

8th December 2015

Dear faithful prayers,

It sure has been a while. I didn't think that Bangor's Christmas lights would be switched on before I wrote to you again, but they have been (even if the result is a bit feeble). Many of you I have seen face to face, so you can easily believe that I really have been back in the UK for the past three months. But there has been radio silence from my end, although I have still been posting monthly updates for the PCI website.

Truth be told, I have been enjoying a rest. That may sound funny seeing as I have spoken at about 20 different churches since I returned to NI (more of which later). But between my forays to such far flung folds as Annalong, Ballywillan, Clontibret, Dunboe, Eglinton - you get the picture - I've had the chance to enjoy family (with my successful debut as an uncle), sport and basically not being under much pressure. A key aspect of this has been the chance to be a 'private citizen' so to speak, with relatively little 'ministry work' and much more time for personal reading. However, I was definitely convicted last night listening to Marty Gray's sermon of the huge blessing of having people pray for me, and the importance of maintaining that contact that keeps prayers fresh. This is something I really should have thought of in the middle of my speaking engagements, rather than leaving it until the seasonal hiatus. So, I continue with tail between legs.

Most people associated with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland will know that missionaries do 'deputation', and will probably wonder why that word is used. I can't really answer that, but what I can tell you is what it achieves. Basically, the Council for Global Mission (as it has emerged after restructuring) sends people out on behalf of the whole church. This means that when people like me rock up to a women's group in Donegal on an autumnal Wednesday evening, I am reporting to the people who have sponsored my work, both financially (through United Appeal) and spiritually. It's not only a case of people seeing what their resources have gone into, it's a chance to bring back challenges from Malawi so people get a deeper sense of the mission into which Christ is calling all of his people, whether in their

overseas partnerships or the life of service at home. When seen in this light, there is no way in which deputation should occasion a groan and in fact I have often been aware of how much of a privilege it is to be doing it, without going so far as to boast 100% levels of motivation for every single meeting. The major lesson that has been crystallising during these past weeks has been focused around I John, that vision of God's people as an eternal fellowship with God himself, for whom Christ laid down his life, who therefore love one another in real, practical ways (I John 1:3-4, 3:16-17). When we take seriously that this is at the core of Christianity, that it is not an optional extra for those with 'social concern', then it should really make an impact. The question now, though, is how this vision can be developed, both in keeping the connection with Malawi and with my own next steps.

My first priority is the relationship with those in Ekwendeni itself. You may well have noticed that I have gone nearly a page without even updating you on the college or the community (not to mention the cobras) there. The simple fact is that when I am not there, even with some skype/mobile contact, I know far less about what's happening in that beautiful little corner of Africa. What I do know is that the ministers in training are scheduled to finish their exams on Friday (11th) before heading back to their families for a few weeks. It won't be rest mind you – they'll be working hard at their farming, praying that the rains are favourable.

From what I've heard, semester's gone by pretty well; as of Saturday past, 10 former students are now ministers, ready to be posted as soon as they have finished their bachelor's degrees (hopefully by May/June). But as you probably will have heard, there are many in the communities surrounding Ekwendeni, as well as many more further south in the country, that are suffering severe hunger. Not only was the maize harvest poor, but the political and economic situation is such that the government silos are pretty much empty. It is the people in the thousands of villages, where nearly all are unemployed and live without money, who really suffer in this kind of situation, not least because their voice is so little heard. Do ask me for more information specifically about that.

The question I would like to hear your views on, and one that I am also asking Malawians to help me with, is how best to continue being in touch. I know that some of you will be eager to keep praying for and supporting the work in Ekwendeni Mission, but for the first time in its nearly 140 year history there are no Scottish or Irish folk based there. I'll be maintaining personal contacts at the college as well as with others in the community, and I'd be happy to pass on information, even to a mailing list of those who decide to stay involved. But are there any who would like direct contact with folk out there? We could arrange it.

At the same time, there are several in PCI who keep an active interest in all things Ekwendeni, with former missionaries and teams visiting fairly regularly (the current

moderator, Rev Ian McNie, for example). Personally, I long for the day when some young, enthusiastic men and women will come here on mission, preaching in a way that few of us could. Such an arrangement has been tried, but I am convinced that folks of the quality of certain Christians in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia could really be used here, putting to bed the patronising one-way view of mission that is so hard for us to shake off.

And that brings me to my own plans. This is not my final prayer email, there will be one more after Christmas before I officially sign off from service with PCI. But, as Paul unashamedly put it in Romans 15:31, 'I appeal to you, brothers (and sisters), by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf...'. I am fully aware that those reading this prayer email are no less 'ministers' than me, but since I'm still in this privileged position as a missionary, I would love specific prayers for guidance as I move forward. I am convinced that I am to be committed long-term to theological education, although I am not yet sure of the context to which I'll be called (whether it's university, church, or overseas mission again). More training is definitely needed, and a PhD is the direction that I am moving in, hoping to deepen my understanding of God's purposes as spelled out especially by John, and how these should inform the holistic mission of the Church. But what exactly the topic should be, with whom I should study, and how the logistics would all work – these are all totally up in the air (both prayers and any practical advice you have would be welcome). One thing I know, is that I am not acting as an individual, but as a member of the Church for its upbuilding.

(No video this time, but there will be next time).

With festive decorations flickering everywhere we look, let's seek God so that He lets us know the true Light brighter than ever before, in what we see and what we do.

Happy Christmas,

Matt

- Pray for those Malawians who are struggling to find food, 2 million of whom are in especially severe danger of malnutrition
- Ask for God's blessing on students as they write exams and go home
- Thank God for my period of rest and speaking, asking that the way forward would be clear, even if it's just the next step and no more.

If you would like to sign up for emailed prayer updates, please send an email to Andrew Topping (andi@rt.to).