



# Peacebuilding in Rwanda and Burundi

## IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Houses for Peace: Reintegrating Ex-Prisoners in Rwanda**  
by Josh Bazuin
- 4 Comics for Peace: A Creative Medium for Transformation**  
by Deanna Hiebert
- 6 The Africa Great Lakes Peace Seminar: Living and Reflecting our Mutual Humanity**  
by Bridget Butt
- 8 Searching for Sustainable Peace in Conflict-ridden Burundi**  
by Onesphore Manirakiza
- 10 Women Reconciling After Genocide in Post-War Rwanda**  
by Doug Hiebert
- 11 Conscientious Objection for a Culture of Peace Among Youth in Rwanda**  
by David Bacura

## Introduction

by Deanna Hiebert

Movies, books, and national media have brought the atrocities of Rwanda to nearly every home, but less known is the closely linked situation in the neighboring country of Burundi. It has been said in the past that these beautiful countries are the land of a thousand hills. In more recent years it has been added that they are also “the land of a thousand problems.” While this statement may seem harsh, this area has endured numerous difficulties at a level of intensity seldom seen elsewhere.

Rwanda and Burundi share many similarities. Their size, their population, and agriculture as their main source of sustenance are akin. Both countries also share a similar language, culture and ethnic composition (Hutu majority, Tutsi minority, and Twa 1%). The legacy left by colonial powers of oppressing certain ethnic groups and empowering others, in both Rwanda and Burundi, has only served to deepen the rift between ethnicities. By the early 1990s, the animosity, especially between the Hutu and Tutsi groups, reached a critical point.

In Rwanda, this divide culminated with the 1994 war and genocide. Within 100 days more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. This was largely accomplished with machetes, a common agricultural tool. Fifteen years later, Rwanda is still striving to sift through the ashes and rebuild its country and people. Much progress has been made through the determination of the Rwandan people and government, as well as from resources given by a conscience-stricken international community.

In Burundi, the civil war began in October, 1993, just a few months earlier than the Rwandan killing, but has endured for an exhausting 15 years. A significant step forward was made in December 2008 with the implementation of the *Comprehensive Ceasefire Agreement* between the government and the last remaining rebel group, the FNL (The Forces for National Liberation). While this is an important step forward, the difficulties surrounding the massive reintegration of more than 470,000 returning refugees, demobilized rebels and child soldiers, food shortages, and a fragile political state all remain hurdles to a stable recovery.

How does peace come to a nation whose memories of ethnic discrimination, oppression, and violence permeate its history? How does a son, with the vivid memories of his father’s murder, break the powerful and gripping cycle of revenge? How do prisoners convicted of crimes of genocide, or rebels living in the bush for the last 14 years reintegrate into a community that both fears and loathes them? How does a woman dialogue with and learn to trust the woman whose husband killed her husband? There are no easy answers to these questions.

A Burundian proverb states, “Climbing even a short hill will bring us to a higher point.” The essays that follow are about people who are climbing; who are seeking to answer the questions posed. Rwanda and Burundi, a region that has suffered so much bloodshed and inhumane treatment, has also produced some gifted leaders who are dedicated to transforming a seemingly hopeless circumstance one uphill step at a time. One of these

**Climbing even a short hill will bring us to a higher point**

climbers, David Niyonzima, a Burundian committed to bringing healing to trauma victims, has said, “In the final analysis, only forgiveness will heal the wounds and stop the violence. Those of us who believe in God know that when we have peace in our hearts

and are reconciled with God and with ourselves, peace will overflow to our neighbors and even to the rest of God’s creation.”

