

History of the Church in Malawi, Africa

Report from G. B. Shelburne III (Part 1) and James Lendal Wilks and Mark Thiesen (Part 2)

The first preacher of the Church of Christ in Malawi (then Nyasaland), was Brother Elaton Kundago. Brother Kundago went from Nyasaland to take a job in South Africa, and became a member of the Church of Christ there in 1906. Soon after he returned to Nyasaland and began preaching at Chikunda, in Blantyre, near the old mission station of Pastor Joseph Booth. Mr. Booth, a pastor from Australia, worked in various denominations at different times, and established a number of different missions and denominations in Nyasaland. When he was deported by the Nyasaland Government, some time between 1902 and 1904, he was with the Seventh Day Adventists. He was never a member of the Church of Christ. But in 1906 he wrote to brethren of the Church of Christ in Britain, urging them to send missionaries to Nyasaland. When they declined, Booth appealed to the elders of the Church of Christ in Cape Town, South Africa. They in turn sent two brethren to Nyasaland: George Hills and George Hubert Hollis, who was later nicknamed 'Kamoto' (Little Fire), by the Africans in Nyasaland.

Bro. Rutherford Pondani in his history tells us that Bro. Kundago and his converts also appealed for the missionaries to be sent. It may be that Brother Kundago knew them while in South Africa. The two missionaries arrived in Nyasaland in 1907. They stayed in Blantyre. Late in the year, Bro. Hills heard that his wife was ill back at home. Both men returned to South Africa intending to bring their wives to Nyasaland. But Bro. Hills failed to return to Nyasaland because his wife remained sick and died in 1909. Bro. Hollis returned with his wife and lived in the Blantyre Area. Bro. Kundago was interpreter and translator for Bro. Hollis. At this time a mission station was soon established at Namiwawa, southeast of Zomba. At first, Bro. Hollis visited Namiwawa from Blantyre, but in 1910 began to live at Namiwawa.

At Zomba there were three African men who held office in the Church of Scotland, (Presbyterian Church). They were: George Masangano, Frederick Singano Khonde, and Ronald Kaundo. Masangano writes that he himself was a deacon. He was also a head foreman in the work of the government in Zomba. Khonde was a foreman in the Government Press. Elaton Kundago knew Masangano and wrote him a letter explaining baptism by immersion as practiced in the Scriptures. Among the scriptures he cited were 2 Corinthians 6:2; Matthew 3:16; and Acts 22:16. Masangano and his two friends were convinced about scriptural baptism. Masangano writes that he went to Chikunda and after studying for two or three days was baptized by Bro. Kundago on November, 28. 1907. Then Bro. Masangano went to Zomba and baptized Khonde and Kaundo. At the same time Bro. Masangano began preaching.

In his history, Bro. Masangano tells us that in December, 1907, he was called by the elders of the Church of Scotland so that they might ask him what he was preaching. He tells of going to the Church of Scotland school where he found 300 people waiting. He told them what he had learned about scriptural baptism in the Church of Christ. The people asked him for scriptural witness and he gave them Matthew 3:13-17. They all were amazed and agreed that the scriptures teach baptism by immersion. Bro. Masangano goes on to say that after he slept that night, seventy people came to him the next morning wanting baptism by immersion. Bro. Masangano sent forty of them to Blantyre to be baptized by Bro. Kundago, and Bro. Kundago came to Zomba and baptized the remaining thirty.

Bro. Masangano says he was then called to account by a missionary of the Church of Scotland. At the mission he found seven church elders assembled for the discussion. They wanted to know why he had

been immersed and asked him many questions. He told them that in their church they had not baptized him, but had only sprinkled a little water on his head. He said other things in which they were offended and they began to beat him.

Later Bro. Masangano left government employment and began full time work as a preacher supported by the brethren in England. Others of the African brethren at Namiwawa were also supported. In those days Bro. Elaton Kundago began to fall into the snare of the devil. Bro. Pondani's account tells us that when the British brethren began to send the support money for the Namiwawa preachers through Bro. Masangano instead of Bro. Kundago, Kundago became jealous and began to drink and do other wrong things. He then went to Tanzania where he was charged with adultery and killed himself along with the woman.

