Travelogue: Malawi, October 2026

Arrival on Saturday, October 10, 2026, at 1.30 pm, at Chileka Airport in Blantyre

We arrived with six large suitcases and six pieces of hand luggage. There are new regulations this time. You have to submit a health declaration, which only a few travellers were aware of, and fill in a customs declaration for goods and cash. Nobody knew exactly how to do this, and there was no internet access. This resulted in several queues, with some people not quite sure what they were queuing for.

Needless to say, it all takes an incredibly long time. Janet is waiting for us outside. She stows our mountains of luggage away and we drive straight to her home for our first meeting with Karen, the football coach, and her partner.

Karen Chawula and her partner Murray Katangwe introduce their project to us, which aims to support disabled children in Malawi. This includes inclusive sports and educational programmes, as well as practical aids that can be produced as cost-effectively as possible using locally available materials. The aim is to improve the children's participation and involve their families. Karen is a well-known figure in Malawi, where she coaches football teams and accompanied the Malawian Special Olympics delegation to Germany as a support staff member and coach.

Unfortunately, Jomo Osman, the Mayor of Blantyre, was unable to attend the scheduled meeting.

We are staying at the same Airbnb as last year: a spacious, clean house, just about 50 metres from Janet's house.

Sunday, October 11

Our first appointment is at Liwiro Secondary School. Unfortunately, it's a Sunday, so apart from the girls who live in the girls' boarding house, there are hardly any other pupils or teachers there.

The headteacher, Witness Malekano, is still the same as he was from the very beginning: a very kind man with great perseverance. Although he was originally recruited for a school with electricity and full facilities, he remains committed to Liwiro School, despite the truly difficult living conditions here.

Everything still looks as good as new. The toilets are in impeccable condition, and all the classrooms and walls are extremely well maintained. The green spaces in the centre look quite good despite the severe drought. Some of the trees have already grown quite well.

The library is still severely under-resourced. The government is only providing very rudimentary support to schools. I can hardly imagine how this is supposed to continue.

Apparently, the government is supposed to pay secondary schools 30,000 MWK per pupil per term. However, this hasn't happened yet. For anything that needs to be bought urgently, they try to raise money from the local community and the parents.

Despite these conditions, Liwiro has once again performed well in the rankings and achieved an excellent pass rate.

There are a few boxes of books from the large US container provided by the Landt Foundation in the library. The foundation has given us lots of fascinating books that pupils and teachers alike enjoy. Unfortunately, however, they do not correspond to the Malawian curriculum.

A quick note on the buildings: there is rust on the roofs. While this isn't a major problem yet – and it's a common issue at almost all schools – it will need to be addressed in the long term.

The teaching staff have made an effort to provide some items themselves, such as missing office furniture. Solar panels on some of the roofs ensure that at least a few classrooms have lighting. These panels also power the outdoor lights, which ensure the school's safety at night.

332 pupils are currently enrolled at the school, with slightly more girls than boys. The next year group will be admitted in September 2027. A further 105 pupils are expected to join then. The school has 12 permanent teachers and 6 trainee teachers, with roughly an equal number of women and men.

We walk over to the girls' boarding house. Today is clearly laundry day, as the entire courtyard is filled with densely hung washing on clotheslines. The house, which was intended for the house mother but which she has not yet moved into due to the lack of electricity, is now home to an additional eight girls.

The girls' boarding house is overcrowded. This means that some of the 80 beds are being shared by two girls. In total, the boarding house currently houses 136 girls.

When we asked whether this wasn't too cramped, we were explicitly told that the girls prefer this arrangement and that everyone agrees – both parents and pupils. For many of the girls, the journey to school is too dangerous and, given current fuel prices, far too expensive.

Most of the beds do not have mosquito nets.

School meals are currently being prepared for 150 pupils (all the girls and an additional 14 boys who are accommodated in the immediate vicinity):

6.00 am: Porridge

10.00 am: Tea

12.00 pm: Lunch (usually beans and cabbage)

5.00 pm: Supper (same menu). Meat is too expensive. Eggs are served occasionally.

The girls gave us a wonderful welcome with fantastic dancing and singing.

Wish list:

- A wall around the girls' hostel
- An incinerator (for sanitary towels)

- Mosquito nets
- The girls' hostel actually needs its own water tower, as the water supply is inadequate.
- Low-energy stoves would be much better. However, the headmaster is also considering the idea of using biochar. Matthias was consulted on this matter.
- There is still no electricity
- The library is completely under-equipped
- There is very little equipment in the laboratory
- It would be good if there were at least a dense straw fence to separate the teachers' houses from the relatively busy road, to protect them from the dust at least a little.

From there, the journey continues

Second stop: Ndalapa Primary School

For the inauguration of the twin teachers' accommodation.

We'd already seen this during the construction phase last year, but it wasn't yet ready for handover at that time. This time, however, it was officially handed over. The flats are already occupied.

As it is Sunday, only a small group of teachers who live on the premises, along with a few members of the PTA and local community leaders, are present.

