

Presentation Narrative

Title

Malawians Together: Faith, Population, and Development

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Chimango is a faith leader who was born and raised in his village. He has lived a long time, and he has seen a lot of difficult life experiences.

He is on a mission to improve people's lives, and this is the reason.

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Chimango has known many women who died during childbirth because their pregnancy was unplanned and they didn't have prenatal care. He has known many infants who died because they were born too soon after a previous birth. And he's seen the health and financial impact of these deaths on families.

He knows that these deaths and hardship could be prevented if people planned their family size and spaced the births of their children.

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And that healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies can be practiced in accordance with faith-based values.

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This is why when *they* were young, Chimango and his wife Eliza discussed the number of children they would have.

Healthy timing and spacing of their pregnancies made it easier for them to plan their family size, to be healthy, to achieve their education and career goals, and to provide for their family.

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Chimango and Eliza have ensured their children are educated about the importance of planning their family size and spacing their children so they too can be healthy and equipped with more opportunities in life.

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This is why today Chimango and Eliza talk with their neighbours about the links between faith and healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

They want everyone to have access to this life-saving information and the opportunities it can provide for families, the faith community, and the nation...

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Reproductive health is important for each of us throughout our lives.

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A central component of reproductive health is healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

This refers to the planning of when to have children, and efforts to regulate healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies using a variety of medical and natural methods.

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Today Malawi has the largest number of people in history in need of reproductive health care because our population is the largest it has ever been.

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Malawi's population has grown rapidly from 4 million people in 1966 to over 15 million people today.

Rapid population growth is the result of high fertility and lack of services for healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. Today the average couple continues to have between five and six children.

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And our population size is continuing to grow. Even if fertility declines to just above four children per woman, the population of Malawi is still expected to grow to over 26 million people by 2030!!

A larger population will increase demands for social services and natural resources.

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The people of Malawi are extremely diverse, but one thing that many people have in common is faith. Ninety-seven percent of the population is religious. The most common religions are Christianity and Islam.

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Faith-based beliefs influence many parts of our lives that are important for our reproductive health.

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Our marriage, gender roles and relationships, education, health care decisions, and the timing and spacing of childbearing are often influenced by faith-based beliefs.

Faith leaders provide moral guidance and shape opinions of their followers.

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Faith-based leadership is essential for providing accurate information for reproductive health and pre-marital counselling.

Deeply rooted in the communities they serve, faith-based leaders can share messages that reinforce healthy behaviour and resonate with values and beliefs for both women and men.

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For many people, decisions on when to have children are guided by faith teachings.

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Families can choose natural or medical methods to plan their families. These natural and medical methods are widely researched and safe for both women and men.

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Healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies saves lives by preventing unintended pregnancies, which can increase the risk of death and disability for mothers and children, especially when the pregnancies are categorized as:

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Too early, meaning the mother is under age 18;
Too many, because the mother has had many previous pregnancies;
Too late, meaning the mother is older than age 35, or
Too frequent, because the pregnancies are spaced too close together.

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There have been many great improvements in recent decades to improve access to reproductive health services in Malawi.

The use of reproductive health services has increased from less than one out of 10 married women in 1992.....

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.....to more than four out of 10 married women in 2010.

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Some faith-based leaders, including Christian and Muslim clerics, have helped foster a supportive environment for healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

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And some faith-based health facilities provide information about methods, including community based sensitization in rural areas.

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But there are still many challenges.

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For example, today one out of four married couples wishes to delay childbearing, but are not using any methods to avoid unintended pregnancies. These couples have an unmet need for services which will allow them to time and space their pregnancies.

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Nearly one out of six children is born less than two years after a previous birth, increasing their risk of health complications or death.

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In addition to the health concerns, unplanned or risky pregnancies may have long-term social and economic implications because they can contribute to:

- Loss to a family and community if a mother or child dies;
- Challenges for families to achieve education or career goals;
- Increased medical and household expenses;
- More demands for social services such as schools and health care; and
- More demands for natural resources like water and farm land.

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Research demonstrates that planning one's family size and spacing pregnancies lays the foundation to:

- Improve the health of mothers and children;
- Strengthen families; and
- Achieve national development.

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These outcomes are aligned with the goals of our faith-based leaders and communities, meaning healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies and faith-based initiatives go hand in hand.