Other missionaries came from Britain to work with Bro. Hollis at Namiwawa. A lady missionary, Mary Bannister, arrived on June 5, 1912. Bro. and Sister Henry Philpott came in November, 1913. Leaders of other church missions were offended because Bro. Hollis would not work in fellowship with them. The government was offended in Bro. Hollis, because he would not accept the guns and ammunition the government was distributing to Europeans after war broke out with Germany in 1914. Bro. Hollis said, "My work is not to kill people but to save them." But Bro. Philpott accepted the arms.

The missionaries and all the members of the Church of Christ came into trouble when John Chilembwe, leader of the Providence Industrial Mission (Baptist), led an uprising against the Nyasaland government in 1915. The government thought the Church of Christ brethren had agreed with the Providence Industrial Mission about the uprising. The Church of Christ missionaries were detained for seven weeks in Zomba. Then Bro. Hollis was deported and the other missionaries left in 1917, the church having been banned since 1915. Brethren Masangano, Khonde, and Kaundo were imprisoned and other brethren were executed. Masangano and Khonde each received a seven-year sentence.

Bro. Hollis was deported because he had had previous knowledge of the plot and had not reported it (he explained that he had not taken the reports seriously). The government suspected the African leaders in the Church of Christ because they were close friends of the leaders of the Providence Industrial Mission, and both churches practiced immersion. But although some former leaders of the Church of Christ aided Chilembwe in the uprising, the missionaries and their African fellow-leaders within the Church of Christ did not. Bro. Masangano told this writer that on the night before the uprising and its killings, he pleaded with Chilembwe not to carry out his plans. Bro. Khonde also pleaded with him. Bro. Masangano said he could not report the plans to the government lest he have Chilembwe's blood on his hands.

The Church of Christ was banned by the government from 1915 to 1924, but the brethren continued to meet in secret for worship and baptized converts in the streams at night. The leaders directed the work from prison, and baptized people and led worship within the prison. Bro. Frederick Khonde petitioned the government in 1920 and again in 1924, to lift the ban on the church. At first the government refused, but finally agreed on May 27, 1924. Frederick Khonde, George Masangano and Ronald Kaundo all signed a pledge to obey the government. The church was required to file a quarterly report of its activities and to consult government about the location and establishment of new congregations in the villages. The location of Namiwawa Mission was shifted one mile. In those days, Masangano, Khonde and Kaundo, together with Peter Chakama and others, were the best-known preachers in the Church of Christ work in Southern Malawi.

The Nyasaland brethren appealed to the Churches of Christ in Britain for other missionaries to be sent.

In 1929, the Baptist Industrial Mission closed their work at Gowa Mission in Ntcheu District and handed the mission site over to the British Churches of Christ. This may have helped influence the decision of the British Churches of Christ to send Bro. Ernest Gray. Bro. Gray arrived in Nyasaland in 1929 or 1930. Previous to sending Bro. Gray, many of the Churches of Christ in Britain had become more liberal doctrinally and were probably parallel to the Disciples of Christ in America. Therefore Bro. Gray believed in fellowship and cooperation with many denominations. He said the brethren should receive into membership, without re-baptism, persons who had been sprinkled by the Presbyterians. He also instituted a long catechismal period so that some people had to study a year or more before qualifying for baptism. It is said that he also wanted to perform all baptisms himself.

These things offended Masangano, Khonde, Kaundo and other African brethren. Bro. Gray told them that if he didn't cooperate with other churches, the colonial government would send him home. The brethren answered, "Then it is better that you go." According to Masangano, Bro. Gray replied, "I have come with money to help your work. If I leave, you will remain in need." But the brethren answered, "We don't want money but to obey the Lord." Bro. Masangano also says that when the "Federation of Churches" in Britain heard of this, they sent an appeal to the Governor of Nyasaland to imprison the African leaders, but the Governor refused.

On August 4, 1931, Masangano, Khonde and Kaundo and their followers separated from Bro. Gray, (one account says Masangano had left Gray's work even earlier over disagreements with his fellow leaders). There are possibly elements of truth in both accounts. In any case, Bro. George Masangano and his followers formed the "Church of God", and Frederick Khonde and Ronald Kaundo and their followers formed the "African Church of Christ." The government required them to take different names to avoid confusion with the British Churches of Christ.

