



A warm welcome to Malawi

On her return to Africa Julie Gemmill visited Malawi to investigate the education opportunities for deaf and deafblind children

In a sense my visit to Malawi at the start of June 2009 was a homecoming. My VSO placement in 2005–06 had been in Zambia, but at the far side of the Eastern Province, almost on the border with Malawi, and so I returned to a familiar landscape and was pleased to find that my few remembered words of Nyanga were still useful.

This time I was only in Africa for a short visit, representing Woodford Foundation Scotland, a small charity which works to develop services for deaf and deafblind children in income-poor countries. At the start of last year we were granted a sum of money by the Scottish Government to fund a small-scale project in the Northern Region of Malawi. The major objective of the project is to gather information about deaf and deafblind children who are receiving no education, as well as details of those placed in mainstream schools with no access to specialist support. In addition we aim to enable the families of these children to develop communication skills, and help their teachers to access further training and wider expertise.

In the course of two weeks I had to learn all I could about the work being done by our Malawian colleagues in collecting and analysing relevant information. The urgent needs of the education service, and the lack of resources taken for granted in UK schools, were clearly apparent. However, teachers and pupils alike demonstrated a determination to make progress and to contribute to the development of this country which is known with good reason as the Warm Heart of Africa.

One morning, comfortably seated in a vehicle heading out of town on the dusty road, I watched large numbers of children of all ages walking to school, books and pens carried in plastic carrier bags, and uniforms worn with pride. I saw the same thing as we drove through the countryside, where even the primary schools can be a considerable distance from the families' homes. We are all used to children learning to walk; all these children gladly walk to learn, hour by hour and day by day.

My last visit was to the Special Education Department of the Education Ministry in Lilongwe, and it proved very encouraging. The new curriculum now operating in Malawi is child-centred, with an emphasis on continuous assessment, and all

Malawian teachers in training learn about the special educational needs of pupils with hearing or visual impairment, or learning difficulties. A steady supply of specially trained teachers is becoming available from the training colleges, and this year a number of new resource centres will be opened in mainstream primary schools, staffed by these specialists. The current project relies on such developments for successful and sustainable outcomes, and for the possibility of further work on behalf of deaf and deafblind children, as funding allows.

Julie Gemmill is a retired Teacher of the Deaf who taught in Manchester in the 1970s and 80s, then moved to The Royal School for Deaf Children in Margate in 1988. Finally she spent two years teaching deaf children in rural Zambia as a VSO volunteer. She is now involved in promoting educational opportunities for deaf and deafblind children in Malawi, through Woodford Foundation Scotland.

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