Austin Nkoma is still the headteacher, whom we've known from the very beginning. There's a brief round of introductions and Matthias impresses everyone with his knowledge of Chichewa.

Current figures: 536 pupils (276 boys and 260 girls) and 12 teachers

Seven of them can now live at the school.

Consequently, there is also a heartfelt speech of thanks for the teachers' accommodation. They describe the many benefits: the team sticks together better and works more closely together when the teachers live at the school. They integrate better into the community, which also significantly improves community life and cohesion.

They express their sincere thanks once again for the school furniture, as this has also significantly improved attendance rates.

The solar power system was the real game-changer. Everyone is very happy about this, as it has also improved security significantly. There are fewer thefts and less misbehaviour thanks to the night-time lighting.

However, there is a problem here in that the new teachers' houses are not yet connected to the solar power system. This urgently needs to be rectified.

The teachers would very much like to set up a school garden and have already chosen a site that receives the most water throughout the year. However, the water supply needs to be improved, as over 600 people are currently using this old, faulty well.

We've also brought along a few boxes of books from the Landt Foundation (there are some really great things in there – even we started browsing and reading straight away). What they don't have are bookshelves.

They have promised to send the report, which they are required to submit at regular intervals, as soon as possible.

While inspecting the teachers' houses, we noticed a few cracks on the otherwise immaculate surfaces of these truly beautiful houses.

Apparently, there had indeed been a small earthquake recently. We could see that a crack had formed in the ground in front of the houses, which had been widened slightly by the rain. Unfortunately, this has also affected the houses slightly. However, there is no cause for concern that there is any structural damage. It is more of an aesthetic issue.

Wish list:

- The noticeboards are a huge problem. The paint has flaked off and you can't read anything on them. We'd actually promised last year to sort this out. We need to tackle this urgently, including at other schools.
- The library is extremely poorly equipped. There aren't even any bookshelves.
- The problem with the well is still there. It had been working again temporarily. We tried to repair it last year. The water supply is also problematic as the whole community relies on this well for water.
- Naturally, they would like a solar-powered pump and a tank to ensure the water supply on the premises
- We'll also need to get back in touch with Sopowerful regarding a solar pump
- The same goes for the connection for the teachers' houses.

In the evening, we conducted an interview with Debora and L'Or.

Debora (born on March 17, 2001) passed her exams at the CLSS in 2018 with the highest marks (second only to our other student, Esther, nationwide). She was accepted onto a degree course, for which we provided sponsorship until her graduation in 2025.

She is the younger of two siblings and the first in her family to attend university. Both her parents worked as small-scale traders and in agriculture.

Her sister, who is three years older, got married last year and is now her only family.

While she was a pupil at CLSS, her parents were already struggling to scrape together the money. For the first few months, she lived off-campus at the maize mill until she was offered a place in our hostel. The hope of securing a sponsorship from us spurred her on greatly. She

worked extra hard because she knew that her parents would not be able to finance her university studies.

She began a five-year programme in 2019, which was, however, extended to six years due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite her mother's death during this time, she graduated with an excellent degree and has been awarded a partial scholarship for a Master's programme. Nevertheless, she still needs our support, as no other family member is able to help her. There were 35 male and 10 female graduates in her course. All of them are struggling to find jobs.

Thanks to Matthias's contacts, she secured a job on a large mango plantation, where she worked for one season. She would now like to start an MA degree, however, and hopes to continue working part-time as a laboratory assistant at the plantation in Katabay.

The Baptiste family, who have supported her so far, also want to continue helping her.

L'Or, our scholarship holder from the Dzaleka refugee camp, was born in the Congo on October 27, 1999, and came to Malawi in 2016. In February 2016, her father, who was politically active, was imprisoned. She has never seen him again. She had begun her escape together with her mother, but her mother was arrested shortly before reaching the border between the Congo and Zambia. Her mother still managed to contact a friend in Lusaka, with whom L'Or was able to stay for one night. However, the friend was too afraid of reprisals and found a lorry driver and paid him to take L'Or to a border town. So she arrived at the Dzaleka refugee camp all on her own.

She registered as a refugee and was then passed from one family to the next, which didn't go well at all. These were deeply distressing and traumatising experiences. When she arrived, she didn't speak a word of English, only Swahili and French.

In 2020, she failed her school exams and tried to find work as a domestic helper in Dzaleka: poorly paid and poorly treated. In 2022, she moved into a shared flat with a few friends of different ages (one of whom was older). That is where Carolin and I first visited her.

In 2022/23, she took part in the TIH plumbing workshop and we met her afterwards.

As a refugee, she was not allowed to retake the exam once she had failed it.

We helped her catch up on her school-leaving certificate. She then managed to pass it within a year, achieving 31 marks.

