELS missionaries decided not to hire more than one servant, but financial reasons were not among them. Thirty years ago the government of Malawi set the wage that these household servants would earn. “Government-set wage for common labor was 26¢/day for an 8-hour day. This worked out to about \$6 or \$7 a month with a standard 45-hr. work week. Africans worked 7 to 4 Monday through Friday and 7 to noon on Saturdays. It

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<sup>1</sup> Valleskey, Rev. Stephen. Through a series of telephone communications, email correspondence and a personal interview conducted with Rev. Stephen Valleskey and his wife Sally Valleskey during the months of October and November, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Valleksey.

was very inexpensive, at our level of living, to employ Africans as servants.”<sup>3</sup> This emphasizes the extreme level of poverty that the people Malawi lived in. Not much has changed over the past thirty years. Malawi is still one of the most economically deprived countries. The per capita income in Malawi thirty years ago was about \$100/year.<sup>4</sup> Today Malawi’s gross domestic product per capita is \$800 per person.<sup>5</sup> When inflation is taken into account and one understands that gross domestic product per capita factors in the extremely small minority that are much wealthier, one can see how this extreme poverty is a major cultural consideration.

In this way, Mozambique is very similar to Malawi. In fact Mozambique may be even more poverty stricken than Malawi. Pastor Valleskey says, “Conditions are much more primitive in Mozambique than in Malawi.”<sup>6</sup> While the gross national product of Mozambique per capita is a little higher than Malawi’s at \$900 per person, 36% of the people make less than a dollar per day.<sup>7</sup> There is a tremendous disparity between the wealthy of Mozambique and the poor. 69% of the people live below the poverty line, and the wealthiest 10% of the population has 39% of the income and consumption of the nation, while the poorest 10% only share 2%.<sup>8</sup>

The poverty of the nations like Mozambique and Malawi can be a source of cross-cultural ministry. Pastor Valleskey had been told all about how this poverty would affect his ministry before he arrived in Malawi, but he did not fully understand it until he experienced it for himself.

We were rudely awakened to the cultural reality that the Africans, by and large, thought better of the British way of life than they did of our American way of life. This awareness came to us in this way. Since it was known in the area where we lived that Sally and I

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<sup>3</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>4</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>5</sup> CIA World Factbook. *Index Mundi*. [http://www.indexmundi.com/malawi/gdp\\_per\\_capita\\_%28ppp%29.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/malawi/gdp_per_capita_%28ppp%29.html). (December 5, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>7</sup> Regents of the University of California. *HIV InSite*. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/global?page=cr09-mz-00&post=19&cid=MZ#Poverty>. (December 5, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> University of Adelaide. *Global Education*. <http://www.gloaleducation.edna.edu.au/gloaled/page643.html>. (December 5, 2009).

employed only one African to mow our lawn and tend our shrubs and flowerbeds (which he did 45 hrs/week, and did it to perfection), we had a steady stream of Africans coming to our door asking for work. At the first, I would try to explain to them that, being American and not British, we preferred to cook our own meals and keep our own house, thinking that they would view this as something noble on our part. Not so. One afternoon a 50-ish African man knocked at our door and asked if he could be our cook. I started to give him my long explanation about being American, not British, and being not accustomed to having servants do our work for us. But he just looked me in the eye and said in a matter-of-fact way: “The reason why you don’t want to hire me is because you want to keep your money.”

So all our thoughts on being “noble Americans” went out the window. In that cultural setting, the only way Africans could understand us was that we were being “selfish” with our money. It didn’t mean that we started hiring more servants, which we didn’t. It just meant that we quit trying to explain ourselves to the Africans on that particular point, which was a cultural impasse.<sup>9</sup>

This would certainly be a challenge for a WELS missionary in Mozambique. The impression of being a “super rich” American coming into the country would certainly be present. One would have to try to be generous and benevolent with their money without creating a culture of dependence. This certainly would be difficult to deal with. However, because the WELS already has a great amount of experience with a very similar financial situation in Malawi, perhaps the adjustment to this might not be as slow as it was for the missionaries in Malawi.

