

Dr Jack Thompson, 1943-2017

Very sadly, SMP Co-Vice Chair Dr Jack Thompson (Jabulani Jere) died on the 10th August 2017 in Edinburgh.

At 11am on the 31st August, two services were held to remember Jack: one in Edinburgh at the Warriston Crematorium, followed by St Andrews and St Georges West, and one in Malawi at Njuyu CCAP Church. Both Scottish and Malawian hymns were sung at both services.

Jack was a life-long friend of Malawi and he is sorely missed in both countries.



He is one of only a handful of non-Malawians who have been given the great honour of having the clan name “Jere” bestowed upon him. He was named *Jabulani Jere* and thus became associated with the Ngoni royal family. Jack was rightly proud of this honour, choosing to be cremated in his Ngoni clothing.

Further ceremonies will remember and celebrate Jack’s life in the coming months and his ashes will ultimately be laid to rest in Malawi.

SMP Chair, Rev Professor Ken Ross, reflects on Jack's contributions and lasting legacy:

Jack first arrived in Malawi in 1970 to begin a life-long absorption with the country and its people. He remained in touch with many of his students from his early years at Livingstonia Secondary School and with the church leaders he came to know during his time as Director of Theological Education by Extension in Malawi (TEEM). His interests in Malawi were very wide-ranging but he found a particular niche with Ngoni history, on which he became a major authority. His work on the relationship between the Ngoni and Scottish missionary Donald Fraser was an important archetype of the Scotland Malawi Partnership. Jack was greatly honoured when the clan name “Jere” was bestowed upon him and he thus became associated with the Ngoni royal family.

When Jack was appointed to a Lectureship at Edinburgh University in the early 1990s he quickly became a leading figure in Scotland-Malawi relations. He chaired the Scotland Malawi Network, which was formed in 1992 to support the dawn of the democratic dispensation in Malawi and in some ways was a precursor to the SMP. He was also part of the small group which met in 2002 to lay plans for the formation of the SMP and when it was formally constituted in 2005 he became Vice-Chair of the Board. At the same time, he was an unyielding champion of the need for a viable counterpart body in Malawi and worked tirelessly to bring MaSP into being. In addition, he took a leading role in the Higher Education dimension of the Partnership, drawing on his extensive professional experience in both countries. It was a great joy for Jack to be able to return to Malawi for a year as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Livingstonia.

He remained a member of the SMP Board until his death and his contributions were always independent, forthright, gracious and collaborative. The range and depth of his knowledge of Malawi was a priceless asset to the Board and he was always generous in making himself available to SMP staff as a mentor and source of support. The scale and vitality of Malawi-Scotland relations today owes an incalculable debt to Dr Jack Thompson. His passing leaves a gap that will be very deeply felt but the legacy he leaves us will continue to bear fruit.

Our sympathies are very much with Jack’s wife Phyllis, and his children Jenny and Mark with their families.

At his funeral in Edinburgh, Walter Dunlop read a moving tribute written by family friend Jim Campbell:

“When I think of my life I cry, not because of sadness or regret, but because of joy – I’ve had such a wonderful life”

A few weeks ago my wife, Ruth and I went over to Edinburgh to visit Jack and Phyllis at the Marie Curie Hospice – both of them critically ill. When I sat down beside Jack, almost his first words were; “When I think of my life I cry, not because of sadness or regret, but because of joy - I’ve had such a wonderful life”

Those words brought tears to my eyes – here was my dear friend –disabled, diseased, in discomfort, dying - and what feeling was filling his heart – gratitude!

Gratitude to God for a wonderful life! What did Jack think was wonderful? He thought that of his early years.

Life began for Jack in 1943 on the Shankill Road in Belfast - a solid working class area of the city, not one of its leafy suburbs. He was blessed by having good parents, he had a wonderful sister, Dorothy. He went to a good primary school; he belonged to a terrific church – Townsend Street congregation. He gained a place at Methodist College Belfast, one of Northern Ireland’s leading grammar schools. He made the most of every opportunity. He saw it all as a wonderful start to life.

He went to Queen’s University Belfast where he read history and at the same time studied for a Diploma in Theology. After graduation he obtained a post teaching History and RE at Regent House School in Newtownards. He married Phyllis Wright and at much the same time was ordained to the eldership in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland where, for a while, he was the youngest elder in the denomination.

However, the horizon of Jack’s interest was not the coast of Ireland nor indeed the needs of the PCI. God had given him a great gift- the ability to communicate clearly and concisely - and he felt compelled to use that gift to help those with less opportunities in life than the grammar school pupils whom he was teaching. Jack decided to apply to his church for missionary service overseas. However, he didn’t want to be a missionary in the narrow sense of that word – he regarded himself as first and foremost a Christian teacher who used his God given talents, wherever he was, to serve his pupils. He saw his mission not just as something that was carried out through church or missionary society, but something that happened through every aspect of his life. He and Phyllis were appointed for overseas service by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and after a time at St Colm’s College he was posted to Livingstonia Secondary School, Malawi.

What did Jack think was wonderful in life? Nothing compared with his years in Malawi!