She also found school very difficult and unpleasant. She was much older than her classmates, and as a refugee with poor Chichewa skills, she was often bullied. Although her final results weren't outstanding, they were good enough for her to study social work at a Christian private university in Blantyre. She hopes to work for an NGO later. She is now in her second year and, for the first time in her life, has her own room in a shared flat where the kitchen and bathroom are shared. She has found a church where she feels at home and made a friend too. However, she doesn't tell anyone that she is a refugee; she just says she is from the Congo. Because of this, she still feels terribly alone.

Two very different stories of two very strong women who have had an incredibly tough time right from the start. Despite all the adversity, both have an extraordinary determination to make something of their lives.

Although we felt like crying after the interview, we were also extremely proud to have two such wonderful young women in our programme.

October 12, {year}

First stop: Ndege Primary School

The new headteacher is Namisengo Chuma

He's been at the school since last year, but we hadn't met him yet.

The school currently has almost exactly 600 pupils. There are an equal number of girls and boys.

There are six qualified teachers and two assistant teachers, who must be paid 60,000 MWK per month by the school.

All the issues we had raised last year have now been resolved. The two broken taps have been repaired. The doors to the staff room and the solar panel system have also been repaired and are therefore secure again.

They have also restored the school garden and planted maize.

The maize is intended primarily to support the school meals programme, as the 'Feed the Children' provision was abruptly withdrawn a few months ago.

The school has a solar system from Sopowerful with four water outlets on the school grounds.

The government began constructing another double classroom block last year. This is now more or less complete.

However, one of the two new classrooms is to become a nursery for 40 children to attend a sort of pre-school.

There are also two new toilet blocks, which were much needed given the large number of pupils.

Due to the high number of pupils, it is also urgent that a school meals scheme be reintroduced.

A solar panel fell off during a storm. It provided around 20% of the school's energy supply. As far as we know, no report has yet been made to Sopowerful. We have followed this up.

Wish list:

- The school has virtually no school furniture. Only Years 7 and 8 have any; Years 1 to 6 have none.

- They would also be delighted to have more teachers' accommodation. As far as I've seen, there are only two here.

- We absolutely must help to re-establish a school meals scheme

- They have sent us a detailed breakdown of their income and expenditure. They are finding it very difficult to contribute pro rata to the cost of a school meals scheme.

This should be a priority, especially as the next maize harvest is still some way off.

Second stop: Mpalapata Primary School

The school has had a new headteacher for a week now, Mr Dikson Kwatani. He went to great lengths to give us a proper welcome, but due to the short notice, he hadn't actually had a chance to prepare everything.

The school has 343 pupils: 180 boys and 163 girls.

9 teachers: 5 men and 4 women

5 teachers' houses

Last year, we helped with the cabling for all the classrooms and the admin block, but the electricity connection from ESCOM is still missing.

Wish list:

- We have a massive water problem here too. This was already noted last year. In the meantime, the well is apparently supplying significantly less water and there is tension with the local community. Too many people are using it. There have even been scuffles and a brawl, in which a child sustained a minor injury. While this is unusual, it just shows how tense the situation is.

- There is a small water tower, but unfortunately, it has never been possible to connect it in such a way that it can actually be used. On top of it sits a tank that is far too small.

- This school was previously donated a small library by Mr. and Mrs. Schumacher. However, the books are now in poor condition and quite old. In some cases, they are no longer compatible with the curriculum.

- There is some broken furniture, but far too little of it

- They'd also like to create a school garden and need support.

- The headteacher would be absolutely delighted to have a new telephone, as his current one doesn't work properly.

Third stop: Muonekera Primary School

Today we're visiting the first phase of construction of the two planned double-teacher houses, which will comprise of four residential units.

There is a new headteacher here too, though he is an old acquaintance. I've always liked him: Laurence Katchola was our first headteacher in Mpalapata.

This is currently one of our largest schools:

1,200 pupils

This means that there are well over 100 pupils in every class. There are 10 permanent teachers and 4 student teaching assistants. However, they would need over 20 teachers.

The school still has no electricity, even though a power line runs through the grounds. At least water isn't a problem at this school. (We did help with that last year, though.)

The teachers' accommodation, however, is a long way from the nearest tap.

They installed a small solar system themselves last year, so that they can at least charge computers and phones and have lighting in the admin block and one classroom.

They also urgently need a printer and haven't yet received any computers from us.

Paule's spare laptop has now been sent to this school, along with a large power bank.

Wish list:

- Printer and computers
- Library
- No shelves, no books
- No electricity: This is why we'd like to get the small Sunny Money systems – which are inexpensive – for the staff accommodation and perhaps for two more classrooms too. This would provide the staff accommodation with lighting and charging facilities at least.
- They need a photo of Christian. The headteacher requested this personally.
- Not enough school furniture
- A project I'd like to follow up on here is:

This school is short of about 10 teachers. This will probably improve with the four new accommodation units.

Important

There are still two old teachers' houses. One of them, where the new headteacher lives, is in such a poor state of repair that it is actually no longer habitable. It could, however, probably be restored to a fairly good condition for a relatively small budget. We have requested a quote for this, as we would like to get started on it straight after the new teachers' houses are completed. This would mean that, for a small budget, another teachers' house at this school would become habitable.