*Deanna Hiebert was the Menmonite Central Committee Co-Representative for Rwanda/Burundi from 2003–2008.*

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## **Houses for Peace: Reintegrating Ex-Prisoners in Rwanda**

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by Josh Bazuin

**The government turned to a traditional, village-based conflict resolution structure.**

**Poverty is an obstacle to the traditional Rwandan ways of expressing hospitality and neighborliness.**

**I**n late 1994, Rwanda was in ruins. Approximately one million people died in the country’s genocide and civil war, millions more had fled to neighboring countries, and the infrastructure which supported its economy had been destroyed. More seriously, the very social relations which sustain all societies had been torn asunder by violence in which neighbor had killed neighbor, pastors had betrayed their congregants, and civil leaders conspired to murder those they were supposed to protect.

The situation Rwanda’s new government faced in 1994 was grave. It inherited a country in ruins. While international support poured in to help repair the physical devastation, the emotional and social challenges were much more difficult to overcome. Early on, the government made a decision to end a culture of impunity in which murder was an acceptable means of settling disputes by holding those who had committed crimes of genocide accountable for their actions by trying them in a court of law. While the international community set up a court for the leaders of the genocide who had fled the country—the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, headquartered in Arusha, Tanzania—the Rwandan government imprisoned those people who had been accused of participating in or planning the genocide.

Unfortunately, Rwanda’s justice system had been decimated by the war and genocide, and the trials for those people who had been imprisoned were proceeding at a very slow pace. By 2002, there were approximately 120,000 people in Rwanda’s jails, which were built for a fraction of that number. The limited capacity of the courts meant that it would take decades to try the entire prison population, let alone the several hundred thousand other people who were suspected of genocide crimes but had not yet been formally accused. Clearly another solution was required.

The government turned to a traditional, village-based conflict resolution structure to help clear the backlog of crimes. The *gacaca* courts meet weekly in each community across the country, presided over by a panel of judges—the *inyangamugayo*, people of integrity—elected from the population. Initial meetings helped the community compile lists of people who had been killed or injured and property which had been destroyed or looted during the genocide. People were then accused of having committed each of those crimes. Once accused, a person is brought before the village tribunal. He or she is offered an opportunity to confess their crimes. If they do, they are offered a reduced prison sentence in exchange for community service. If they plead not guilty, testimony is offered by people on both sides of the case. Considering the balance of evidence, the panel of judges pronounces the accused guilty or innocent.

This process has managed to try 80,000 suspects in approximately three years. Thousands of people who had been stuck in Rwanda’s jails, some for as long as thirteen years, have been set free because of a lack of evidence against them. Others have already completed their sentences and have been released. Hundreds of thousands of people, convicted of crimes of genocide, have community-based sentences to carry out.

The *gacaca* process has again highlighted the scars of war and genocide. Former prisoners returning to their communities find their property confiscated, their homes in ruins, and their livestock long since lost. Those with families sometimes return to find that their wives have remarried in their absence. People in their home villages, especially those who survived the genocide, distrust the returnees, so the returnees frequently find it difficult to reintegrate into community life.

Rwanda's continuing poverty—the country currently ranks 161st of 177 countries on the United Nations Development Program's 2007 Human Development Index, and each Rwandan lives on the equivalent of USD \$898 per year (2005 GDP per capita in purchasing-power-parity)—mean that many people, prisoners and survivors alike, make do with less food, housing, medical care, and education than is required to thrive. While there are many organizations and mutual aid groups that help survivors of the war and genocide with everyday needs, especially housing and education, few groups in Rwanda try to help the prisoners that have recently been released from prison.

Beyond the physical deprivations, such poverty is an obstacle to the traditional Rwandan ways of expressing hospitality and neighborliness. During an interview this summer, a young man who had recently been released from prison told me how his material poverty prevented, in his view, acts of reconciliation between him and people who had survived the genocide and civil war. He reflected that his home was run down, he didn't have a single chair on which a visitor could sit, and he had no money to buy a drink for someone who might visit him. He worried that he would not be accepted back into the community because of his poverty, and he had few prospects to improve his fortunes.

Friends Peace House (FPH), MCC's primary partner in Rwanda, is one of a few organizations that tries to help both former prisoners and survivors. Its Gacaca and Reintegration program has distributed MCC-provided material aid, including clothing, soap, and food, to several thousand prisoners and survivors alike.