Another challenge that faced the missionaries in Malawi was the presence of witchcraft in that culture. This belief is so heavily ingrained in the culture and societies of the tribes that live in sub-Saharan Africa that it is almost impossible to convince the people otherwise.

Witchcraft belief permeates all of life in Africa, and keeps the people in fear. There is a strong belief in causality, but not simple cause and effect as we know it. If a man walks a path and trips on a log that has fallen on the path and breaks a leg, he will not argue with our understanding of cause and effect—that the reason he broke his leg is because he tripped on the log. But he will look for a deeper cause. Why has he walked this path many times before and nothing bad happened to him? That’s where witchcraft belief enters in. He will believe someone “witched” him. He will ask why that fallen log was

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<sup>9</sup> Valleskey.

right there on the path just at the time when he was walking on it. He will think that someone practiced witchcraft on him in order to do him evil. If a man wakes up in the morning with a sore shoulder, he might remember that the day before he was sitting outside and a leaf fell off a tree and glanced off his shoulder. Traditional witchcraft belief will lead him to think that someone ‘witched’ him, and caused the pain in his shoulder by that falling leaf.

Traditionally in Bantu Africa, everything is caused. Nothing happens by chance. In Chichewa, they have a word for accident, *ngozi*, but it doesn’t mean accident as we think of it as a chance happening. There are witches everywhere, typically an older woman, frequently a close relative, who are causing the trouble. In pre-colonial times, national calamity like drought or famine was considered to be the work of witches. The witches were hunted down and the *mwabvi* (poison) ordeal was applied to them to determine whether they were witches or not. The colonial governments outlawed the *mwabvi* ordeals, but you would hear rumors about it still happening in some remote places.<sup>10</sup>

Again this was something that Pastor Valleskey was made aware of as he prepared to enter ministry in Africa. However, even with knowledge of the fact that witchcraft permeated all of African lifestyle, the missionaries in Africa still did not have a complete grasp on the issue, and they also were ill-prepared to deal with it. One misconception that many of the missionaries had about witchcraft is that they assumed that the African people lived in fear of the witchdoctors because they seemed to have all the power and control. This however, was not the case.

The witch doctors, in traditional African belief, are the people you go to to try to determine who is witching you and causing your problems. So in that respect the witch doctors are the “good guys” who you go to for help, but they are still much feared by the people for their occult powers.

Typically, the witch doctor practices “divining” as a means of ferreting out occult (secret, hidden) information for you. Some witch doctors would use a basin of water to divine. They would throw a handful of flour on the water and then make out in the image the face of the person who is witching you. One witch doctor at Chiradzulu Village kept a gourd in the corner of his hut, which he would ask yes and no questions. For affirmative replies, the gourd would mysteriously rise from the ground. For a strong affirmative, the gourd would rise very high. Sort of a “you’re getting warmer and warmer” in trying to figure out who is the witch. I even heard of witch doctors who would practice divination

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<sup>10</sup> Valleskey.

by using the Bible. They would open the Bible and random put their finger on a word, and from that word divine secret information.

Once the witch doctor has helped you identify whoever is witching you, the witch doctor will get something personal from the witch, such as fingernail clippings or some cut hair or fecal matter, and he (the witch doctor) will use this to make a potion for you to drink which will then permit you to break the spell of the witchcraft. For this reason, Africans are careful to hide and conceal any of the personal items of themselves like those above, so no one can find them and use them in some way related to witchcraft.<sup>11</sup>

It was fairly easy for the missionaries in Malawi to change their mindset regarding the witchdoctors in a relatively short amount of time. However, it took years for the missionaries to find a good way to deal with the witchcraft practices that still had a firm grip on the hearts of the Christian believers. Pastor Valleskey shared one such example of how witchcraft affected the lives of those who had been members of the Christian church in Malawi for a long time.