The British work continues till the present, centered at Gowa Mission. Government records show that the Church of God in 1932, had congregations registered in Zomba, Mulanje and Thyolo Districts. In 1940 Bro. Masangano was put out of the church for marrying another wife in Mulanje after his first wife became mentally ill. After a time he repented and was restored. In 1962, he led his congregations into unity with the missionaries at Namikango Mission near Zomba. This mission had been established by brethren in the Church of Christ in America in 1961. The churches again took the name Church of Christ or "Mpingo wa Khristu" in the Chichewa language. Brother Masangano died in May 1964. Soon after, one of the leaders who had been in Bro. Masangano's work, Bro R B J K Tambalah, separated from Namikango Mission and resurrected the Church of God in George Masangano's old home village at Muima near Jali in Zomba District. But most of the local churches that came with Bro. Masangano to Namikango continued to work with the mission.

The group led by Bro. Frederick Khonde and Bro. Ronald Kaundo began using the name "African Church of Christ" in 1933. At the time of Bro. Khonde's death in 1935, the group had 2,000 members in the districts of Zomba, Mulanje, Ntcheu, Chiradzulu and Lilongwe, according to reports made to the government. Bro. Kaundo succeeded to the leadership of the church on Bro. Khonde's death, followed by Bro. Tabbu Chisiyano. Since Bro. Chisiyano's death the work has been led by Brethren Peaches Jana, Benson Tulisha, and Chalero. Their work is centered at Namiwawa in Zomba District, not far from the Namiwawa Mission station of the British Churches of Christ. In 1950 a missionary Bro. Phillips, from a branch of the Church of Christ in the USA came and worked with these brethren until 1951. In 1979 the African Church of Christ agreed to work in unity with the churches associated with Namikango Mission (although they retained the name "African Church of Christ.")

In 1935 or 1940, Bro. John Malembo, a leader in George Masangano's Church of God, seceded from it and formed the "Sons of God" which still exist. Their teaching is reportedly still the same as that in the Church of Christ. Some say Malembo left Masangano because of Masangano's unlawful marriage.

Mr. Paul Nichols, a missionary from the "One Cup" branch of the Church of Christ in America, came to Malawi in 1952 to visit the African Church of Christ. He failed to agree with them and encouraged one of their school teachers, Bro. E. C. Severe, to leave them and begin another mission. Brother Nichols only stayed in Nyasaland about six months on this first trip, but the mission was founded at Wendewende in Mulanje District. Bro. Nichols came again along with Bro. Gayland Osborne about 1957 and stayed till 1959. Bro. Severe continued to lead the work there after the departure of the missionaries until his death, when his sons tried to continue the work despite the divisions among them.

In 1964 Brethren Jerry Cutter and James Orten (of the same church group in America as Bro. Nichols), came to Malawi for six months and later that year Bro. Cutter came again to live in Malawi. But he was unable to work with Bro. Severe and separated from him, afterward working from the address of Box 573, Blantyre. (Bro. Severe continued to lead the work at Wendewende. Formerly his church was called the Faithful Church of Christ, but this was changed in 1958 to Church of Christ, Wendewende Mission). In Blantyre, Bro. Bennie Lee Cryer came in 1965 to aid Brother Cutter. Bro. Roy Lee Criswell replaced Bro. Cutter in 1967, working until 1969. Bro. David Macey replaced Bro. Cryer in 1968 and worked in Malawi until 1969. Bro. Bill H. Davis came into the work in 1973. Bro. Dennis Smith worked with Bro Davis from 1978 till 1985. Jim Franklin came after the Davis family left, in 1990. These brethren work apart from other missionaries of the Church of Christ in Malawi because of disagreement about the cup in the Lord's Supper. They work with more than 900 local congregations.

Northern Region Work

In 1957 there came three missionaries of the Church of Christ in America who built Lubagha Mission at Rumphu in the Northern Region. They were Brethren Andrew Connally, James D. Judd, and Doyle D Gilliam. Bro. Connally left in 1960 and later worked in Tanzania. Others who have worked at Lubagha include Bro. Fred Liggin (1960-63), Bro. Leon Clymore (1961-62) Bro. Doug Baur (about the same time), and Bro. John Thiesen (1969-91). Missionaries Bob and Flo Caulderwood, came to Lubagha in 1992 after John Thiesen became sick. Through the work of these missionaries and their Malawian co-workers the Church of Christ has been established in almost every district of the Northern Region. James D. Judd returned to stay in the Northern Region in 1990, and started the Church of Christ Bible College at Mzuzu, which was opened 1994. Randy Judd came in 1995 to assist his father at Mzuzu. John & Ann Thiesen returned for short terms of work in 1998 in the Mzimba District.