More than providing material aid, FPH tries to promote reconciliation between these divided people. The cornerstone of their efforts is a three day workshop in which survivors and prisoners come to talk about their experiences, listen to each other's experiences, and learn about conflict resolution, trauma healing, and reconciliation. Friends Peace House, an agency of the Evangelical Friends Church of Rwanda, presents a Biblical perspective on conflict resolution and reconciliation, but people of all faith backgrounds, including Catholics and Muslims, report that they find these workshops informative and useful.

Perhaps the most important part of this reconciliation process happens at the end of the workshop. The Friends Peace House facilitators

ask participants if they would like to form an association in their community that works to improve the living conditions of themselves and their neighbors. If participants choose to form such an association, FPH tells them that the organization will provide materials like sheet metal, nails, and door and window frames to build houses for genocide survivors and perpetrators if the association will provide the bricks and labor. Through this partnership, FPH-supported associations have managed to build 10 homes in multiple districts throughout Rwanda. The associations make careful choices about who to give the homes to, seeking the people in their communities most at need.

The collaboration between former prisoners and survivors of the war and genocide is remarkable. At a visit to one of the building sites, the president of the association told us how his father and other members of his extended family had been killed during the war. When he had finished his story, another man got up and told us,

"I am the man that killed his father. I went to prison after the genocide, but in prison I accepted that what I had done was wrong, and I confessed my crimes. I have asked forgiveness for what I did." He went on to explain that under the *gacaca* system he had been released from prison. Following his release, he visited family members of the man he had killed to ask their forgiveness, and he also asked for the community at large to forgive him, for he said, "I have done terrible things."

Friends Peace House provides structured, safe spaces in which dialogues like this can occur. The homebuilding program goes one step further in providing opportunities for the community members to rally around a common project and shared experience to deepen the ties of reconciliation. The man who asked forgiveness went on to relate how he was proud to be a part of the association that was serving his community. The survivor who had lost his father also says he is happy to work on the homebuilding project.

The homes Friends Peace House has sponsored have been scattered across the country as the agency has identified opportunities for communities to rally around this project. Recently, however, FPH has become interested in extending this program model in creating new communities.

"We want to build our own *umudugudu* [small village]", says Sizeli Marcellin, FPH coordinator and himself a genocide survivor.

**The collaboration between former prisoners and survivors is remarkable.**

**Friends Peace House provides structured, safe spaces in which dialogues can occur.**

**We want a place where survivors and former prisoners can live together.**

In times of peace, a machete can be used to shave a man's head.

—Burundian proverb

“Many of the other agencies that provide houses build *imidugudu* where survivors or refugees live in segregation. We want a place where survivors and former prisoners can live together, a true integration in community.” These villages might be yet a new way of promoting reconciliation through places and spaces where grace-filled living is a main feature of daily life.

Programs like FPH's Gacaca and Reintegration are one small step in transforming Rwanda's society and culture. From the destruction of war and genocide new possibilities for inter-personal reconciliation have

arisen. The seeds of reconciliation are sown and tended by such programs. The testimony of the program's participants of their own journeys through violence and despair to forgiveness and reconciliation give some indication of the success of the program model. More than that, however, such stories show how the act of building a house can require incredible grace and courage.

*Josh Bazuin was MCC's Peace House Consultant in Rwanda from 2003 to 2006. Currently he is a Ph.D. student in Community Research and Action at Vanderbilt University. He returned for a visit to Rwanda in 2008.*

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## Comics for Peace: A Creative Medium for Transformation

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by Deanna Hiebert

**Many victims of past injustices from both ethnicities had been unable to reconcile and the lack of reconciliation passed on the desire for revenge to the next generation.**

**For most students this was their first personally-owned book of any sort.**

One day during our time in Burundi, a friend stopped by to tell us of rising ethnic tensions in the local secondary school. The situation between the two groups had become increasingly volatile. Students reported that various groups would meet secretly in the dormitories to discuss ethnic tensions while others were too terrified to sleep at night or to study during the day. Some students were fleeing the school for fear of what the future might hold. With violence imminent, the school director, at a loss for what to do, simply closed the school doors and, with military aid, forced all students to return immediately to their homes throughout the country. The school remained closed for the remainder of the year with hopes that, by September, tensions would have dissipated.