In the 1970s Livingstonia was a fairly isolated mission station in the hills of Northern Malawi. In addition to Malawian colleagues, there was a little expatriate community of a dozen or more people, mostly fairly young and most of them teaching at the Secondary School. Jack was the star teacher. I can still see his neat writing on the blackboard and maybe five or six sentences setting out clearly the core of some complex issue. His students regularly got top marks in national examinations and many went on to do well at University.

But it wasn’t all work. Jack coached the school football team and pursued his interest in running. Many of the locals were fascinated to see this white man, this wasungu, as we were called, jogging round the boundaries of the mission station in shorts and vest. Jack and the rest of us also had time for expeditions through the bush and trips down the steep escarpment to visit Lake Malawi.

Jack had an inquisitive mind and a love of history and he developed an interest in two particular aspects of Malawian history – the role of Africans in bringing Christianity to Malawi and the methods of pioneer missionary, Donald Fraser. The latter topic became the subject of his PhD at Edinburgh University which



was awarded in 1980 for his thesis, "Fraser and the Ngoni". It was later published under the title, "Christianity in Northern Malawi".

After completing his PhD Jack, Phyllis and family were posted to Blantyre, in Southern Malawi where he took charge of TEEM (Theological Education by Extension, Malawi), which provided in-service courses for church leaders of all denominations in the country. Again he did a wonderful job.

However if you were to ask Jack what gave him most satisfaction in Blantyre – what was wonderful about his time there - he would probably say it was not teaching but running. Jack was a keen long distance runner. (By the way, when Jack talked about long distance he meant long distance. I remember how he marked his 50th birthday by doing a sponsored 50 kilometre run around Birmingham. His son Mark and I were the back-up team!)

It was while he was at Methodist College that he discovered he could out run the other boys in his form. He continued his athletic career with the university harriers at Queen's and afterwards was in charge of running at Regent House School. When Jack came to Blantyre in 1980 the St Andrews Running Club had just collapsed. He decided to form a new long distance running club. He was fortunate to get to join him Matthews Kambale, an outstanding distance runner, who represented Malawi at two Olympic Games and one Commonwealth Games. They called their group the Camba Road Running Club (a camba is a tortoise). Others soon joined the club.

Jack was able to train those runners to international standard and indeed he was appointed Honorary Coach to the Malawi National Marathon Team. It was a matter of immense pride to him that he was able to give them a sense of dignity and self-confidence on the international stage. When I was speaking to him a few weeks ago he mentioned this as one of the most worth -while things he did in Malawi.

One of the things that made life good for Jack after his time in Malawi, was that he was able to continue his interest in African History and his academic research, first at the Centre for New Religious Movements, Selly Oak Colleges Birmingham and then at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at Edinburgh University. He developed an international reputation as a historian of African Christianity with particular expertise in the history of the growth of Christianity in Malawi. He was the author of various books, contributing to many other publications and delivered many papers on African and Missiological topics at International Conferences around the world. In Edinburgh, in addition to a full teaching schedule, he supervised students working for higher degrees playing a full part in the School of Divinity and in the wider life of the University.

In wider society he was very active in the establishment of the Scotland Malawi Partnership in 2004 and in its subsequent development, particularly its academic exchange programme. Also he retained his links with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and was often consulted on its work in Africa and contributed to various consultations and conferences there. Over the years he retained ecumenical contacts with the United Reformed Church, the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland and the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies.

Life was good for Jack because in every phase of life and through every aspect of his work he managed to draw to himself a wide circle of loyal friends. There was just something about his personality that was magnetic. He had friends from every strata of society and every corner of the world. A look at his Visitors Book shows the wide range of people who were entertained in his home.

When I visited him recently he showed me a book, "Growth and Decline in the Anglican Communion", which he had just received from Barbara Bompani, Director of the Centre for African Studies at Edinburgh University. On the fly leaf she had written, "The kindest and most inspirational of supervisors". In those words she had captured the essence of Jack's success as a teacher and supervisor. He was not only kind to his students but inspirational. He was a great motivator of others whether they were school children or athletes, graduate students or academics.



I want to finish by saying a few words about what I believe caused immense satisfaction to Jack – his family. He was supremely proud of Jenny and Mark and talked of them often and with great pride. He had a deep affection for his grandchildren. He always was concerned for the well-being of his late sister, Dorothy's, children - Rhoda, Deborah and Christopher.

There was another member of the family that most people are unaware of - Jack and Phyllis' first child was born in Ireland during the early years of their marriage. Sadly, that little girl lived for only a few hours. She is buried at Newtownards in Ireland. He did not want her forgotten and we want to acknowledge her in this tribute and give thanks for her brief life.

Most of all Jack was very conscious that he had a wonderful life because of Phyllis. They met in their teenage years. They shared a common commitment to Christ and his Church. They had a common goal in life but had their own interests and opinions. They didn't always agree but the underlying love and loyalty was rock solid.

