

# MIRACLE in Malawi

*A Marianist technical school in Karonga, Malawi,  
empowers AIDS orphans with job training and life skills.*

BY JAN D. DIXON

**B**Y THE TIME ANNIE MHANGO celebrated her 17th birthday, she had watched with horror the deaths of three close family members. First her mother died from HIV/AIDS in 2000. Then her father succumbed to the illness

the following year. But when her sister-in-law, who had become her guardian, died suddenly from kidney failure in 2002, Annie's inner reserve was gone. "We were very close," she says. "She was like a mother to me."

Without the support of those dearest to her, Annie languished in a state of depression and uncertainty. She kept herself going with a part-time job at a bookstore until one day she discovered MIRACLE, a training program for

AIDS orphans operated by the Marianists in Karonga, Malawi, a few hours drive from her hometown of Mzuzu.

"I was accepted into the program last year. I am grateful to the Lord from

deep down in my heart that I am here," says Annie.

As a student in the catering/hotel management program, Annie is hopeful about her future. "I won't have to depend on others to take care of me. I can rely on myself. I am very happy about this," she says, noting that many women in Malawi do not have job skills. Often these women are abandoned by their husbands and have few resources to support themselves.

Annie's face lights up as she talks about her schooling at MIRACLE. "For the first time I feel free," she says.

Freedom, empowerment and hope are some of the byproducts of the training programs offered at MIRACLE (Marianist Institute of Rural Artisans for Christian Life Education). Founded as a pilot program in 1999 by the Marianists, District of Eastern Africa, MIRACLE opened its doors as a full-fledged technical training school in 2000 and graduated its first students two years later. Originally established to provide life skills and technical training to children orphaned as a result of AIDS

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— Marianist Brother Paul Kageche, Director of MIRACLE



Annie Mhango



*Salomy Mkandawire, a student in the tailoring program at MIRACLE*

in northern Malawi, today it attracts young adults from all parts of the country.

“It has become a national school,” says Marianist Brother Paul Kageche, director of MIRACLE since fall 2008. With more than 1 million AIDS orphans in Malawi and as many as 20,000 in Karonga District alone, the school now has a waiting list. “We admit 100 new students each year,” says Brother Paul, “and nearly 100 percent of the students are AIDS orphans.”

The waiting list has grown long. “Everybody knows about MIRACLE,” he says.

#### **CHILDREN RAISING CHILDREN**

Annie Mhango is what healthcare specialists call a “stage-three orphan” having lost both of her parents and guardian to HIV/AIDS or other life threatening illnesses. Unfortunately, her story is common, says Peter Daino, a former Marianist

who spearheaded the efforts to establish MIRACLE in Karonga and served as its director until 2006. Daino, along with other Marianists, conducted a feasibility study in 1999, canvassing the villages near Karonga to see if they could be of greater service.

Having established Chaminade Secondary School in Karonga in the early 1960s, the Marianists already had a strong presence in the region. But they were aware that much more could be done. The feasibility study concluded that poverty and unemployment were at the root of the villagers’ problems. The situation was exacerbated by the deaths of many parents from HIV/AIDS, leaving thousands of children malnourished and unattended.

“Children were heading up households and dropping out of school to take care of the family,” says Brother Paul. “The villagers believed that what these children



*Marianist Brother Paul Kageche, director of MIRACLE*



*Students practice bricklaying as part of their vocational training.*



In addition to technical skills, the school provides education in social skills and Gospel living so that “these young adults can learn how to interact with others and raise Christian-centered families,” says Brother Paul.

needed most was vocational training.”

MIRACLE was founded as a two-year training program because many of the students needed additional instruction in math, English and other skills that had been neglected when they dropped out of high school. Today the curriculum offers instruction in bricklaying, carpentry, electrical installation, tailoring and catering/hotel management. Many of the students train in more than one discipline so they are more employable.

The school is staffed by 39 employees, including faculty, social workers and administrative personnel.

