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In touch with Church & Faith

- Home
- News
- Editorial
- Current Affairs
- Reflection

- Theology & Scripture
- Pastoral Care
- Life in the Spirit
- Gender
- History
- Documentation

- Letters
- Newsletter
- Archive
- Links
- Contact us

BOOK REVIEW

WATER IS LIFE

Water Harvester: Episodes from the inspired life of Zephaniah Phiri

Written by Mary Witoshynsky, published by Weaver Press, Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2000

Reviewed by Stewart Musiwa

This book chronicles the life of Zephaniah Phiri, an innovative Zvishavane communal farmer who turned barren land allocated to him by colonial authorities into a wet farmland through creative harvesting of rain water for use in dry times. He achieved this by channeling rain water into hand-dug reservoirs, wells, ponds and stone-walled canals that trapped water for a long time and could be drawn upon for irrigation after the rains.

Getting this 8-acre piece of land was not easy for Phiri. Born in Rhodesia as son of a Malawian immigrant, Phiri had a hard time getting this piece of land as the colonial administrators regarded him as a foreigner with no right to land. By and by, through the goodwill of a one-time Rhodesian Prime Minister, Mr. Garfield Todd who was a friend of his father's, Phiri was finally allocated this piece of land. As a native reserve farmer in the 1960s, Phiri faced the common problem of being allocated land unsuitable for crop production in a drought prone area. However, he was able to make good use of the land through innovativeness. Using his water harvesting techniques Phiri transformed his little plot into the now famous Zvishavane Water Project (ZWP) that has attracted visitors from many parts of Africa.

On his road to success Phiri encountered many obstacles. He was arrested on several occasions by colonial authorities for both political reasons during the liberation struggle and also for not complying with soil conservation laws of the time that restricted farming near stream banks. However, Phiri continued to demonstrate to them that his cultivation techniques, using traditional methods that did not use chemicals and caused no damage to the soil, conserved the environment better than the farming methods encouraged by colonial agricultural authorities. Colonial authorities did not understand this and continued to arrest him. It was only when during a court proceeding a magistrate agreed to visit his farm and see for himself how environmentally friendly his farming methods were that the colonial government eventually let him free to continue with his farming.

Later on, agricultural experts began to appreciate how his methods conserved both soil and rain water that would otherwise be lost as runoff. It later dawned on the experts that Phiri's methods were preferable to those they encouraged, namely the digging of contour ridges. Contour ridges never conserved rain water but wastefully drained it away from the fields. Phiri's water harvesting techniques proved useful as they combined environmentally sound traditional ways of cultivation with scientific farming methods that agricultural experts have now approved and recommend for farmers. His water harvesting techniques have benefited not just himself and his family but also the community around him.

This book, although based largely on a story Phiri told about himself, is more than just an autobiography. The author does not intend merely to showcase the 78-year old Phiri's innovativeness as a marketing technique. Rather, it is meant to inspire both communal and commercial farmers who would want to creatively harness rain water for irrigation after the wet season. Above all, the author hopes that this book will inspire not just farmers but everyone who wishes to make a unique contribution to the world through innovation.

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