

PARTNERPLAN  
**Ken Ross - Malawi**  
**May 2020**

Zomba Theological College  
PO Box 130, Zomba, Malawi

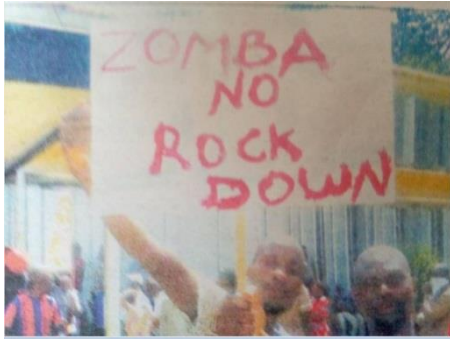


Dear friends,

Warm greetings from Zomba. Though we are far apart geographically and culturally the coronavirus is a great leveller. I can imagine that for many of you, life right now is very different from what you expected at the start of this year. Likewise with me, everything I expected to be doing in this period has been cancelled or postponed indefinitely. March to May was scheduled to be an intensive teaching spell at Zomba Theological College with excursions to Livingstonia and Nkhoma Universities but all of these programmes are currently on ice. At the time of writing we do not have a full-scale lockdown in Malawi but we are in a “state of disaster” with all schools and colleges closed, restrictions on public meetings and strong encouragement not to travel unless absolutely necessary. In practical effect, for me this means working from home – so I can empathise with you as you adjust to lockdown conditions in the UK.

A particular difficulty in Malawi is that the advent of the coronavirus has intersected with an unprecedented political crisis. On 3 February 2020 the Constitutional Court found that last year’s Presidential election had been compromised by manifold irregularities and declared the result “invalid, null and void”, with a re-run ordered to be held within 150 days. This means that the incumbent Government is fighting for its political life while the opposition gears up for the electoral contest. It also means that it is an almost irresistible temptation for the Government to exploit the coronavirus for political advantage while the opposition also looks at it through a heavily politicized lens. As a result, the country has been very unsuccessful when it comes to forming a united front to combat the virus.

The lockdown is a case in point. Rather than consulting widely and building a consensus around plans for a lockdown, the Government abruptly announced a total lockdown for 21 days commencing on 18 April. This was met by widespread consternation as the many people who work in the informal economy contemplated how they would survive if they were confined to their homes



for three weeks. A common conclusion is that they would prefer to take their chances with COVID-19 than face almost certain death through hunger. Anti-lockdown demonstrations were held in all the main cities. The High Court granted an injunction requested by the Human Rights Defenders Coalition and issued a stay-order of 7 days on the imposition of the lockdown. The HRDC make it clear that they are not opposed to the lockdown in principle but they argue that it must include provisions that enable citizens to

sustain their daily life while it is in force. Now we wait with bated breath for the Court's determination on 29 April.

The stakes are high in a context like Malawi. Of course, they are high in every country. But Malawi's health service struggles at the best of times to provide the required health care and would very quickly be overwhelmed by large numbers of people falling seriously ill with coronavirus. An oft-cited statistic is that the country has one ventilator per million people (i.e. 18 in the entire country). There is therefore high urgency and great importance attached to preventative measures to counter the large-scale spread of the disease. At the time of writing there are 39 confirmed cases but testing facilities are few and far between so it is unknown whether there are other cases that have not been confirmed. We are holding our breath.

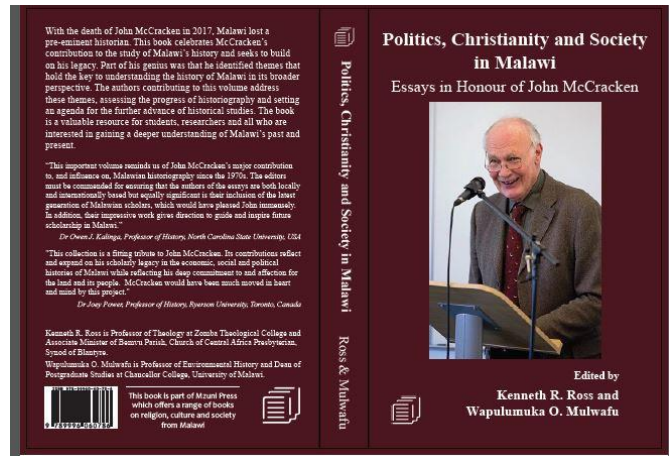
The crisis has also posed a dilemma to the churches. The vast majority of people in Malawi think of the crisis in faith terms, expressing their confidence in God for protection and deliverance. In a highly communal society, it is instinctive to want to come together to pray at such a time. It was soon clear, however, that large religious gatherings could accelerate the spread of the virus. Hence since the declaration of the state of disaster on 23 March, congregations have been limited to 100 and this number is due to fall to 10 in the event of a lockdown. Some churches have taken the line that church buildings should be closed and members encouraged to pray at home, with provision of Bible studies and other materials through social media. Others are determined to continue gathering for worship at all costs. Tough decisions have to be taken by church leaders and individual church members alike.



Meanwhile for me, the situation makes for a very quiet life. Ironically, I am usually complaining that I cannot get the time I need at my desk. Well, no excuses now! No meetings. No classes. No services. No journeys. Of course, there is a degree of switching to online working but Malawi does not yet have the level of internet access that would allow e.g. for running our classes on online platforms. This is frustrating but opens up a rare opportunity for literary work. I

have been surprised and gratified that several of the books I published in Malawi in the 1990s are still in demand so I am taking the opportunity to produce reprints and new editions. I am also working on a completely new book – a much-needed textbook on Malawi church history.

Meanwhile, if you need a good book to read during lockdown I can recommend *Politics, Christianity and Society in Malawi: Essays in Honour of John McCracken*, which I have co-edited with my colleague Wapulumuka Mulwafu and newly published with Mzuni Press. John McCracken was the doyen of Malawi historians and I have missed him very much since he died towards the end of 2017. We wanted to create a book that would recognise John's contribution but also set an agenda for the further development of historical studies. We applied full academic rigour to the preparation of the book but at the same time we were always deeply aware of the emotional dimension as scholars acknowledged their debts, both academic and personal, to someone who was a mentor and inspiration across the six decades of his involvement with Malawi. The result, we feel, is rather a special book that breaks new ground in research while also expressing the distinctive affection and collegiality that Malawi seems to evoke. It can be ordered in the UK (as print or e-book) from the African Books Collective – [www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com); or in Malawi from Mzuni Press – [mzunipress1@gmail.com](mailto:mzunipress1@gmail.com)



These are tough times for sure and few are exempted from facing extraordinary pressures. Yet still there comes the Easter message – “Christ is risen!” We are called to be resurrection people – trusting God even in the darkest times because we know that nothing can ever extinguish the light that has come with Christ.

Yours in solidarity and in hope,

Ken

Please pray:

- For the people of Malawi in the early stages of facing the coronavirus pandemic.
- For leaders of church and nation to make wise and selfless decisions.
- For international solidarity in mobilising the needed resources to meet the crisis.
- For students whose programmes are disrupted with the future unknown.
- For the production of good literature to support theological education in Malawi.

121 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN  
T: +44 (0)131 225 5722 E: [world@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:world@churchofscotland.org.uk)  
Scottish Charity Number: SCO11353