*MIRACLE students Peter Chapola and Friday Mayoyo*



### **JOBS CREATE HOPE**

Peter Chapola, 25, and Friday Mayoyo, 26, are students in the electrical installation and bricklaying programs. They have become close friends since arriving at MIRACLE and would like to be business partners someday. Having completed their training, they are now serving a six-month internship in the capital city of Lilongwe.

“The whole nation depends on new technology and that will require electricians,” says Friday, noting that he and Peter are upbeat about getting jobs — most likely at their internship site — once they have completed their assignment. But not all graduates are so lucky.

Brother Paul’s greatest hope for the students at MIRACLE is that they find a job. “I don’t want them to complete their training and not find employment. We are working to improve this through a jobs creation program,” he says. Still, this is an uphill battle in a country where job growth is stagnant and unemployment remains high.

### **FOOD FOR LIFE**

Malawi is the second poorest country in the world according to the World Bank Development statistics and provides little economic opportunity for young people. Agriculture is the backbone of Malawi’s economy.

“The survival of its citizens is based

on agriculture," says Loudon Aggrey Mwasikakata, who teaches crop production and animal husbandry at MIRACLE.

One of the interesting provisions in the tuition program at MIRACLE is that each student must take classes in agriculture and, in addition to a nominal tuition fee, must pay the school 50 kilograms of maize each year.

"We give the students seeds and fertilizer and teach them about crop production so that in addition to the schooling they receive, they learn how to grow their own food," says Brother Paul.

The students are taught how to grow maize (corn), ground nuts (peanuts) and

*Women involved in the Marianist-sponsored Women's Empowerment Program sell their wares at the market.*



rice, as well as tobacco and cotton which are cash crops. "Normally these children would have learned this from parents," explains Mwasikakata, "but most of them have lost a father or a mother or have no parental care."

Mwasikakata enjoys teaching agriculture, but the favorite part of his job is getting to know the students. "They have had a hard life. You wouldn't believe the stories they tell me," he says. "This school is so important in helping them develop a full life. The school also plays a vital role in shaping the national economy. Graduates from MIRACLE are found all over Malawi," he says.

## We Need Your Help

Did you know that in Malawi . . .

- Sixty percent of the population exists on one meal a day?
- Since 1992 the life expectancy has fallen from 51 years to 38 years due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic?
- Nearly 10 percent of the population are AIDS orphans?

There are many things you can do: Become aware. Educate an orphan. Empower the poor. Pray. Volunteer. Donate now.

MIRACLE, a training program operated by the Marianists in Malawi, provides technical training, life skills and spiritual formation for more than 200 AIDS orphans. In addition, the school supports the Women's Empowerment Program, an initiative that grants micro-loans to women operating small business ventures, such as a fruit stand or a fabric store.

To make a donation to the Marianist ministries in Malawi, use the envelope in this magazine or contact the Marianist Mission at 1.800.348.4742 or [www.marianistmission.org/donateafrica](http://www.marianistmission.org/donateafrica). To learn more, go to [www.marianist.com/africa](http://www.marianist.com/africa).

## A GARDEN OF ONE'S OWN

As a student in catering/hotel management, Annie Mhango has been given a garden bed — a six foot by 10 foot plot of ground to grow vegetables for her catering and agribusiness ventures. Though only a few small plants have survived the dry season, Annie has been careful to water them daily and tend the sandy soil. It is an activity that brings her much joy. "I love it," she says.

"A real danger for orphans is that they give up on life and succumb to depression," says Daino who now helps run an orphanage in Karonga as a Catholic lay worker. "They must believe that they are a child of the universe, that they are important because they are here and that they belong. They must believe that even if their parents are gone, we need them."

For Annie and the other students at MIRACLE, this is the message the Marianists hope will take root, along with the training and spiritual support. "These children are God's gifts to us," says Brother Paul. "What I love most is getting to know them and listening to their hearts. More than my administrative duties, this is my most important work. I don't ever want to forget that." ■