

MEMORY'S STORY—MALAWI

Twenty-six-year-old Memory lives in rural Malawi and is the eldest child in a family dependent on subsistence farming for survival. Memory grew up in the Mwanza district in southern Malawi, with her parents and four siblings. Her parents are subsistence farmers who depend on their crops for survival. Climate shocks and low agricultural productivity mean that poverty levels remain high in Malawi, particularly in rural areas. Nearly 70 percent of the population live on less than \$2.15 a day – one of the highest rates worldwide (World Bank).

As the eldest child in her family, Memory faced many challenges in her daily life. She had to support her family with domestic chores such as farming, carrying water, cooking and cleaning, alongside her education efforts.

Growing up in the village was not easy. My parents don't have a job, so they depend on farming. When the season goes wrong, we suffer a lot and become food insecure. Sometimes we need to bathe without soap. Sometimes we need to walk without shoes," Memory said. "When I was in primary school, I went to school barefooted because my parents didn't have money to buy shoes for me. "But I told myself I can't stop going to school because this is the only way I can get a better life."



Malawi has a large youth population, with 80 percent of the population under 35 years of age. An estimated 85 percent of children aged between 7 and 14 are unpaid family workers (World Bank). Approximately 21.9 percent of girls complete lower secondary school and only 1 in 100 girls will go to university.

Economic opportunities for girls in Malawi are constrained by high levels of early school dropouts and women typically tend to work in lower paying jobs or stay at home. "Many women in my community drop out of school because they can't afford school fees, which lead to early marriage and early pregnancy and more poverty," Memory said.

After being identified by local leaders in her village as a capable candidate for a vocational skills course, Memory was referred to a technical college near the city of Blantyre with support from CADECOM, Caritas Australia's local partner in Malawi.

Growing up, Memory wanted to become a nurse. However, she decided to pursue vocational training in carpentry to prove to her community that women are capable of working in male-dominated industries. "In my community, most people think that only men can be carpenters, so I want to prove to my community that women can do it as well," Memory said. "It was my dream to go to college, so I was very excited to get that opportunity. My parents also were very excited to see their daughter go to college."

Through the A+ program, CADECOM supported Memory with the provision of logistical support like tuition and boarding fees with funding from Caritas Australia. The program has provided opportunities for more than 360 youth to be empowered through vocational skills such as welding, carpentry, tailoring and brick laying. Since 2016, the program has supported 7,397 households (33,287 people) by improving food security, access to basic water & sanitation, women's income generation and child protection. The program will soon enter a new phase – the A+ Successor program – and will help 10,184 households (56,096 people) over the next 5 years.

CADECOM Diocesan Secretary in the Archdiocese of Blantyre, Mandinda Zungu, said Memory has the determination and resilience to succeed in the carpentry industry. "To become a carpenter, you need someone who works hard, and Memory is that kind of person," she said. "By using the strength-based approach, we support communities to identify their own strengths to change their lives.

After three years, Memory graduated with an advanced certificate in Carpentry and Joinery. With her newly acquired skills, she secured a job as a carpenter at one of the largest hydroelectric power companies in Malawi.

"If I didn't have this opportunity, I would maybe be married now with two or three children and just rely on my husband," Memory said. "But that is not good. Nowadays, you need to stand on your own so that your husband can also assist you."

The program also supported Memory's family through Village Savings and Loans groups, and provided them with goats, and training in bee keeping and irrigation farming to increase food security.

With the income from her carpentry job, Memory can now provide some financial support to her parents and inspire her siblings to finish their education. "Because I studied carpentry, my siblings admire me and want to get educated so they can get a job and assist my parents,"

Memory's dream is to open her own carpentry workshop in her village and help provide carpentry services to households in her community. As the only female carpenter in her village, she is also a role model and trailblazer for other young women who want to pursue a career in a male-dominated industry.

"In the future, I want to build a house for my parents because the one they are using now is in a bad condition. I also want to own my own workshop so I can help the community and employ others in the community," Memory said. "Being a female carpenter sets an example to others in my community. They see a woman can do what a man can do."



Along with your generous support, this program is also supported by the Australian Government, through Australian NGO Coop Program

REFLECTION: 2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23 | Ephesians 2:4–10 | John 3:14–21

We have all lived through a great deal of change. Even young people have seen plenty. ChatGPT is a recent development and so are electric cars. Older people can remember having a phone plugged into a socket that you couldn't carry around with you. Sometimes we have discussions about the good old days. They are often tinged with nostalgia for things we miss and gratitude for improvements. We no longer need to buy film for our cameras or change typewriter ribbons. Climate change is deeply troubling. Many medical improvements are inspiring.

Change can certainly be frightening. It can also be an occasion of great hope. Jesus seems to have understood this. Nicodemus comes across as a character who is looking for change in his life, but he is nervous about it, so he comes to see Jesus under cover of darkness. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus uses the image of being born again. Of starting all over again. It is a dramatic description of change.



Jesus says that the light has come into the world and that people prefer the same old darkness. They are set in their ways.

Every Lent, through Project Compassion, Caritas Australia asks us to help bring light into the world and to make positive change. An example is presented to us this week in the story of Memory, a young woman from rural Malawi, the eldest child in a family living at the level of subsistence farming.

Listen to some of Memory's words: 'Growing up in the village was not easy. My parents don't have a job, so they depend on farming. When the season goes wrong, we suffer a lot and become food insecure. Sometimes we need to bathe without soap. Sometimes we need to walk without shoes.'

With the support of Caritas Australia and its partner the Catholic Development Commission in Malawi (CADECOM), Memory was able

to enrol at a technical college where she learnt practical skills in carpentry. A new life became possible. She can now realise her full potential and offer more to her family and her community.

Today, the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that every person is 'God's work of art.' God is the artist who never signs off on a painting but is always trying to make it better. Perhaps we can see the world in the same way.

We pray for all people who make things. We thank God for their skill. May our support of Project Compassion help people around the world find the opportunity to use their talents to support their families and communities.

Please donate to Project Compassion 2024. Together, we can help vulnerable communities face their challenges today and build a better tomorrow **for all future generations.**