

THIS SUNDAY IS WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE POOR

... so a very good Sunday to receive an update from the STEKA Children's Home in Malawi (one of the poorest – and most vibrant - countries in the world), founded by Helen and Godknows Maseko for local streetchildren, when they found they were unable to have children themselves.

You might remember how in the last four years first Sandra, the Gift, then Abigail joined the community of our parishes, while living in Portobello with Emma Wood, and studying at Queen Margaret University (where Emma lectures in sociology) - Gift is now in the final year of his 4 year sociology degree there.

Three years ago STEKA Skills was the focus of our charitable giving and we raised a considerable sum to help fund 2 Buildings for Vocational Skills in the countryside just outside the city of Blantyre. This was part of a wonderful initiative to help the children leaving school to learn various trades such as hairdressing and set up in (very) small businesses – this in a country where only 1% of the population is able to access Further Education.

An Update from STEKAskills

Emma Wood writes: 'We'd like to emphasise our huge thanks to the parishes of St John's and St Mary Magdalene's for all your support for STEKAskills and to update you on all we have achieved in Malawi during the last year. We have made some great progress over in the Vocational Skills Building you funded which is well and truly open for business. A full progress report is available to anyone who would like it, which shows the special things are happening there as your building has allowed our young trainees to learn together with shared, positive aspirations and hope.

It has been a really complex process though - such marginalised people don't just magically feel confident and powerful enough to run their own businesses. But Godknows and his team have created a 'foundation course' to build young people's confidence and self-esteem. And the really aspirational and positive environment created at our Centre has been life-changing for many of the young people who have experienced the training. So, we have achieved more than creating buildings where the ambitious can learn, the team in Malawi has challenged structural inequality and created a spark of ambition where there was mainly hopelessness and a culture of donor dependency before. And they have achieved this because of their local knowledge and contacts.

One of the biggest barriers encountered however, is in enabling young women to complete the courses., Pictured below is Chinsisi Ngunguza a young single mum who has managed to complete her training (with heart-warming results) but many women have not managed this and have been forced to drop out.

The team in Malawi feel strongly that they are hampered by damaging cultural

practices and attitudes which disempower and oppress women. Godknows has been working tirelessly with local communities, battling, for example, the way in which 'initiation camps' disenfranchise women and can severely limit their expectations and feeling of self-worth. Girls are removed from school to attend these camps which can focus on training them to serve men and include 'the practice of 'kusasa fumbi' or 'removing the dust'. This can involve men having sex with young girls which is perceived as sexual cleansing in preparation for marriage. Our project manager, Mac, has previous experience working on projects like ours and is joining with the rest of the team to create a safe space where women can learn at our Centre among those who respect and believe in gender equality.

It's been a steep learning curve, but we are so grateful for the bravery and dedication shown by

Godknows and his team who are extending the safe environment created for girls at the STEKA home to many more young people through the vocational skills centre. And we have ambitious future plans to further develop this work which we'll be sharing through our social media over the coming months.

So, thank-you for believing in our small grassroots charity and enabling lifechanging work to happen through your generous fundraising for us. And for always welcoming and cherishing members of the STEKA family such as Gift, Abigail and Sandra into your warm and loving community.'

Chinsisi Ngunguza



'I have fought the good fight and finished my course...A new chapter of my life has now opened. I can now accomplish my dream of becoming self reliant and be able to take care of myself, my child and my family,'