



ZEPHANIAH PHIRI HONOURED WITH LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

by Mary Witoshynsky

BZS members may remember meeting Mr. Phiri when he attended the 2001 Research Day. BZS members associated with Oxfam will recall that that agency was fortunate enough to be able to support his project for some years. (Editor)

Zephaniah Phiri Maseko of Zvishavane long ago expressed a commitment to carry his water harvester's mission everywhere. After a half century of work in Zimbabwe and throughout southern Africa, and nearing his 80th birthday, he spread this message to the United States of America last November when he travelled to Washington, D.C., as the winner of the 2006 National Geographic/Bufett Award for Leadership in African Conservation. Howard W. Buffett, representing the Howard G. Buffett Foundation which co-sponsors the annual event, presented the award certificate, after which Mr. Phiri thanked his hosts and guests with a tour-de-force acceptance speech at the headquarters of the (US) National Geographic Society (NGS). Internationally renowned for his inspirational oratory among dryland farmers, development professionals, agricultural researchers and students, Mr. Phiri's stirring words moved guests to acknowledge him as an angel and a philosopher.

The NGS/Bufett Award recognizes remarkable lifetime achievements in cultural and natural resource conservation. Mr. Phiri is a dryland farming and conservation innovator who, as founder of the Zvishavane Water Project (ZWP) and leader of various farmer-support programs, has broadly disseminated his techniques in resource-poor zones across Africa.

Mr. Phiri's socio-environmental innovations are both practical and deeply inspired. A railway worker

⁵ Mr Phiri's 2001 visit to the UK was funded in part by Ashoka, (see <http://www.ashoka.org/node/2484>), and included a wide-ranging tour of sustainability projects in the UK and a talk at Ryton, the HDRA garden outside Birmingham

blacklisted from employment after being detained without charge under the former Rhodesian régime, he turned to farming to support his family. He also turned to the Bible and was struck by the life-giving rivers described in Genesis. This was all the inspiration he needed to begin to create a network of handmade water sources across his predominantly rocky plot. Equipped with only pick and shovel, Mr. Phiri began his arduous construction work in the 1960s, for which he was initially fined.

Confident in the value of his work, he persevered but was again interrupted by the Rhodesian government during the *Chimurenga*. Despite arrest and torture, Mr. Phiri emerged unscathed by bitterness and again set out on his mission. He eventually received modest funding that enabled him to found the ZWP and implement a variety of community water and soil conservation works based on one of his principal innovations, the Phiri Pit. These infiltration pits are precisely dug and planted with reeds in order to conserve scarce rainfall and topsoil within dryland farm plots and shelter these precious resources from runoff, evaporation and wind. In years of abundant rainfall, the pits may remain full. In times of drought, water and soil can be excavated from the pits and used in cultivation. Shortly after his 1996 retirement as ZWP director, Mr. Phiri received an Ashoka Fellowship that enabled him to further develop and disseminate the findings of his many experiments.⁵ He continues his "researches" and achievements in promoting self-reliance, sourcing school water supplies, and raising local water tables.

In an interview with NGS World Radio, Mr. Phiri explained his mission: "After reading about the Garden of Eden, I knelt down and prayed to God for guidance, commitment and love. The concept is that, naturally, I love people. And when I said my prayer, I looked for love. People come to draw water from my own strength". Mr. Phiri receives numerous invitations to participate in workshops and conferences. He hopes to carry his mission to South America and the Middle East this year.

Nigel Hulett of Granadilla Films is currently producing a documentary on Mr. Phiri. Entitled *The Water Harvester*, it is based on Mr. Phiri's oral history of the same name (by Mary Witoshynsky, Weaver Press, Harare, 2000; for purchase information, please visit www.africanbookscollective.com in the UK, www.msupress.msu.edu in the US, or www.weaverpresszimbabwe.com). Plans call for the 30-minute film to be broadcast on television and available on DVD.