Fourth stop: CLSS Secondary School

There is a new headteacher here too: Mr. Ishmail Kanyukuta

The customary event takes place to present gifts to the school and to the two top pupils in each of the second and fourth year groups takes place here.

Unlike in previous years, the two Year 2 pupils did not receive bicycles this time, but instead a two-year sponsorship. This is intended to enable them to stay in boarding houses, as their parents are genuinely unable to afford this in either case.

The cost per pupil per term amounts to 200,000 MWK.

The two top pupils, a boy and a girl, were presented with laptops, which are intended to provide them with crucial support as they progress through life.

The school has once again performed extremely well in the national rankings this year and has once more received a special mention. One of our teachers was even honoured as an outstanding teacher in the country.

The tour of the computer lab was a pleasure. The fitted fans do indeed make the room more bearable, and the computers are being used intensively by the pupils. The IT teacher makes a good impression and explains the inner workings of a computer to the pupils.

In fact, they are having problems with the internet. We should look into whether Starlink could be set up here. It works quite well in the rest of the country.

The second laboratory for physics and chemistry has been renovated, but unfortunately, it still lacks everything necessary for proper teaching.

A short interview with the Head of Science, Mr. Kopolande

This is where we intend to use the money raised by the Dr. Karl Hermann Gymnasium. A shopping list containing everything needed for chemistry and physics lessons has already been drawn up and is available.

The inspection of the girls' boarding house was also encouraging. It is still in really good condition. However, we did note that not all the girls have a mosquito net.

The workshop is now looking pretty good too. We were clearly real trendsetters with this workshop. We've now heard from several schools that the government is encouraging them to set up workshops for vocational training (without providing any financial support, of course – I've no idea how that's supposed to work). The new headteacher is extremely proud that he can now offer this at his school.

Wish list:

- The girls' hostel urgently needs new mirrors. We'd already planned to do this last year. You really can't see a thing in them anymore (see the photo for proof).
- They are also in urgent need of an incinerator (for sanitary towels).

- Equipping the physics and chemistry laboratories with the help of the Dr. Karl Hermann Gymnasium
- The Head of the Science Department needs a laptop for lesson planning and setting exam papers.
- Matthias intends to try to source footballs for PE lessons
- Despite the large donation of books, there are still a few books missing to cover all subjects. (We were aware of this, as the provided budget wasn't sufficient to purchase all the books on the requested list.)

It's been a long day. We're driving home in the dark again.

In the evening, the two Community Focus (COFO) staff members from Chikwawa, who are helping us plan the Leo project, join us here in Blantyre. We discuss a few more points. The two of them stayed overnight at our Airbnb. I'm still very impressed by these two gentlemen, and Matthias agrees.

Tuesday, October 13

After managing, with some difficulty, to get hold of petrol on the black market, we set off towards the lake.

We arrived at the Day Secondary School / Mtakataka girls' boarding house in the afternoon, where we met up with our colleague, Rabson Mpinganjira, again.

There's a new, young headteacher here, too: Harvey Chunga.

A large multi-purpose hall is being inaugurated and handed over here today.

The rooms already existed as two separate, completely dilapidated old classrooms in an old building. They have been fitted with new windows and doors, and the partition wall has been removed. This has created a multi-purpose hall that can be used for eating, studying, exams and school and community events.

We can now hold the activities we used to do outdoors in this hall. Two bicycles are being presented to the two best pupils in Year 2, a boy and a girl.

There is dancing and singing. The new headteacher gives a fantastic speech. You can tell he has prepared for our visit. He speaks English very well and comes across as extremely competent and friendly.

While I am giving my speech, I notice a young white man sitting right at the back of the hall, which irritates me slightly. However, it turns out to be Gage Mettler, a nice young man from Florida, USA, who will be staying at the school for two years with the Peace Corps. We immediately asked him to help us with a few things.

The girls' hostel is now fully occupied with 60 pupils. However, they urgently need more beds to avoid turning away pupils who would like to, or need to, live there. Firstly, they'd like to put up another bunk bed in each of the two larger rooms. That would be perfectly possible if the other beds were arranged more efficiently. At the moment, they're all over the place and take

up too much space. This is a project that the young Peace Corps student is taking on. He will draw up a new plan to arrange the beds in the best possible way. Now that we have a large multi-purpose hall, we no longer need the extra room inside the hostel that was previously used as a storeroom and library. This can now be used as an additional dormitory.

New beds, mattresses and duvets are needed for this. We'd definitely recommend metal beds in this case, as they last much longer and take up significantly less space thanks to their drawer systems. There are other small rooms on the hostel grounds that could be used for storage instead. However, these rooms would also require some refurbishment.

We will draw up a separate budget for this.

You would like to have electricity in the hall. We need to work out whether the wiring and connection to the existing mains supply, or a small solar panel system from Sunny Money, would be the cheaper and more sensible.

