



MINUTE FOR MISSION

December 15, 2005

Vera Chirwa—A Woman's Voice in Malawi

Orton Chirwa was a prominent political figure in Malawi before independence from the UK in 1964. He and his wife, Vera, lived thereafter in exile in Zambia because of differences with Malawi's President Hastings Banda. They were faithful Presbyterians as well as leaders of a national movement opposed to the Banta dictatorship. In 1981, Malawi security officials took the Chirwas into custody. They were subsequently sentenced to death for treason at a trial in which they were denied legal representation.



Vera Chirwa, Malawi's first woman lawyer, has been a powerful force in the fight for democracy and human rights.

After a worldwide protest organized by Amnesty International, the sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Though they were held in the same prison, Vera did not see her husband for eight years. Orton died of mysterious causes in 1992, and Vera was not permitted to attend her husband's funeral.

An outpouring of support for Vera's release came from many sources, including the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, the PC(USA) moderator, and the stated clerk. Vera was finally released in 1993 after spending a total of twelve years in prison, including four years in solitary confinement and three years in shackles.

Just prior to her arrest in 1981, Vera obtained a law degree in London, becoming Malawi's first woman lawyer. Her education has been a powerful tool in her fight for democracy and human rights.



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In 1993, Vera Chirwa formed Women's Voice to promote and protect the welfare of women through education, training, counseling, anti-violence campaigns, and HIV/AIDS education.

On January 6, 2004, at the age of 73, Vera became the first woman in Malawi to run for president. Although she was not elected, she continues to serve as the executive director of the Center for Advice, Research, and Educational Rights, a group that monitors human rights abuses in Malawi and provides legal services to victims of such abuse.

For more information about the Chirwas, read page 336 of the 2006 *Mission Yearbook for Prayer & Study*.

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For more information on the Witness Season mission education emphasis contact Billie Healy, Associate for Mission Education Resources (888) 728-7228, ext. 5689, or Bhealy@ctr.pcusa.org.

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