Faith-based leaders and communities can use the following evidence-based information to advocate for the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

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Healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies has numerous benefits for families.

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For mothers, this means.....

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..... reducing death and disability

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Reducing mother-to-child transmission of HIV by preventing unintended pregnancies;

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....and improving health and nutrition.

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Healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies also has many benefits for children. In fact, it saves children's lives.

In this bar chart, we see an example of the relationship between birth spacing and child survival.

On the left axis, we have deaths of children under age 5 per 1,000 live births. On the bottom axis we have the interval between the mother's last two births ranging from less than two years to three years.

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We see that children born less than two years after a previous birth are more than twice as likely to die before age 5 as children born after birth intervals of three years.

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So by enabling parents to wait three years after giving birth before trying to become pregnant again, healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies

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..... increases child survival. It also lays the foundation

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.....for improved child health and nutrition,

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And educational attainment, and well-being.

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For both fathers and mothers, planning their family size and spacing pregnancies can make it easier to...

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.....achieve education and career goals through healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies

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The resulting higher household income enables parents to have.....

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.... more resources for each child. Planning their family size also helps to strengthen marriages.....

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.....by engaging both men and women in childbearing decisions and increasing opportunities for women.

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The benefits of planning families are felt throughout the nation.

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By helping families prevent death and illness, achieve higher levels of education and employment, and accumulate more savings, planning one' s family size leads to healthier and wealthier communities.

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With these improvements healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies allows governments to save money and invest in social services and natural resources.....

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.....And the infrastructure needed to achieve development goals.

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Faith leaders around the world have contributed to increases in reproductive health awareness. Let's look at Egypt as an example of where faith-based leaders have been actively engaged in initiatives that support the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

Here in Egypt, in 1988, fewer than four out of ten married women were using methods to time and space their pregnancies, and the government was becoming increasingly concerned about the development challenges caused by poor reproductive health and rapid population growth.

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During the 1990s, the government increased support for methods that promoted healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies in line with their faith-based teachings.....

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.... as part of its development initiative to strengthen maternal and child health.

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Political leaders spoke out in support of planning family size and spacing pregnancies, and the number of clinics providing services increased.

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In recognition of the strong influence of religion in the country, the government engaged faith-based leaders in campaigns that supported healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies.

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Large religious centres dispatched faith-based rulings in favour of planning family size and spacing pregnancies, which were also aligned with their mission to improve health and well-being.

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In the years that followed, some faith-based leaders – including Christian and Muslim leaders - were provided with tools and skills to promote healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies in their communities.

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At the same time, the government invested more in education, health, and job creation.

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By 2008 – 20 years later – methods used for healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies were widely available, and *more than half* of married women – nearly six out of 10 - were using these methods to plan and space their pregnancies.

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During this same time period – from 1988 to 2008 - unplanned pregnancy, maternal death, and child death declined

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...while educational attainment among women increased, and the gross national income of Egypt also increased.

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The experience of Egypt demonstrates how engaging faith-based leaders can make healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies more acceptable, especially when combined with strong political commitment, and investments in health, education, and employment.

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So how can we engage Malawi's leaders to ensure that people of all faiths understand the value of planning family size and spacing pregnancies?

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Faith-based leaders should integrate information about the benefits of healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies with their faith-based messages and values.

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Faith-based leaders should advocate for an increased age at first marriage, and for the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies to protect health and well-being.

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Government officials and political leaders should increase support and leadership for the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies. This includes partnering with faith-based leaders on reproductive health initiatives, and allocating reproductive health resources for faith-based communities.

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Health sector leaders should work with service providers to ensure healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies services are available for both women and men, and sensitive to diverse faith-based beliefs.

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Leaders in education, including teachers, should ensure that reproductive health **information** is provided in schools, and is appropriate for students of all faiths.

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Leaders at all levels, including civic leaders, elders, parents, and youth leaders – women and men - should talk about the role of faith in planning family size for healthy families and a healthy Malawi.

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When we invest in planning families and spacing pregnancies – while also investing in health, education, and employment – the impact is felt throughout the nation.

Health is improved, the family is strengthened, the economy is stronger, and national development is in place.

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