A problem with the water supply had already been reported. There also appears to be an issue with the wells. For several weeks a year, there isn't enough water for the showers. The girls then have to fetch water from the well outside again.

We have requested a quote for this. I would definitely prioritise this issue.

Wish list:

- The water supply issue must be addressed urgently.
- There is no incinerator here
- The multi-purpose hall has no furniture whatsoever – no dining tables, benches or chairs. This could potentially be a good project for our CLSS workshop. Given the current transport costs, however, we'll need to think carefully about this.
- Sunny Money system for the multi-purpose hall

We set off in pitch darkness for the lake to Janet's house, where her husband and children are waiting for us. We reached the house at around 9 pm. We're completely exhausted; it was incredibly hot and exhausting.

Wednesday, October 14

First stop: Kasankha – new secondary school project

The site chosen for the new secondary school is close to Janet's house by the lake.

There is already a primary school here with the inscription 'LEA'. In Malawi, the abbreviation 'L.E.A.' in school names stands for 'Local Education Authority'.

It means it's a state primary school, run and funded by the state or the regional authority.

The open site, covering several hectares, is set in truly beautiful countryside. There is a football pitch that belongs to the primary school. The site is divided into two areas: one with

significantly looser soil and a larger area with firmer, harder ground. There are already a few buildings on both areas.

Both areas have been approved by the local council as building sites for a secondary school. The primary school is situated on the firmer ground, but there is ample space for this large-scale project. Trial excavations have been carried out on both sites. Both Nick and Philip say that both areas are suitable, but the looser ground would result in higher construction costs because the floor slabs would require significantly more cement. Therefore, the firmer ground closer to the primary school is better suited for the construction of the new school.

Around 15 people are present, including several village headmen, community leaders and community group representatives. Also present are the deputy of the Member of Parliament (MP) for this area and a representative of the Ministry of Education: Mr. Solomon Bonde, who joined us through a contact of Matthias'. He asks in detail what the community wants and why. We explain to him that this school is absolutely essential for the area. There are 338 primary schools, but only 48 secondary schools in this large, densely populated area. There are already around 3,000 primary school pupils waiting for a place at this secondary school.

The community makes it very clear to the Ministry of Education that it must provide the school with teachers and further support. In return, the community promises to do everything in its power to ensure the school is well received and supported.

Mr. Rafique Maru, the building contractor, is also present.

We sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in which the local council sets out its need for a school and pledges its full support. The deputy from the Ministry of Education also signs the MoU.

We take photos at a symbolic foundation-laying ceremony, during which everyone present holds a brick aloft and then adds it to a small section of wall.

Second stop: Nankhwali girls' hostel

We visited the secondary school that Janet had stumbled upon while searching for a suitable community with land on which to build our new project. At the time, she was shown the extremely dilapidated and run-down building in which some of the schoolgirls lived. They were lying on thin mats between dirty walls that were on the verge of collapsing. It was a completely unacceptable and dangerous situation, which Janet immediately told us about, providing photos and a report. We quickly decided to take action.

The room now looks very welcoming and clean. In addition to the renovation work, we have also provided proper bunk beds.

There are 16 beds for 32 boarding girls.

However, we can see that some of the beds are being shared by two girls. I think this is a problem common to all schools: pupils would rather be crammed in than have no bed at all.

However, one thing that has not yet been started at all is the renovation of the sanitary enclosures, which are still in a dreadful state. The protective wall at the back is broken, so it no longer serves its purpose. The school kitchen is in poor condition but can still be used.

Otherwise, the school is in good shape.

A solar system was installed in 2012 through an organisation called Ultimate Traveller. Further panels were added in 2021, sponsored by UNICEF. Recently, it appears that ESCOM has connected the school to the mains electricity supply.

In the entrance hall of the rather spacious administration block, we saw donations from CAMFED, including 14 Buffalo Bikes as well as clothes, books and school uniforms. An open shelter for the bicycles is currently under construction.

I mentioned that I felt this school was receiving a great deal of support and was actually in quite a good position. The headteacher replied that the problem was that organisations would make one-off donations but wouldn't continue to support the school. Consequently, there is once again a major problem with the water supply: the school had a water pump, but it is now so damaged that it cannot be repaired. The school cannot afford a new one. The borehole, which has a hand-operated water pump, is situated in a hollow that floods completely every time the rainy season comes around. When that happens, the pump cannot be used. This problem also affects the two neighbouring villages and the primary school in the immediate vicinity.

They have 217 pupils: 117 girls and 100 boys.

17 teachers: 5 women and 12 men. Attendance rates are quite good.

We received a wonderful welcome with brilliant speeches and beautiful poems. The chief gave a powerful speech, essentially saying: 'The girls were lying on the floor. You have lifted them up – literally and metaphorically.' Now they are allowed to sleep in proper beds. What a lovely image!

There were also, once again, impressive Gule-Wamkulu dances, this time even featuring a fire show. We'd never seen anything like it before.

