

Malawi Mission

Church members strengthen bonds through partnership

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Written by

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Photos by Bill Bresler | staff photographer



Doug Kee, a member of First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, has been on nine mission trips.



Daisy Felix Kamnyanja Nyaka (left) and Efrida Kawaye will take home a few American ideas about nursery school classrooms and domestic violence shelters. Kawaye was impressed by her visit to First Step, the center for domestic and sexual violence victims.

Hussein Latif has prayed for members of First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth for four years.

Over the past two weeks, while visiting Plymouth with a mission team, he finally got a chance to match faces and names with prayer requests.

“There was one young lady I had been praying for. I was so glad to meet her here. I felt like I had known her for a long time,” said Latif, who serves as a partnership liaison between Mtenthera Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi and First Presbyterian Church in Plymouth.

“Building strong relationships with each other — that can't be done by Skyping one another or writing e-mails. It's important to come together once and awhile face to face to get to know each other.”

That's just what he and other members of Mtenthera Church have done since arriving on Tuesday, April 30, in Michigan to meet members of their "sister" church in Plymouth.

The Mtenthera team members, Rev. Shadreck Solomon Banda, Mtenthera's pastor; Labani Ababi Chafulatira, partnership chairman; Efrida Kawaye, Christian Education chair; Abineri Kalulu Kuleza, Development Committee chair; and Daisy Felix Kamnyanja Nyaka, Women's Guild chair; have lived with First Presbyterians families and participated in worship services, youth group meetings, a Bible study, choir rehearsal, and church committee meetings. They also toured both church and secular nursery schools, with an eye toward bringing ideas home to their own church-based preschool, and visited an urban Presbyterian church. Sunday, May 12 is their final day in Michigan.

Understanding

"When we've gone to Malawi, they've introduced us to every part of their church. We received a special orientation," said Kathy Bernard, who was among the first four members of First Presbyterian to visit Malawi. "This was their first time to come here. We hoped to expose them to what First Presbyterian is. "We're sharing cultural and church organization information. Ultimately, the goal is to have these people develop relationships with more people here."

From the beginning, the 10-year partnership between the two churches has been about building relationships. The two churches wrote and signed a covenant four years ago identifying the scope, length and purpose of the partnership.

"We do share tangible gifts and trips and so forth. But the whole purpose is to share the spiritual life of the congregations," said Doug Kee, who was on the initial First Presbyterian mission team to Mtenthera CCAP. He has taken eight mission trips to Malawi since then. Both churches have sent partnership teams to visit each other's congregations, but this is the first time the Malawi delegation has included lay members of the church.

"It's very cool that you can get to know people personally," Kee said. "We've done a ton of projects, but we've also shared prayers lists. We do a devotional time here Thursday evening that is at the exact time they do prayers in Malawi, at 4 a.m. there."

Reaching out

Church members from the two congregations also Skype weekly. The Plymouth church helped fund roof replacements at Mtenthera's satellite prayer houses, which extends the church's reach into the community. It also arranged for a company to dig a well for clean water and distributed 700 Bibles in the native language, among other projects.

"They have benefitted from us and we have benefitted from them," Banda said.

"People from Africa tend to think they have nothing to offer and that's not true," Latif added. "We've been given so many opportunities to prove that while we're here, whether it is teaching, preaching or just working in various capacities."

Rev. Elizabeth Campbell, First Presbyterian's associate pastor, said members of her church have found spiritual renewal by watching their African brothers and sisters “live out their faith.”

Laura McHugh, who has both visited Malawi and opened her home to the women from the visiting delegation, said the partnership has “renewed excitement” at First Presbyterian. She said their stay in Plymouth has caused her to “re-examine our lifestyle.”

McHugh pointed out that one of her guests, Felix Kamnyanja Nyaka, grows her own food and farms.

“ I buy everything from the grocery store,” McHugh said. “What a gift to understand that you can grow your own food and rely on yourself. Just this morning she said, are you going to put a garden in your backyard? I feel like I need to do that.”

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