One case that comes to mind was that of one of our members who left her husband and returned to her home village. I was with Evangelist Mbewe (with about a third grade education) and we went to visit the woman to ask what was the problem and why had she left her husband. She told us that when she got up in the morning, there had been a bowl of *mankwala* ("medicine") setting outside the door of her hut, and therefore, she could not return to her husband and that hut. At WLS, they never supplied us with answers to questions like that in pastoral theology, so I had to rely entirely on what Evangelist Mbewe explained to me was going on. It had all to do with the practice of witchcraft, which is very prevalent, even among our members who have to struggle with it.<sup>12</sup>

So even the members of the Christian churches still held on to their beliefs about witchcraft.

This was one of the most difficult things for the missionaries in Malawi to deal with. At first they would try to convince the people that witchcraft was not a real thing. That it had no power because it was all superstition. They tried to convince them of the American way of thinking about such things. Yet no matter how many times the missionaries would say such things, it was impossible for the natives of Malawi to believe that.

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<sup>11</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>12</sup> Valleskey.

The Africans I worked with all agreed that “Europeans” (white folk) are exempt from the power of witchcraft, that it doesn’t work on us, but there was no one, no matter how strong a Christian believer, who thought the witchcraft was just superstitious bunk. This led the missionaries not simply to dismiss witchcraft belief and try to tell the people it’s just superstitious nonsense, which would not have done the people any good because they wouldn’t have believed you. What we taught them instead is that the devil is active in doing all sorts of evil in the world, but that Christ is stronger than any witchcraft, and that was a message that they embraced wholeheartedly and did believe with all their hearts. Occasionally, some would revert to witchcraft practices, like tying *ju-jitsu* charms on the wrists of their babies to ward off the evil spirits, but by and large the message of Christ is making its mark.<sup>13</sup>

Even when the missionaries led the people of Africa to embrace this fact that Christ has power over any sort of evil spell or witchcraft that they could think of, the lifestyle of the native people of Malawi still was affected. Because of this tradition, the people in the villages almost had a communal lifestyle. If someone experiences some sort of success, even if it is very small, they must immediately share it with the rest of the village, lest they be ostracized from their community.

In Malawi, and in Bantu culture in general, traditionally everything was shared. Sudden or unexpected good fortune or wealth was one of the most common occasions for a witchcraft accusation, in their traditional culture. You wouldn’t have had that good fortune unless you were practicing witchcraft. So if a man had the good fortune of bagging an antelope, it would immediately be shared with the village to minimize any witchcraft allegations. So things tended to be spread around. It is a major hindrance to success or getting ahead in Africa to this day. If you are “successful,” you are written off and ostracized from your tribal community. Ernest Chikwanda, at Msoro Village in the Eastern Province of Zambia, worked as a waiter for many years in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia 350 miles away, where he became a member of the Lutheran Church. In retirement he moved back to his home village, but he had to build his hut apart from the rest of the village because of his “success.” Msoro was on my regular once-a-month 3-4 day trips to the Eastern Province of Zambia, where I had numerous preaching stations and churches to visit.

Today when an African comes to town and gets a job, low paying as it might be, he is able to buy things for himself, like a transistor radio. I asked a young man in the city of

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<sup>13</sup> Valleskey.



Blantyre once what it would mean if someone from the village came and saw the few things that he had acquired in “civilization.” He told me that if his father came to town and said to him, “That is a very nice radio you have,” he would have to give it immediately to his father or risk being ostracized from his village and clan. The only alternative he had, he said, was to tell his father, “I’m happy that you like my radio. I will get you one just like it.” The more common method of dealing with this cultural phenomenon is to hide whatever you have if someone is coming to visit from the villages. You need to remember that these are not “rich” people in town, by our standards, who we are talking about, but people who are probably earning about \$8-10 a month.<sup>14</sup>

It took quite a bit of trial and error on the part of the missionaries to convince the people in sub-Saharan Africa that the powers of witchcraft had no power over them. Yet through experience and continued preaching of the Word, they did. It is this experience that the WELS has gained over the years that also is a benefit for a propose mission in Mozambique. Mozambique, like most sub-Saharan African countries is heavily influenced by witchcraft. Because the WELS has become familiar with the grip that witchcraft has on the African people, and because they have learned how to deal with this, it would give a mission effort in Mozambique a distinct advantage over the mission that began without the benefit of this experience and knowledge when the world mission first began in Malawi.