Jack was very conscious that he was only able to pursue his interests and conduct his research because Phyllis was there caring for the home, looking after the children, hosting the friends that Jack would sometimes invite back home with him. Also, Phyllis, who was a top class secretary did much of the typing involved in preparing various papers Jack authored including typing his entire PhD thesis. In the Acknowledgments in the thesis he writes, *"I owe a great deal to my wife Phyllis.. for enduring and supporting that most selfish of beings –the research student."* He was very conscious that his work had placed demands on her and it was because of her that he had able to achieve his goals. He was proud of Phyllis – her commitment to the Church - at Wooley Hill, Birmingham and at St Andrew and St George's West in Edinburgh. He was delighted at her involvement with Christian Aid and her enthusiastic work for the Child Survival in Malawi Project.

Jack and I had a long session at the Marie Curie Hospice a few weeks ago talking about his life and work. When we came to the end of our conversation he summed it all up by saying to me – Phyllis was the quiet strength behind it all – The oak to my willow.

Next day before I set out to return to Belfast, I went to say my final goodbye to Jack. We both knew we would never meet again in this world. I wrote out on a little card some words written by the Apostle Paul just before his death, to his companion Timothy. They pictured for me Jack's life and where he was that morning.

Paul writes in Second Timothy 4 at verse 6: "The time is here for me to leave this life. I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance and I have kept the faith. Now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God which the Lord, the Righteous judge, will give me on that day". For me there was Jack!

The last lap took a little longer than we expected that day. It was a very difficult lap. Jack crossed the finishing line on Thursday, 10th August 2017. He had done his best in the race. He had run the full distance. He had kept the faith. It was a wonderful life.

We thank God today for the life of Jack Thompson.



Dr Peter West, Malawi Hon. Consul, read a tribute on behalf of His Excellency Kena Mphonda, High Commissioner of the Republic of Malawi

Jack Thomson was not technically a Malawian citizen but we came to see him as one of our own. He is mourned in Malawi as in Scotland and a memorial service for him will take place in Livingstonia simultaneously with the service in Edinburgh.

He arrived in Malawi as a teacher in the Livingstonia School, little knowing that his academic career would flourish so much that he would eventually return as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Livingstonia. His research into the history of the Ngoni people led to the very rare honour of having the clan name "Jere" bestowed upon him. He thus became associated with the Ngoni royal family.

His deepening interest in Malawian history led him to publish some 20 books and articles, making him a leading figure amongst the historians of our country. He collected and conserved historical photos and documents, some of which were displayed in the Livingstonia Museum which he founded. He showed them to Malawi's first President, Kumuzu Banda, on the day of its opening. His collection contains several hundred historical photographs relevant to Scottish missionary work in Central Africa. Many are unique, the originals having been lost in Malawi. One of the photos shows Jack wearing David Livingstone's own cap. Appropriately enough, it appears to fit him very well.

The original documents he amassed cover the period from the 1880s and include letters by Dr Robert Laws who founded the Livingstonia Mission, the main source of education for Africans in the whole of what was then Nysaland, now Malawi. There are also letters from leading African clergy of the period.

Jack has donated the whole archive to the University of Edinburgh which has warmly welcomed the donation. The books, photographs and documents will be lodged in the University Library's special collection with material such as the papers of Jack's good friend Colin Cameron, the last living member of the first government of Malawi. The papers will form a powerful and unique resource for future historians of central Africa and will bear permanent testament to his scholarship.

Soon after his arrival as a member of the academic staff of Edinburgh University in 1993, Jack became the chair of the newly formed Scotland Malawi Network, which was in some ways the precursor of the current Scotland Malawi Partnership. When the latter was constituted in 2005, he became its first vice-chair and was to continue as a director of the Partnership for the rest of his life, his contributions always independent, forthright, gracious and collaborative. Typically, he worked tirelessly to ensure that it was a true partnership of equals and was delighted to see the equivalent Malawi Scotland Partnership finally established in Malawi.

He was rightly proud of having acted as a coach to the Malawi national marathon team. Memories of him as a runner prompted a member of the Scotland Malawi Partnership to respond to the obituary published on its website earlier this month with this tribute:

I had the very great pleasure of meeting Jack and going out for a run with him in Muzuzu. He talked enthusiastically about Malawi throughout the run, despite the heat and the pace. I am certain that his work will continue through the actions of others whose interest has been kindled by Jack's knowledge, articulacy and love of Malawi.

In his later years, reflecting no doubt on his many decades of working in Africa, Jack would refer others to a favourite poem of his, "To an English friend in Africa," by the African writer Ben Okri. The first verse ends with these words:

*"Do not think your ways superior
To another's
Do not venture to judge
But see things with fresh and open eyes
Do not condemn
But praise what you can
And when you can't, be silent"*

The poem ends thus:

*"So fear not, my friend.
The darkness is gentler than you think
Be grateful for the manifold
Dreams of creation
And the many ways of unnumbered peoples

Be grateful for life as you live it
And may a wonderful light
Always guide you on the unfolding road."*

Jack Thompson had the deepest respect for Malawi, its history and its people and Malawians had the deepest respect and affection for him.

Mzimu wa bambo Jack Thompson Uuse Mu mtendere.

