



MALAWI MISSION PARTNER COMMUNIQUE

By Missionary John Holtz

December 2017

"A Most Blessed Christ-filled Christmas"

I just have to smile.

After all, it's Christmas time! It's the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I just have to smile.

I just have to chuckle, too. Christmas is also a time that I do.

Here's why: at Christmas time my family and I display some of our nativities in remembrance of our newborn King. When setting them up and seeing them displayed, my mind immediately recalls the time I once bought a Crèche in an open air market here in Lilongwe, Malawi.

What's so funny about that?

Picture this: Mary and Joseph and Jesus, some shepherds, the Wise men, a star,¹ a cow, a couple of sheep, a donkey or two...

and a hippo.

Ok, granted, it *is* Malawi. It *is* Africa. And



hippopotami *are* abundant here. And to top it all off, it *is* a very different culture from the USA.

But a nativity scene hippo? Hmm...maybe this explains a few things.

For years I always pictured that Joseph was wide-eyed in amazement because of

the birth of the Baby. Now I'm wondering if his eyes were like saucers because he was a bit worried and astonished that the three-toed barrel-shaped beast with the beady eyes, big mouth, and bad breath was meandering just a bit too close to the manger.

We all love to sing *Silent Night* and we seem to think that all was indeed calm, but now I doubt if it was really all that quiet. I mean if

the cattle were lowing,
the sheep were baaing,
the donkeys braying,
and now the hippo gets a bit edgy and chimes in with its snorting, grunting, bellowing and blowing, then maybe

the Baby was crying after all with the noise! And yet we faithfully and confidently proclaim “No crying He makes” when we sing *Away in a Manger*.

Yikes! Strange thoughts run through my mind! I just have to chuckle. I guess it’s fun to have fun with it. Gives a lighter side to the very important and monumental fact of Christmas:

The INCARNATION!

The “ten dollar” word that means *God became Man*.

The second Person of the Trinity, True God, became the “first-born among many brothers,” True Man! (Romans 8:29).

Born to die!
Died to live!
Descended to earth so that we might ascend to Heaven!

That means we can sing *Joy to the World* with gusto all year round if we want! We have untold, incalculable, immeasurable, even indescribable joy! Not just on the 25th of the last month of the year.

That gives us reason to worship every day of the year!

And worship we do. All around the globe Lutherans are worshipping this Christmas season. Which brings up something to ponder again at this time: Lutherans worship in different cultures and different cultures worship in different ways.

Lutherans in fellowship worship in different ways. Even at Christmas.

The instruments played in *your* church may not be the ones in *ours*. Dancing choirs may be common place *here*, but not *there*. *Your* congregation dresses one way, but they do so very



Home-made guitar from an oil can

differently on the other side of the world...or maybe even on the other side of town.



Malawian women dancing dressed in zitenje

There really wasn’t a hippo in the stable on that first Christmas in Bethlehem, but it didn’t seem to bother the marketer much that he included one in the nativity set he sold me. I walked away with a good deal and a good deal to ponder each Christmas in Africa: there are many differences at Christmas time in Malawi compared to an American Christmas in Wisconsin. Here are some:

No snow! While you may be singing “*I’m dreaming of a white Christmas*,” we are opening up our umbrellas because it’s the front end of the rainy season.

Decorations? There are a few but there are probably more in one Wisconsin Walmart than in the whole country of Malawi.

I’ve never seen a Christmas tree set up in a Malawian house.

Strings of lights framing houses? Are you kidding? Most houses don’t have electricity hooked up and the ones that do don’t have power most of the time anyway.

The most common and most favorite Christmas meal in Malawi seems to be chicken and rice.

I have never seen or heard of a Living Nativity in Malawi enacting the Christmas story. (Maybe it’s because it’s too difficult to get the hippo to cooperate).

Plenty of differences, but there are also similarities:

God's people gather for worship.
Sins are confessed and songs are raised.
The Word of God is preached.
The Bethlehem Story is pondered.
Gospel news shared.
Fellowship enjoyed.

The Babe in the manger is honored with humble gifts
and worshipped with happy voices.

I just have to smile....at the absurdity of it all. There are
many things more surprising than a hippo in a Nativity
set! Imagine...

A God in love with us!
A night sky of angels exploding in song!
Shepherds who seek!
A virgin birth!
A believing husband-to-be!
God becoming Man!
A leading star!
Wise men who followed and those who still do!

And there still are missionaries who live in far off lands
who, at Christmas time, still set up trees, decorate their
houses and string lights even though there's little
power. Some still display nativity sets...with or without a
hippo. On behalf of the Lutheran Mission in Malawi:

A Most Blessed Christ-filled Christmas!



Sincerely,

Missionary John Holtz
Your Malawi Mission Partner

1. Nativity sets often are sold
with more than just Mary, Joseph
and the Baby. The carvers add
the Wise men and a Star, even
though that part of the story
came later.