A tract ministry supplying Gospel Tracts on various subjects, in the Chichewa and Chitumbuka languages, has been conducted through Lubagha Mission at Rumphu since 1992. They provided from 500,000 to one million tracts a year shipped to preachers in all three regions of Malawi for use by congregations in evangelization.

Central Region Work

Although there were already a few local churches established by the African Church of Christ in the Central Region, many of today's churches were established by American missionaries and their Malawian fellow workers. The first missionaries from America to work in the Central Region were Doyle and Louise Gilliam, who came from the Northern Region and worked in Lilongwe from 1958 to 1966. F.P. and Marriane Higginbotham arrived from America in 1962 and helped Bro. Gilliam until 1966. Now all the preachers in the Central Region are Malawians and the Church of Christ is found in every district. A

church building was built in Lilongwe town in about 1960. A Bible school was opened in about 1967 at Mponela and is operated by the Malawian Brethren. Missionary Larry Williams arrived 1991 and remained until 1998 Wayne and Dolores Jarnigan came in 1993 to work in the Salima District. Ed Crookshank began work in Lilongwe in about the year 2000.

Southern Region Work

From 1930 to 1960 many smaller divisions appeared in the Churches of Christ in the Southern Region. Some brethren (Garnett Limani and associates) in the Southern Region who had separated from Masangano's Church of God began writing to American brethren about 1955 pleading for missionaries to come. Bro. C.B. Head was sent and stayed in Salisbury, Rhodesia 9 months during 1958 and 1959, visiting Malawi periodically. He reported back to America on the need and the American brethren sent Roland & Wanda Hayes and G.B. Shelburne III and his wife Ruth, to open Namikango Mission at Thondwe near Zomba in 1961. Brother Hayes worked at Namikango from 1961 through 1964. Lendal & Peggy Wilks from 1964 through 1972, and again from 1977 to 2005, and Jack & Evelyn Hutton from 1972 through 1977. Jim and Kathy Albright came in 1980 replacing the Shelburnes, and worked at Namikango until 1994. They then began work with the "Why Wait" program to deal with the AIDS situation in Sub Saharan Africa, and later worked with SAFE Ministries. In 2003 Mark and Era Thiesen came to Namikango, staying until 2011.

The main work at Namikango is the four year Bible school opened in 1961. The mission operated Ntonda Primary School near Jali and a Maternity Clinic at Namikango. In 1974 a church building was completed in Zomba Town. Many Malawian brethren in fragmented divisions of the Church of Christ have found unity again through association with the mission.

In Blantyre James & Deane Judd worked from 1963 through 1968. Others working as missionaries in Blantyre have been Bro. Leon Clymore (1963-66 and 1971-72), Bro. Frank Alexander (1967-69), Bro. F.P. Higginbotham (1967-73) Brother Robert Compton (1967-69) and Bro. Jerry Smith (1967-68). The church building near the Red Cross building on Mahatma Gandhi Road was built in 1965. The church that meets there sent Bro Daisi Banda Feliciano to Mozambique as a Missionary in 1968.

Beginning in about 1962 some began to translate the English name "Church of Christ into the Chichewa "Mpingo wa Khristu." Both names are used interchangeably. The church is still growing and Malawian brethren have planted congregations even in Mozambique, Zambia, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. Though the church has its weaknesses, there are good signs, for the future. Only a few missionaries remain and the church does not depend on missionaries as before. Little by little the congregations are beginning to support their leaders financially in a small way, to arrange their own Bible studies, and judge their own church cases.

In 1979, the congregations began for the first time to provide all the food for the village Bible schools operated from Namikango mission. For several years Malawian teachers were teaching along with the missionaries in the Namikango Bible School courses, and now they do all the teaching. Unity among brethren is still growing though it is lacking in some quarters. Especially the churches need to learn to find unity because of the same Spirit, same faith, and same Lord, not just because of association with the same mission or doing the same things in the same ways. Self dependency is needed among many of the churches of Malawi. May God grant this.

[This history was gathered up to this point by G.B. Shelburne, III. The following information, as well as a

few updates to preceding material, were gathered by Lendal Wilks with help from Mark Thiesen.

