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From Zimbabwe to Liberty University

December 20, 2007 | Tara Maxwell

It is Albert Mavunga's voice that allowed him to fulfill his dream of attending Liberty University and it will be his voice that will carry the word of God back to his homeland of Africa.

Mavunga, a freshman and member of LU Praise's International Choir, is from the township of NKETA 8 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Bulawayo, known as the "City of Kings," is the second largest city in the country, which has a life expectancy at birth of 40 and suffers from soaring inflation and unemployment, supply shortages and a refugee crisis.

Although syncretic (part Christian, part indigenous) religious belief is dominant in Zimbabwe, Mavunga said he was saved when he was a young child, while his mother was afflicted by a severe illness, and began preaching at age 11.

"We went to this church and I came to know Jesus at the same time as my dad and mom and sister," said Mavunga, who has five siblings. "A lady preached salvation ... I can still sense me receiving Him. It wasn't dramatic, but my mom being sick, it got my attention and I knew there had to be something greater. My mom got better and my whole family is saved now. I know if they passed away it would break my heart, but when the trumpet sounds I will see them in heaven."

Mavunga's twin brother, Allen, left Africa to attend Salem International University in West Virginia and Albert soon followed. Although Albert's first choice was to attend LU (he found out about it on the Internet), lower tuition led him to Salem International University.

Mavunga's father borrowed money from friends for Albert's plane ticket to the United States, but he arrived with nearly empty pockets. After attending Salem International for three months, Mavunga was forced to leave school because of his inability to pay. With only \$8 in his bank account, he became homeless and was shuffled between different hosts and shelters.

Mavunga said God then directed his path from West Virginia to Central Virginia, where he spent his first night in a homeless shelter. While there he met a West Virginia pastor and LU alumni who offered Mavunga a place to stay in a trailer in Campbell County.

“There was no TV, no Internet. I just had my radio, my Bible and a few other books,” Mavunga said. “God isolated me, and that’s where I really found direction for my life.”

One afternoon, Mavunga went to the Daily Bread in downtown Lynchburg where he saw Thomas Road Baptist Church Youth Minister Tim Grandstaff washing dishes in the kitchen. He told Grandstaff his story and was asked to speak to TRBC’s high school youth group, Living Proof, about his journey of faith.

The church held a love offering for Mavunga, giving him \$700 and a book by the Rev. Jerry Falwell. After that day, Mavunga said he knew God was telling him to become a pastor.

“It was a divine appointment when I met him [Grandstaff] at the soup kitchen,” Mavunga said. “That was a turning point for my life and the beginning of a legacy in Christ.”

After speaking to the teenagers, Mavunga began working and traveling with the group and had his sights set on attending Liberty.

One Sunday night Mavunga was introduced to Falwell, who he says is his hero.

“He [the Rev. Jerry Falwell] punched me in the stomach and he told me he had been to Zimbabwe — then called Rhodesia, but then left the country because the war was about to start up. He kind of understood where I was coming from,” Mavunga said.

During their meeting last fall, Falwell told Mavunga to set up an appointment about financial aid. Donning his best brown suit, Mavunga was directed to talk to someone who told him that 10,000 other students were looking for aid and that there was no help available.

“That crushed me,” Mavunga said. “I went to church and I cried. I said ‘Does it stop now or what?’” Mavunga then contacted a friend in Cameroon, Africa, who was able to lend him \$1,000 toward tuition, but it was not enough.

He then heard about an opportunity for a full scholarship through LU Praise’s international choir. Although he had not sung in a group for many years, Mavunga signed up for auditions.

Mavunga sang “Lead Me Lord,” for LU Praise Director and artist in residence Alicia Williamson Garcia, who told him to practice a little and try out later.

“After the try-out I went home and told my friends about it. I was praying and I told my mom that this could be it,” Mavunga said.

Two callbacks later, Mavunga found his name on the top of the list for the choir. With his tuition dilemma solved, Mavunga asked God for a place to live near campus with access to transportation.

His prayer was answered when he went to Daily Bread to make a donation and was connected with Rod Anderson who directs a ministry in downtown Lynchburg. Anderson owned a house used for ministry, which Mavunga offered to help with in exchange for a place to live rent-free.

Muvunga moved into the house and was later joined by his brother Allen, who is a junior at Liberty studying accounting.

Although Mavunga has had a relatively easy assimilation into American culture, he has noticed some differences.

Mavunga said one cultural difference he encountered in coming to America is the way affection is displayed. In Africa, Mavunga said, family members rarely show expressions of love except when someone is in trouble.

“When everything’s OK it’s rare for someone to just show appreciation. It’s almost like exposing yourself, like a sign of weakness. When I called my dad and said ‘I love you,’ I had to close my eyes. We’re not used to it and that’s something I want to bring back home; showing your love. When I hear my mom say that, it’s still weird, but it keeps me going,” Mavunga said.

Mavunga had the opportunity to travel home to Zimbabwe this past summer thanks to Thomas Road Baptist Church. While preaching there, he said he saw 229 people accept Christ. He hopes to travel back to Africa this summer with LU’s Bridging The Gap Urban Ministry’s step team.

As for his future goals, Mavunga says he wants to be a pastor who happens to be president of Zimbabwe.

“I want to travel the world and preach the Gospel. I want to go to every high school in Africa and tell [students] to be positive, to value themselves and know Christ died for all -- black, yellow, red. I want to tell them there’s hope.”