After the headteacher put forward various requests, we advised him to contact Computers for Malawi or Enhanced Education. We also suggested that he to look for a partner school in another country and perhaps even write to universities to ask whether they might be willing to fund, for example, laboratory equipment.

Wish list:

- New sanitary facilities for the girls' boarding house
- A wall behind the girls' boarding house
- A new submersible pump

Dr. Chisomo Tumeo, Carolin Zulu and Rabson visited us in the afternoon.

We discussed the programme that Chisomo runs in the schools. We are very keen to continue with it. I also speak to Carolin about her coaching sessions with the girls.

She says that some girls still get in touch with her afterwards. Providing this ongoing support is quite time-consuming and often involves transport costs.

We are happy to reimburse her for these transport costs. At current prices, it would otherwise be unreasonable to expect her to cover them, especially as I consider this support to be a very important additional service provided as part of her coaching.

Thursday, October 15

Early departure from the lake

That was a close call. Our driver, who was coming from Lilongwe, took a long time to find a car (cars aren't being hired out at the moment because the hire companies are afraid they'll break down somewhere due to the petrol shortage). Then he had to organise petrol to reach us at the lake. This took so long that by then he was completely exhausted by the time he arrived and had to find another driver. This driver drove through the night to pick us up, take us to Mtosa to see Father Manolo, and then on to Lilongwe.

Janet is still travelling with us, though on her own business: she has to go to the Norwegian Embassy in Lilongwe to apply for a Schengen visa, which would enable her to perhaps visit us this winter.

First stop: Benga Parish.

We met Father Manolo here for a very good lunch and visit the large church with its extraordinary stained-glass windows created by a local artist. The windows depict scenes from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the new saints. This beautiful, light-filled space can accommodate 800 worshippers.

Second stop: Mtosa, girls' boarding house

Construction is still underway, but the work is in its final stages. You can already get a good feel for how it will look when it's finished in a few weeks' time. Father Manolo has also put a great deal of thought into the colour scheme: the walls are painted the colour of a lime's flesh and skin, becoming lighter towards the top, while the ceiling is a very pale shade of lavender (prettier than light grey). It really does look lovely. The windows are slightly tinted with a mirrored finish on the outside for the girls' protection, so you cannot see into the rooms.

The large room is divided by walls that are higher than head height to dampen sound and give the girls more privacy. This also keeps the room much brighter.

The toilets and showers can be accessed directly from here via a small courtyard. Manolo explains that they're actually indoor pit latrines. However, when they're full, they're treated with a special lime, meaning they don't need to be emptied for years.

The beds are due to arrive soon. They are the same ones we've ordered for the other hostel: sturdy metal frames with drawers underneath (like in Liwiro and Nankhwali). After that, the building will be officially handed over.

Matthias is going down there again in February. Perhaps he'll be able to take another look at the building once the pupils have moved in.

About 100 metres further on and a little lower down the grounds, there are some very dilapidated buildings. These were the old girls' dormitories. It seems that a number of boys are

now being accommodated there. We should consider whether it would be worthwhile renovating them, so that the boys have somewhere decent to stay too.

We carried on to Lilongwe in the afternoon.

We have to go out of our way to get some extra petrol as we're running very low. The petrol stations are completely dry. There's absolutely nothing left. In the days leading up to this, we'd already seen queues stretching for kilometres, with some people waiting by the roadside for days on end. The whole country is effectively paralysed. Everyone is limited to just 10 litres. We hear of people who can no longer keep their appointments. They wait through the night only to be turned away because the car in front of them has taken the last few litres.

At the petrol station itself, we're offered black-market petrol for around 8 euros (16,500 MWK) per litre. We don't buy it. Instead, we carry on at our own risk and, thank goodness, manage to find someone by the roadside who's willing to sell us 10 litres of petrol for 14,000 MWK (approx. 7 euros) per litre. It's just enough to get us into the city centre to our accommodation at the Msamba Catholic Conference Centre. The warning light is already on. Janet is staying at the Catholic hotel too. It's lovely here, spotlessly clean and good value – a really good place.

Dinner with Valentin from Humission

We're meeting Valentin Amian from Humission e. V this evening. The organisation has been working in Malawi for several years, focusing on areas such as education and sustainability in agriculture. We are particularly interested in Humission's extensive experience in the production and use of organic fertiliser, for example in connection with Bio Juggle. We see potential for using this in the school gardens at the schools supported by CLS and would like to explore how this could be applied to our school projects.

Friday, October 16

First stop: Bishop Kalilombe Secondary School

Last year, we helped to renovate the chemistry laboratory at this school, equipping it with all the necessary apparatus to enable proper lessons to resume. The laboratory is located a good distance outside Lilongwe and can only be reached via a poorly maintained road. Sister Ethel, an old acquaintance of Matthias', is accompanying us. It's lovely to see just how many people Matthias knows here and how delighted everyone is to see him again, including in his new role as a CLS board member.

The school is named after Malawi's first black bishop and is situated on a large site.

