

Young Adult Completes Research Internship in Malawi

■ During a two-month research internship in Malawi, Christina Davis, a junior studying marketing and economics at Seattle University, assessed the progress of 30 UCG members who are LifeNets scholarship recipients and the economic future they face.

by Christina Davis



Christina Davis

Imagine the green of Kauai, Hawaii, and the blue ocean of Fiji and what you get is the land and sea of Malawi, Africa. It's branded "the warm heart of Africa," and for good reason.

Up the misty heights of Mt. Molanje, the third tallest mountain in Africa, are dramatic peaks, waterfalls and baboons. But even more inviting are the people with their contagious cheerfulness, joy and hope.

Beginning Jan. 15, I had the research opportunity of a lifetime! Facilitated by Seattle University's International Development Internship Program, I spent an academic quarter in Malawi with LifeNets International to report on its development efforts in the region.

LifeNets, headed by Victor Kubik, pastor of the Lafayette and Terre Haute, Indiana, congregations, and his wife, Beverly, is a nonprofit organization that develops programs offering practical assistance that promote the well-being and self-sufficiency of disadvantaged people throughout the world and, when possible, encourages them to pass on their LifeNets benefits to others.

In Malawi, the world's third poorest country, over 30 United Church of God brethren are currently attending high school and college with full-tuition scholarships from LifeNets. Attending college is a rare chance. In addition, 15 are receiving grants to start small business developments. I surveyed the education infrastructure and employment landscape in Malawi. These efforts are really "doing the work!"

Need for Investment

While Malawians appear to be all smiles, many children and adults have persistent hunger pains. The International Monetary Fund estimates the average Malawi income is \$299 per year. That means that more than 50 percent of the population lives on about 80 cents per day. The threat of starvation is real!

While visiting the LifeNets Chizeni Clinic in Balaka, I interviewed over a dozen widows and orphans who told me about their struggle to survive. When I asked these widowed mothers of their most difficult challenge, 90 percent answered "starvation."

As we talked, children suckled the milkless breasts of their mothers and cried from disappointment and chronic hunger. But the main killer of both

body and spirit is lack of vision. They have hope but no real plan to change their circumstances.

To illustrate, while in a rural village outside of Balaka, I sat under a mango tree with a widow and her seven children. Her husband died of cerebral malaria, or what she called "a bad headache" last year. Her oldest son is 19 and dropped out of high school during his sophomore year because he didn't have funds for school fees.

"Why don't you choose to be a mechanic where you can be called direct from your village?... You will definitely have something in terms of pay... Secondly...there is building. If you can go for building, people from the village will be coming to you to say 'we have a contract, can you go for it?'... Or carpentry...making furniture, chairs and other things. I feel this can be profitable to you. You know people will be coming, 'please make a bed for me... Please make a chair for me.' Why can't you pick from the three of these? In driving, there is nothing."

She spoke with passion. She wants him to hold the reins and drive his life. Children in the United States have things like "Career Day" and "Take Your Child to Work Day," where from an early age we begin to dream big. Schools have resource centers and guidance counselors. But in Malawi, "job" and "career" are replaced by "piece-work." "Hope" is the primary résumé buzzword.

Mrs. Chilopora's wisdom was the first guidance he had ever received.

Education, guidance and opportunity are real needs in Malawi. And

He is the third of 10 children. All nine siblings stopped going to school at eighth grade. With his knowledge from MacMaine, Daniel wants to work for a company or be self-employed fixing computers. "I've seen companies come and bring the computer for maintenance maybe charging 25,000 kwacha [\$178.57]."

Other LifeNets scholars were "exemplary examples" and "role models" to Daniel. Daniel told me he is so thankful for this chance. Undoubtedly, he will struggle to find employment, because less than 1 percent of the population owns a computer. But an

leaving but want Malawi to be part of their own development success story.

Do the Work

The husband and wife who run Chizeni Clinic, Dr. Sam and Esther Chilopora, sang a song one Sabbath morning titled "Do the Work." Though they are nearly 80 years old, their voices rang with a passionate plea, as if they were crying babes:

"We have known the truth of God. Do we know how it came to us? Someone was called to do the work for us to know the truth. Do the work, do the work. Now is time to do the work. Do

Whether in Africa or elsewhere, we must fight to live the "way of give."

investment in people like Daniel will help Malawi develop, not only economically but also towards a higher level of social justice. He described one of his first goals as helping others. "I would like to assist some people, especially orphans... I can say there are a lot of orphans just moving around," he told me.

the work of the Lord. We all have to do the work."

I took it as a personal commission. While seeing the bare bones of some of the world's starving, I reflected on my personal conversion. I have to be an agent of change in my own life before God can do anything with me. I have to live the "way of give."

A mentor told me before I left for Malawi, "There is the way of give and the way of get."

Whether in Africa or elsewhere, we must fight to live the "way of give." The field of international development is growing and of special interest to my generation. There are unique opportunities to serve. But we must realize that we are all starved—starved from



Clockwise from left: Shore of Lake Malawi; LifeNets scholarship recipient Daniel Bizwick; and Christina dancing with widows and orphans at a vibrant community meeting

In Malawi, only 1 in 15 will continue education after eighth grade. He is still the breadwinner of the family but can only find "pieces of work" cultivating others' gardens and earning 30 to 50 cents per week. They can afford to eat one meal of cassava, a common root, three to four times per week.

His mother has no idea how her son could get work outside of the home. But from what I learned, he has marketable skills! He can build furniture, do home construction and fix tools.

When I asked him what he wants to do—his dream job—he replied, "To be a driver." His younger brother echoed the same thing. But it costs 45,000 kwacha (US\$321.43) to go to driving school, and minibus drivers make hardly any money.

A driver! I thought. That is his ambition. Why? In the village, this is the kind of success they see—they see the cars driving by and think that must be the good life. Mrs. Chilopora, the nurse at Chizeni, tried to guide the boy in his native tongue:

while LifeNets cannot help everyone, its investments are transforming similar stories of poverty into episodes of promise.

From Poverty to Promise

LifeNets is giving Malawians the opportunity to aspire way beyond their financial means through scholarships and small business grants. As one scholarship recipient put it, LifeNets really is the "net of our lives." I interviewed these scholarship and business grant recipients, usually over a bottle of Fanta, to learn about their struggles, achievements and visions to excel.

Daniel Bizwick is just one of the many success stories. Daniel is pursuing his advanced diploma in information systems at MacMaine School of Computing on a full-tuition scholarship. He told me, "I want to master computers." This is a rare chance for Daniel.

The organization Raising Malawi estimates there are over 2 million orphans and vulnerable children in Malawi out of a total population of only 14 million. Seeing these children abandoned in his local village, Daniel wants to help them. "They don't have any support. They have no one to assist them. So I wish, if God will bless me, I could just take some of them and assist them by taking them to school, because for this generation, school is the key to success."

Daniel represents dozens of recipients who echoed a passion to help their family and the most vulnerable populations in Malawi. They love their country and are not interested in

the peace that abounds from brotherly and godly love. Right now I'm only 21, but I can't wait to do the work and develop the world—with you in God's Kingdom! **UN**

Christina Davis is a member of the Seattle and Tacoma, Washington, congregations. She extends special thanks to Eliphazi Salawila, the LifeNets coordinator and a UCG elder in Malawi, as well as Wordsworth Rashid and his family who took her under their wing with patience and care for the nine weeks.

Read more about Christina's volunteer work in Malawi at her blog www.travelpod.com/travel-blog/davisc.11tpod.html