



## Update from Cheryl Barnes December 2021

Dear Friends,

Advent Greetings! I pray all is well with you during this wonderful season. Indeed, in the midst of life's challenges, we celebrate the birth of Christ and the hope, peace, love, and joy we have in him.

I have returned to the states for a holiday vacation and a brief home assignment. Over the next four weeks, I am available to connect via Zoom. There is more information on how we can connect at the bottom of this letter.

### Remaining Curious

Letting go of stereotypes is never easy. It takes patience, time, and remarkable effort. It is a slow but steady process of learning how to reframe narratives so that the psyche begins to release a lifetime of indoctrination.

My formative years of education in the South did not validate my worth as an African American. My worldview was limited and my knowledge of the greatness of Africa was non-existent. I was not taught as a child that some of the world's great civilizations flourished in Africa in the years before 1500 and before the "Middle Passage" endured by millions of enslaved Africans.

None of my teachers mentioned the fact that African countries participated in the international trade of gold, ivory, and spices to Europe and Asia. Art teachers failed to share that African artisans created some of the world's most intricate hand carvings from both wood and precious metals, that are now exhibited in European museums. From elementary to high school, I never knew that the earliest evidence for mathematical activity was discovered in Swaziland, Africa, on the Lebombo bone. The stories of great African civilizations and inventions were suppressed and replaced with images of malnourished children sitting in barren deserts. These pictures were commonly found on magazine covers sitting on school library shelves.

It was with deep gladness and immense curiosity that I accepted the call to Malawi to partner with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) as an Education Facilitator. This has proven to be one of the greatest gifts imaginable. I am now able to replace the mental and pictorial images from my childhood with images of hard-working resilient people and faces of smiling children. While it is still true that, due to colonization, some African countries, and specifically Malawi, lack important resources, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, what needs to be stated is this: not all who are poor are impoverished. It is my intent as a mission co-worker to lift the needs of Malawians, without diminishing their potential and natural abilities.



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As I travel around Malawi using COVID-19 protocols, I continue to be amazed by the sheer ingenuity and excellence of Malawians. Many items that are readily available on store shelves in America are routinely made by hand in Malawi. Mops, chairs, tables, cooking pots, grills, and wooden utensils. Rugs, toys, clay pots, jewelry, and even wigs. Everything you can think of, all being made by skillful artisans. What is apparent is that Malawian citizens have developed a network of highly skilled workers who use their hands to produce goods. For those who prefer to buy imported goods, all of these items are easily accessible from the recently constructed malls in the capital city of Lilongwe.

Watching these artisans work is a remarkable sight to behold, and I often stare in wonder at the hands that deftly move to craft such useful objects. Without a doubt, it speaks to the boundless abilities of the people in this developing country. I believe that their skilled handiwork is nothing short of a labor of love.



Even the youngest children are learning how to take discarded items and craft them into creative play toys to share and enjoy. While I believe this type of ingenuity will never be a lost art, I am curious as to how we can begin to incorporate the teaching of this skill set into the primary school classroom. Most CCAP schools are geared to teaching a basic academic curriculum of mathematics, language, and literacy skills. These skills are necessary for children to achieve success in a changing economic society. Unfortunately, the possibility of post-secondary education will never be a reality for many children in developing

countries because their families lack the necessary income to pay the school and university fees. As I continue to learn how to best support the Education Directors, I must gain more insight into the education systems and capabilities in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. I must continue to ask questions and document my observations. I will continue developing relationships with Educators and the Education Directors so that we can work together to develop a sustainable plan for classroom instruction that incorporates an active learning instruction model.

I will never underestimate the vastness of this beautiful country and its incredible culture. It seems that what I was taught to believe about my African siblings is not actually what I am seeing and experiencing. For this reason, I must remain open to what God is doing in me and through me. It has been refreshing to replace tired and untrue narratives and engage in new conversations about the greatness of the African continent and her people. In doing this, I am better able to appreciate what true partnership means in the missional context.

Perhaps one of the many reasons that God continues to send mission workers into the world is not so much as to teach Western concepts, but to ignite our curiosity about the complex stories of the countries to which we are called. It is clear that this is where I am meant to be, and that I am doing what Yeshua has asked of me. I plan to honor this gracious gift by remaining curious. This allows me to take full advantage of this wonderful opportunity because there is much to discover and still so much to learn. I invite you to go with me as I continue on this journey of curiosity and wonderment.

After two full years serving in Malawi during the pandemic, I have returned to the states for a vacation in December and two months of home assignment and speaking deputation in January and February via Zoom. If you are interested in having me share with your congregation, please contact Derrick Jones, supervisor of RCA mission programs in Africa, [djones@rca.org](mailto:djones@rca.org) as soon as possible. As always, I am grateful for your prayers and financial support.

Zikomo. (Thank you). Advent Blessings and Have a Merry Christmas!!!  
Rev. Cheryl Barnes

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