Churches of Christ in Malawi (as of about 1999)

- ☐ Estimate for 1999: 4,100 congregations in Malawi with an average of 50 Christians to a church, makes about 205,000 Church Members in Malawi.
- ☐ Baptisms: (Southern Region of Malawi and part of Mozambique).
 - For the year of 1996- 7,235
 - For the year of 1997- 4,867
 - For the year of 1998- 3,415
 - For the year of 1999- 3,190

Bible Schools in Malawi:

Mzuzu Bible College, in the Northern Region:

- ☐ Eight months each year, training preachers, with six Malawian teachers.

Rumphu Bible School, in the Northern Region:

- ☐ Preachers and wives training.

Mponela Bible School, in the Central Region:

- ☐ Churches donate money and maize to feed the students during the months of July to September. Visiting Americans and Malawians teach during this time.

Namikango Bible School, in the Southern Region:

- ☐ Five Village Extension Centres provided teaching with 10 Malawian teachers. Each extension centre provides food, a place for the study, and tries to provide some support for a teacher one month out of every three. [Update: 17 village study centers as of 2011]
- ☐ Village congregations (193), contributed mk19,300.00 during 1999 and into 2000, for the Bible School work.
- ☐ Other places in Malawi are scheduling a weekend study during a month or for one week, using graduate teachers of Namikango Bible School, with the churches in that area donating food and trying to give the teacher some help for his work of teaching.
- ☐ Other short studies and discussions are scheduled monthly to encourage Malawians to look for ways for self-support, and to find ways of continuing the work of the church without dependence on outside aid.

Mozambique Bible Schools:

- ☐ (Milanje, Namarroi, Nemone, Molumbo in the Zambezia Province) - These centres are operated by themselves with their own teachers in Mozambique (graduates from Namikango Bible School). Namikango provides teaching materials, certificates, chalk, etc.

Campus Ministry:

- ☐ The Campus Ministry Workers, first under the direction of Winter Chinamale, schedules a Gospel Meeting in different regions of Malawi each year.
- ☐ The Campus Ministry has recorded the names of students in each primary, secondary school and college, with a Church of Christ background, and encourages them to meet each week for fellowship and study. Some of the students also meet on Sunday to worship by themselves to get training to carry on services and the teaching by themselves. Other schools receive helpers from the nearby Church of Christ for midweek study and for Sunday worship.

Youth and Women:

- ☐ Beginning in the year of 1992, Bro. Solomon Jere of Namikango began to co-ordinate studies for Girls, Couples (husband and wife), Women, and Boys. Each group is scheduled one week of study, each one pays a fee to help on food, plus his and her own transport to the study. One of the purposes of this is to prepare churches and Christians to support the work of the studies with their

own power, and to encourage those who study to teach others.

- ☐ Weekly studies are also provided for local youth in the area of Thondwe and Namikango Mission on Saturday mornings. Contact is made with “street boys” in the Thondwe area, to provide guidance and encouragement.

Printing Work by Namikango:

- ☐ A monthly teaching paper in the Chichewa language, is prepared (39,000), and sent to over 1,800 church addresses in Malawi, and to parts of Mozambique. [Update: This has been suspended due to high cost of production.]
- ☐ Teaching material is published in the Chichewa language. A total of 21 booklets have been published in Chichewa, for the Village Bible School Extension Centres in Malawi. These books are also sold to provide funds for reprints of the same books or to publish new titles.
- ☐ A Mozambique Hymn book in the Lomwe/Portuguese languages was printed in 2000. Material on the “Life and Work of the Preacher” has been translated, but not published yet.

Other works:

World Bible School and World Radio have done work in Malawi. The Malawi Project has provided significant medical and other humanitarian aid. The White’s Ferry Road Church of Christ in Louisiana, USA, has provided food aid.

A closing update from G.B. Shelburne as of July, 2011:

Namikango Mission is planning to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2012. New missionaries Ben and Becca Hayes plan to begin work at Namikango in May or June, 2012. We are hoping to publish a concordance for the Chichewa Bible next year. Rodrick Maluwa is now serving as director of Namikango Bible School and Bisani Mphongolo is business manager at Namikango.

Since the death of John Thiesen, his widow Ann Thiesen has made repeated trips to Malawi from the US and has taught many women’s classes.

Missionary James Judd passed away in June, 2011. His son, Randy Judd, has continued to do mission work in Northern Malawi.

A new Bible school in Central Malawi is to be opened later this year in association with Sunset International Bible Institute.

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