



Chaka chabwino (Happy New Year) from Blantyre!

January 2010

Children in Malawi *hate* doctors and nurses. The 2 words I hear most every day are 'Osalira' (don't cry) and 'Sakubaya' (he's not going to inject you) – perhaps not the most helpful thing to say to try and comfort an already nervous child. The children have cause to fear. Most Malawian adults *really like* injections – they seem so much more potent than just a few pills – so children are always getting injected. Vaccinations, intramuscular (ouch) quinine if they have malaria, a shot of penicillin when they get a chest infection. Very quickly, they learn to associate a white uniform with the needle, and develop a Pavlovian fear of anyone vaguely medical. The reaction is worse if the doctor has also got a white face, dark hair that's not very curly and talks strangely. So, after about 50 'Sakubaya's' on the ward-round the other day, it was nice when a 5 year old laughed and smiled when I came up to him. He giggled when I talked to him, chuckled when I listened to his chest and told his mum he could go home. In my faltering Chichewa I told her it was nice to see such a happy child. She explained "He thinks you're Mr Bean". I reached for the biggest needle I could find...

Since we last wrote, the final years of 2009 sat their exams, and those who passed (nearly all of them!) have started as interns. There is a real sense of satisfaction in seeing students that you taught working diligently through the huge queues of patients in A&E. The shortage of doctors here means that much of their work is barely supervised. They carry so much responsibility and come face to face with incredible suffering every day. On average at this time of the year, 4 or 5 children will die each day in our hospital. Please pray for these young doctors. Pray they will remember Christ's promise to all who carry heavy loads (Matt 11:28)

The government declared in November that over the next 3 years we will gradually move the start of the academic year from January to September. This requires cutting the amount of teaching time by 1-2 months each year, and lots of frantic re-organisation of the curriculum. We had 6 weeks to come up with an entirely new 3rd year syllabus. It goes live in 9 days time.

In addition, the president has controversially ordered the re-introduction of a quota system for admissions. Students will be awarded places according to the number of people in the district they come from, rather than on pure academic merit. The university has a disproportionate number of Tumbuka students from the sparsely populated north where there is a strong tradition of education associated with the Synod of Livingstonia missionary schools. Many Tumbuka graduates go on to prominent positions in civil society. Chewa, Yao or Lomwe people from the central or southern regions resent this, and the president has acted accordingly. Church ministers in the north (many of whom we know from our time in Embangweni) planned a peaceful protest march in Mzuzu. The march was declared illegal and riot police surrounded the synod headquarters. This issue has divided academics and has the potential to re-ignite tribal conflicts. Please pray for wisdom for those in authority in the government, university and churches.

We had a wonderful holiday in South Africa just before Christmas. We stayed north of Cape-Town in the West Coast National Park – a great spot with just the right combination of touristy things and beautiful empty beaches. The attached photo is of Ben and Grace on a sunny evening in Hout Bay. Thank you *so much* to everyone who sent presents and cards for Christmas. On the 22nd December we collected 10 parcels from the post-office! The resulting chocolate mountain was a challenge, but we're working hard at tackling it! January is birthday month. Grace turned 10 on the 3rd and as I write we are hosting her 'sleep-over' (or : 'stay-awake-as-long-as-you-can-over') party. Ben will be 13 at the end of the month.

Sara's role at Phoenix Primary School has changed. She is now the learning support teacher. Please pray as she enters this new and challenging role working with some lovely but needy children in the school. She continues to do the weekly Wednesday Bible club. She is very happy there, working with a fine Christian head – Mrs Mpemba – whose granddaughter is one of Grace's best friends.

Some of you may recall the visit last March of a team of child abuse experts from New York – a paediatrician, social worker and prosecutor. Their visit catalysed the formation of the Blantyre Child Protection Team – the first multidisciplinary team of its kind in Malawi. The team from NY return next week and working with UNICEF, we will be meeting officials and colleagues in Zomba and Lilongwe to share our experiences and encourage them to set up similar programs. The whole area of child protection and treatment of survivors of sexual abuse is something I never thought I'd be doing here – but we strongly feel the Lord's call to engage in this work. Please pray that we'd see encouraging progress over the next fortnight.

Thank you again for taking the time to read this, and especially for praying. It is much appreciated.

Love from

Neil, Sara, Ben and Grace.

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