The school was apparently privately run in the past. At some point, the private operator could no longer afford to run it, so the Catholic Church took over.

Overall, the school makes a relatively well-equipped impression.

They have 580 pupils.

157 girls are accommodated in the boarding house.

There is a large hall dating from much earlier times, which appears structurally sound but is in urgent need of renovation. The kitchen is very small for such a large school and is currently

rather run-down. However, there is already a project underway to meet the requests for improvements to the school kitchen.

Afterwards, we tour the girls' accommodation. They are very large buildings, constructed according to a design very similar to ours. However, the rooms are longer and narrower, and each room accommodates at least eight girls instead of four (four bunk beds in two rows). It all looks relatively run-down and worn, but nevertheless somehow quite cosy and, given the circumstances, clean. It's not a bad place, I must say. The atmosphere is friendly.

However, the building is in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. All the walls and floors are badly worn. I don't know when these buildings were built.

The sanitary enclosures, on the other hand, are in a terrible state and urgently need a major sponsor to bring them up to standard.

There's a large maize mill on the grounds with its own entrance for people from outside. This enables the school to generate its own income and mill its own flour.

In the large hall, we are treated to a short play and two wonderful choral pieces. The teacher in charge speaks flawless British English, wears bright red trousers and is delighted that we're enjoying it so much.

Lunch was planned too, but unfortunately we didn't have time.

The school's own Catholic TV channel even did a short interview with me here. I've no idea whether we'll ever get to see it.

Wish list:

- Furniture for the hall and dining room.
- They also need financial support for the kitchen.
- There are far too few desks in the classrooms.
- They need some new beds and mosquito nets.

Second stop: St John's Primary School

Bishop Vincent was also keen to show us this school.

We met the headteacher, Joyce Chipanda and her deputy. The school was built between 1950 and 1960. Although is a state school, it is owned by the Catholic Church, which makes securing support difficult.

The Church would prefer to close the school due to major structural defects and safety concerns. However, the government will not allow this. Nor does the government support the school, though, and apart from providing teachers, it keeps completely out of it.

Until last year, around 5,000 pupils were taught here in two shifts. Now there are 'only' 4,000 pupils, spread across 20 classrooms. But none of them are in good condition; most are in a

disastrous state. Some are unstable as the last storm tore off the roofs and, in some cases, caved in the walls. It looks like it's in ruins or in a war zone.

Even with two shifts, it is almost impossible to teach all the pupils properly. As a result, none of the pupils are getting the education they deserve. Proper teaching is almost impossible under these conditions. This makes it more impressive that the pupils still achieve comparatively good exam results.

The tiny staff room has electricity, but there's no light bulb.

Despite these utterly unacceptable conditions, the exam results aren't actually that bad.

The school grounds are vast, and there would is plenty of space for new buildings.

A survey carried out by the Catholic Church amongst the pupils' parents revealed that at least 2,000 would be prepared to pay school fees for a Catholic private school if this meant their children would receive a better education. The current plan is to build a second, privately run school on the large site, which could then use its income to help support the state school as well. The diocese does not have the funds for a new building or for renovation work.

Matthias and I have looked into this carefully and could, if necessary, envisage taking part in a campaign to make inquiries with several organisations about taking this project on together. But that is still a long way off at the moment. We still have plenty of projects we need to tackle next year.

That said, we'd certainly like to lend a hand to this pitiful place and its highly motivated women.

Meeting with Marc Zedler from 1$ Brillen. He was also present during the site visit to the school, which worked out well as he wanted to meet Bishop Vincent anyway. We'd already worked on a joint project with Marc at our schools a few years ago but had never met him in person. He lives in Malawi. Perhaps we could collaborate again?!

We had a late lunch at the Msamba Catholic Conference Centre and were visited by Susan Namangale and her son from the Chess School.

Susan Namangale, the former president of the Malawi Chess Federation, has spent many years introducing children and young people in Malawi to the game of chess. We discussed the idea of setting up chess clubs, initially at three CLS-supported schools in the Blantyre region. The schools are to be equipped with chess sets and chess clocks. There are also plans to send German short-term volunteers to Malawi to work with Susan to give chess lessons and, in particular, to train local teachers. This would enable the chess clubs to continue operating independently in the future. Initial discussions with the German Chess Youth and the German Chess Federation have already taken place.

We had dinner with Claudia Plock from DWHH, as well as with Susan and her son at the Indian restaurant Woodlands.

Saturday, October 17

Visit to Grace Pads

An Australian woman came up with the idea for this workshop in 2018, when it was based at a different location. They have now been using this building for a year. Grace works there with a group of women in a former residential building.

They also support children with neurological conditions at the Mzati nursery and preschool. The centre provides care and therapies that are often unavailable elsewhere in Malawi.