Part of the experience that WELS missionaries have gained from the years of ministry in Malawi is the desperate need for native called workers. This is the goal of any foreign mission field, to train native pastors and evangelists for work in their own area. The same goal is just as important in sub-Saharan Africa, if not more so. One reason why it may be more important in Malawi and Mozambique is the lack of transportation in these areas. The villages in those countries are fairly independent, in that travel between villages is relatively rare. There is no good system of roads. In fact, as bad as the road system in Malawi is, the transportation system in Mozambique is even worse. “Travel is much more difficult. Good roads do not connect the

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<sup>14</sup> Valleskey.

whole country.”<sup>15</sup> But it is not just the lack of good roads that makes travel difficult. It is the lack of modes of transportation that makes more native workers needed.

The missionaries were mobile. We had cars. The Africans did not. This meant that when, through our Bible correspondence program, through the moving of one of our members to a new area, or by other means of contact, a new village would request our coming to them with the gospel, the missionaries were the point men who generally made the first contact.<sup>16</sup>

The missionaries were important themselves, but since most of the native workers were immobile individually, it was extremely important to have a steady supply of native workers to serve the villages in the area.

But the main reason that there was a great need for native workers in Malawi is the same reason they are needed everywhere. No matter how much experience a missionary has in a foreign culture, it is impossible for an expatriate to understand the culture as well as a native, who was raised in that culture, does. This was very evident in the WELS mission of Malawi. Once the Bible Institute and Seminary was started, many of the mission fields experienced tremendous blessings from God and began to flourish.

I served for about a year in the Sema congregation, our first congregation in the Zomba District of Malawi, and had gathered a congregation of about 3 communicants and 6 souls, although about 20-30 people would regularly come together to hear the Word of God when I came. When Daison Mabedi was assigned as evangelist in 1975, the work exploded. In three years time Sema congregation started 3 daughter congregations and altogether totaled about 1,000 souls. I was confirming classes of as many as 70 adults a couple of times a year in these congregations, and it was not uncommon to have as many as 20-30 babies for baptism when I would come on my monthly visitations.<sup>17</sup>

This emphasizes the impact that native workers had and the importance that the Bible Institute and Seminary.

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<sup>15</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>16</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>17</sup> Valleskey.

Once the Bible Institute and Seminary started to graduate larger classes from its two and four year programs, the expatriate missionaries themselves were able to do more work.

As African evangelists or pastors became available from the Bible Institute and Seminary, they would be called to serve the local congregations, and the missionary would be free to move into new areas. If a congregation was served by an evangelist, he would work only under the supervision of a missionary or African pastor and was not permitted to write his own sermons or administer the Sacraments. So if a missionary was starting work in a new village and had a nucleus of people whom he served directly for, say, as much as a year, and then an evangelist (two-year Bible Institute graduate) was assigned to the congregation, the missionary would still visit the congregation on a monthly basis to work with the evangelist, administer the Sacraments, and confirm those whom the evangelist had instructed. If there was an African pastor close enough to the new village, he might be asked to supervise the evangelist and the work.

Most of our work as missionaries was with and through the African pastors, vicars, evangelists, and lay leaders. The regular meetings with these workers for Bible study, sermon preparation, and discussions of pastoral issues and concerns in leading a congregation were among the most rewarding aspects of the work as you witnessed their growth in knowledge of the Bible and ability to lead a congregation of God's people on their own.<sup>18</sup>

This Bible Institute and Seminary took years of patience and slow progressing mission work in Malawi to make it possible. However, now it is running very productively and efficiently. It is this Bible Institute and Seminary that perhaps provides the greatest advantage of starting mission work in Mozambique for the WELS.

