



Lutheran Woman Today

[Back to Women of the ELCA](#)

Lutheran Woman Today

[About Us](#)

[Feature Articles](#)

[Monthly themes](#)

[Back issues](#)

[Bible study](#)

[Home](#) » [Growing in Faith](#) » [Ministry](#) » [Women of the ELCA](#) » [Lutheran Woman Today](#) » [Feature Articles](#) » [2009](#)
» [July/August 2009](#) » [God's Work, Our Hands](#)

God's Work, Our Hands

July/August 2009



Sue and Friend

by Sue Edison-Swift

Come along as I revisit two communities in Malawi, Africa. Come and see the comprehensive, connected, and compassionate development work that your gifts to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal help make happen. Witness "God's work, our hands," in action.

Because this is a virtual visit, you'll fit in the back seat of the vehicle along with Christopher Carpenter (ELCA World Hunger), the Rev. Philip Knutson (ELCA Global Mission), and me. Evangelical Lutheran Development Service (ELDS) staff members are our hosts. ELDS, an associate program of the Lutheran World Federation, is the development arm of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi.

We leave Lilongwe, Malawi's capital, and drive 90 kilometers to our first stop, the ELDS office at the Lipiri Trading Centre. The Centre is made up of a couple of one-room buildings on either side of a dirt road; it's the last chance for miles around to recharge your cell phone. It's already a hot day, so we're glad when Charles Msowoya, ELDS regional project coordinator, suggests we sit on the porch for our briefing. Charles tells us that ELDS in this region (DOWA West) serves almost 2,000 of the most vulnerable households in 127 villages. ELDS regional priorities are (1) food security; (2) environmental protection, especially planting and conserving trees; (3) water and sanitation; (4) AIDS care and support; and (5) savings and credit village banks.

Our first visit is right next door, the Kasungu Community SACCO (savings and credit cooperative), one of four village banks operated by the ELCM. Albeta Chilombo happened to be there, making a deposit. Albeta earned about \$284 last year as a farmer, baker, and beekeeper. Next year, Albeta will be eligible to receive a loan from the SACCO. She plans to use this loan to increase her income-earning potential by making improvements to her home and farm.

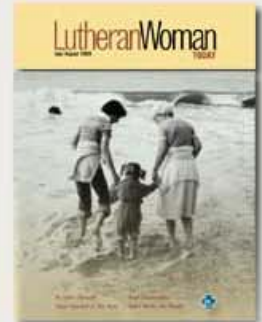
Now it's time to get back in the car and travel to Samuel/Chakwela village, a remote community of 60 families. The comprehensive and integrated nature of effective development work is evident here: water, animals, agriculture ... it all works together.

We watch a woman hand-pump clean, clear water from a bore-hole well. I think to myself "this is where 'God's work, our hands' meets 'Let justice roll down like waters.'"

We learn about how 12 goats (11 does and one buck, a complete gene pool) now number 82! "We each have our own goats now," said Gladys Holiyabu, holding her goat's one-day-old kid.

A piggery project is the newest development effort for the community. We watch four adolescent pigs (three sows and one boar) munch their lunch.

We step around the mound of goat manure (animals are a prized source of food, funds, and fertilizer) to visit the community's seed bank, which contained seed bags of soy, maize, and ground nuts (peanuts). Here we learn that these seeds can be replanted three times.



July/August 2009

Seasons in the Light of Faith

The seasons of our lives—from girlhood to womanhood to old age—bring both joys and challenges. One thing we can count on is that God's love for us never changes.

[God's Work, Our Hands](#)

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As most of the group moves on, we hang back to talk with the women of the community. "We used to be one of the poorest villages," says Vernas Gamatta, "while we're still not well-to-do, we're so much better."

The community actively directs its own development. For example, they selected the 30 most vulnerable families to be the primary beneficiaries of the projects. I ask, "As your lives improve, are your neighbors jealous?" Gladys quickly replies: "There's no jealousy, only unity."

To catch up with the rest of the group, we gingerly cross a wood-plank bridge. The women point to the brown water of the river below, noting that this used to be their only water source.

The group is gathered around protected plastic pots that hold the promise of fast-growing tree seedlings. Wood is used for cooking and heating, so deforestation is a real problem and a real environmental threat.

After a few short speeches, it's time to go. The community accompanies us along the path to our vehicle.

To be a servant

Six women are waiting to greet us at our next stop, Kambuzi village. They narrate our visit with song. We learn that the first verse of their song is "Get out of the car, we want to welcome you."

In Kambuzi we see chickens, pigs, goats, seed banks, and a shallow well. After the end-of-visit speeches, we are invited into a one-room home. Lunch is ready: a steaming bowl of cornmeal along with a chicken-based sauce.




We begin with hand washing. As a bowl is held under our hands, a cup of water is poured over them. We are quiet as ELCM/ELDS staff members begin move around the room washing hands. This ritual strikes us as holy, sacred. We think of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. I jot "God's work, *our* hands" in my notebook, knowing that my understanding of "our" had just expanded to include a world full of neighbors.

Later we learn that hand washing is traditionally done by a woman, on her knees. As she washes hands, she is supposed to keep her head lower than the head of any man or guest in the room. Seeing leaders, both men and women, taking their turn washing hands, is a big deal. Thinking back on it, a favorite hymn keeps coming to mind: "Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 659).

As we head back to our vehicle, the women reappear to sing their goodbyes. I wonder if they might be singing, "Get back in the car, it's time for you to go."

Sue Edison-Swift is assistant director for ELCA Mission Support (www.elca.org/globalmission/support). Find photos related to this story at www.imageevent.com/Malawi.

To donate to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal through Women of the ELCA, make your check out to Women of the ELCA and put "ELCA World Hunger Appeal" on the memo line of your check. Learn more about ELCA World Hunger at www.elca.org/hunger.

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