The group has a great vibe. Tim struck up a conversation with them straight away, as he is considering launching a new project with Grace Pads through his influencers. We presented Grace with a project that Affonso Gavinha and I had come up with last year and which Affonso has now developed further: 'Be Visible Malawi'. The aim is to make people standing on dark roadsides more visible to motorists by providing them with simple wristbands, sashes or ankle bands made from reflective fabric, thereby helping to prevent accidents. Grace thought this was a brilliant idea and could see herself adding the project to her portfolio. She already has all the necessary machinery and knows where to source reflective fabrics.

We'd need to approach sponsors for this project.

Shopping: I've never managed to buy as little as I did this time. I had a quick look around a shopping centre where there are a few traditionally made items. Short and sweet!

Tim Nießner is leaving. He has to be back in the office on Monday. We gave him a lift to the airport. After that, I'm completely exhausted and really need to lie down, otherwise I won't make it through the evening. I therefore let Matthias and Tadala go to the next meeting on their own, which I very much regret. But I'm afraid I wouldn't have been able to follow the conversation any longer due to tiredness.

Matthias meets TA Zulu of Mchinji

At the meeting, TA Zulu explains more about the significance of traditional hierarchies in Malawi to Matthias and how best to work with the chiefs. They still wield considerable influence, particularly in rural areas, and are key points of contact for the communities. For our school projects, it is therefore particularly important to involve the chiefs early on, as they not only represent the interests of the communities but can also play a decisive role in ensuring that projects are supported locally and continued in the long term.

In the evening, there was a big birthday party at the Archbishop's residence with Auxiliary Bishop Vincent.

I'm still blown away by how incredibly lovely this party was. Brother Joel had swapped his habit for a tuxedo and acted as master of ceremonies, which was really funny and lively. A large group of ladies in yellow dresses and turbans from the 'Entertainment' group of various parishes welcomed Brother Joel and me at the gate and led us to the white tables in the convent's courtyard. There, the ladies continued to sing and dance. I had to join in. As dusk fell, hundreds of bats fluttered across the sky above us.

Sister Ethel, a few priests and many other nuns were there too. It's striking how much less formal even the high-ranking Catholics in Malawi are. There was laughter, banter and dancing with plenty of hip swaying.

There was a brilliant buffet, which was polished off in no time. I also had to give a speech and fight back tears. It was all really lovely and touching. I was given a beautiful yellow dress with a Madonna on the chest, which actually fitted perfectly, as if someone had taken my measurements.

Brother Joel gave a wonderful speech about the meaning of my first names, saying that they probably reflect the boundless joy my parents must have felt when I was born. I have been praised so much that I don't even know what to say anymore. My broad grin is almost making my facial muscles ache. It was certainly one of my loveliest and most unusual birthdays.

Sunday, October 18

Meeting with Simeon Kalua from Green Children.

We talked to him about the planned permaculture project at Phereni Primary School in the Lilongwe region. The aim is to create a school garden together with pupils and teachers, where the children can gain practical knowledge about sustainability in agriculture, composting and growing food. At the same time, the teachers will be trained so that the garden can be used in the long term and integrated into everyday school life. The project is initially intended to be a pilot scheme.

2 pm: Meeting with Ambassador Ute König and her charming husband over coffee and cake. Unfortunately, her time in Malawi is also coming to an end. They are returning to Germany next June.

Dinner: Beatrice is going to Brian's to join his family.

Matthias is meeting Joseph Mpinganjira (the former ambassador to Germany).

Monday, October 19

Final meeting at the Ascent Soccer Academy

The grounds behind the wall appear to be well-maintained. There is a proper football pitch, and in the distance, we can see an open-air classroom with a roof supported by thick bamboo poles, like you would see in Asia. Colourful chairs and tables stand on a raised platform.

There we meet Oliver Ulrich, a German volunteer working at the school, his wife works at the German Embassy in Lilongwe. We also meet a very friendly Irishman, Rory Murphy, who is the Deputy Head of Football & Coach, as well as a Spanish woman.

Founded in 2014, the academy combines school education with specialised football training. As well as training in sport, the young people receive support in their personal development and in their search for further education and scholarship opportunities.

On average, 55 pupils, selected based on their sporting achievements, receive specialised training here, including at a fully equipped fitness centre. The academy supports them in making a name for themselves and playing for national and international teams. They also receive a full secondary school leaving certificate, which is likely to be of a significantly higher standard than most qualifications in Malawi.

The academy has a large school garden which is actively used, and even offers art lessons. With so few pupils, it is easier to create a good learning environment, and it really is brilliant here. We see the long lists of pupils' names – those who have particularly distinguished themselves – neatly written on the walls.

However, as not everyone can become a professional sports person, I thought the suggestion of a journalism programme, or even a school newspaper in print and online, was brilliant, especially given our history and Christian's background in journalism. We immediately agreed to support them with this. We are still waiting for a detailed proposal including all the expected costs, though.

Departure at 2.05 pm, via Addis and Rome again

Arrival at 10.10 am, completely exhausted but very satisfied

Beatrice's POV: My two travelling companions were always friendly, cheerful and accommodating. As exhausting as it was, it was great fun.