There are differences in the cultures of Mozambique and Malawi. However, it is their similarities that make the Bible Institute and Seminary in Malawi a distinct advantage.

Malawi and Mozambique are neighboring countries whose boundaries were laid down by the colonial powers, and do not reflect natural tribal boundaries. Malawi and Zambia were part of the British Empire as Northern Rhodesia. Mozambique was part of the Portuguese Empire. But the Nyanja, Lomwe, Yao, and other peoples who live both sides of the border and speak their tribal language first, and think of themselves first as Nyanja, Lomwe, or Yao before thinking of themselves as Malawian or Mozambican. Already we

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<sup>18</sup> Valleskey.

were crossing the border to serve as many as a thousand Mozambicans who came into contact with us in Malawi and are now are members.<sup>19</sup>

Although in Malawi they speak English and in Mozambique they speak Portuguese, the fact that the graduates of the Bible Institute and Seminary would be able to enter Mozambique and seamlessly begin to do ministry there is a huge advantage for a WELS mission there. All the years that it normally takes to gain a congregational body large enough to make it worthwhile to begin a seminary, and then all the growth that needs to take place after that to create an adequate number of graduates to serve the area could be skipped in a mission to Mozambique. All of that time and hard work has already been done in Malawi and now a mission in Mozambique could just reap the benefits.

These are the reasons that so many people were so excited and optimistic about a WELS mission in Mozambique. It is very unfortunate that this mission had to be aborted for the time being because of financial reasons. It is especially discouraging because it was only recently that the WELS would have been able to make use of these advantages that they have in Mozambique.

Mozambique is just coming out of tremendous upheaval and social change brought about by civil war and the massive flooding of the Zambezi River. This resulted in the uprooting and resettling of huge numbers of its population. So there are virgin populations in new settings that are crying to be reached with the gospel.

The government has adopted new policies that offer an open door to churches wishing to come in and do mission work. The only stipulation they make is that we be open and honest with our intentions. Don't say you are coming in to do social welfare work and then covertly do religious mission work. Don't say you are coming in to do religious mission work and then covertly engage in social welfare work. Be transparent and do what you declare that you will be doing.

We know how to work with the gospel in neighboring Malawi. These are in many cases the same people and the same language and culture across the border in Mozambique. Our African pastors and evangelists can step right in in many areas of Mozambique and hit the ground running with gospel ministry in a culture with which they are thoroughly familiar.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Valleskey.

By all accounts, it seemed like this was the perfect time to begin a WELS mission in Mozambique. However, for financial reasons it was not the case. One never knows how things would have worked out if the funding would have been there, and one never knows what the future will hold. Perhaps this will provide a good opportunity for the Lutheran Church Central Africa (LCCA) to make this mission effort on their own without the help of the WELS. That certainly could be a blessing in disguise.

However, as the situation in Mozambique currently stands, it is a disappointment for many.

Often in the history of nations there is a small open window for the gospel that comes along once in a millennium or so, and that certainly would appear to be the case at this time in Mozambique. There are few tragedies greater in our WELS worldwide mission program than the withdrawal of our proposed program and manpower for financial reasons in Mozambique.<sup>21</sup>

But as in all things, God calls his people to turn to him for comfort. Look to the doctrine of election that promises that all of God's people will be gathered to him in his time. However, while the WELS can hold onto this promise, it should never stop looking for opportunities to spread God's Word in countries like Mozambique and other countries throughout the world that God presents opportunities. By the grace of God, the people in Mozambique, who are hungry for the Word of God, may be able to have that Word preached to them by the WELS or by someone else in the near future. In the meantime, everyone can rejoice for the Mozambicans who have heard God's Word from those in Malawi and who continue to share God's Word with their families in Mozambique. For where God's Word is preached, there God promises to bless it as well.

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<sup>20</sup> Valleskey.

<sup>21</sup> Valleskey.

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