My friend compared these tensions with her own high school experience that had happened just a few years earlier. Her stories of ethnic discrimination leading to violent acts are, unfortunately, not unique. In fact, many friends from both ethnicities have disclosed horrific accounts of abuse, torture and narrow escapes. Now, she was afraid that the situation in secondary school would return to the same level of brutality that she and others had experienced.

MiParec (Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross), a partner agency of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), was also becoming concerned with the growing

number of incidents publicly reported about ethnic conflict in secondary schools. MiParec had already begun various peace clubs, programs and trainings in a number of primary and secondary schools in order to teach basic conflict resolution skills and bring understanding between ethnicities. They had already identified the fact that many victims of past injustices from both ethnicities had been unable to reconcile with each other and continued to nurse their pain. The lack of reconciliation thus passed on the desire for revenge to the next generation. A Burundian proverb states that “a tree is straightened while it is still young” meaning that is easy to correct a child's behavior when he is still young. It seemed obvious that the younger generation needed instruction on the importance of peaceful reconciliation and forgiveness in order to break the continuing cycle of revenge.

MiParec and MCC workers decided to create a series of comic books portraying situations where Burundian students, like themselves, were able to break free from the cycle of revenge and transform their school population into a peaceful, proud and unified community. It soon became clear that a comic book using real photos of Burundian children acting out the storylines would be the best received and therefore have the most impact.

A team was formed of MiParec peace workers, teachers and administrators from pri-



mary and high schools, and MCC volunteers. The team began by listening to countless stories from all ethnicities and soon found certain themes emerging. After discussing potential storylines with teachers and school administrators, it became apparent that they had to address these issues very sensitively and creatively in order to avoid starting a fresh eruption of suspicion, fear and paranoia in the community.

Five typical conflict scenarios were chosen—three for primary and two for high school. Discrimination issues (related to ethnicity, gender, religion, economic status, health status, etc.) and non-violent conflict resolution skills were the central themes in all five comics. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the ethnic conflict, the team was forced to think of creative ways to discuss ethnic discrimination issues using other topics like HIV-AIDS and Rights of the Child that were not as potentially explosive.

In order to portray a neutral stance and achieve balance within all the comics, many people of differing ethnicities and roles in society were consulted and included in the writing and editing process. School administrators, teachers, students, parents, medical staff, and peace education workers were some of the contributors. It was necessary to include such a spectrum even though it made progress cumbersome and prolonged since the very process itself could destroy the comics' impact even before distribution.

Students from three primary schools and two high schools were chosen to act out each of the five different storylines while a Canadian photographer volunteered her time to capture the still frames. The color photos were sequenced, edited and text added to create a photo comic book. The entire process was a huge community event including the help and advice of many. Large numbers of people needed to take ownership of the project in order for it to be accepted within the community.

The culmination was the distribution of 25,000 comics in different schools throughout a number of provinces. Students were surprised and excited to receive their very own copy. For most, this was their first personally-owned book of any sort. A team of peace education staff from MiParec accompanied the distribution. The team spent over an hour with each class using the comic as a springboard for discussion and learning on non-discrimination, non-violent conflict resolution, HIV-AIDS, forgiveness, and breaking the cycle of hatred and revenge. Students

then went home armed with their comics, excited to share what they had learned with their family and neighbors.

In Burundian style, the comics passed quickly from student to student within the community. One high school student confided that two copies had reached her high school where the distribution had not occurred and within days, all of the students in her grade had read the two different comics. The only thing that stopped them from continuing to be read was when they fell apart from overuse.

Students in secondary school were surprised to read an example of someone who, in their mind, had every right to take revenge on the perpetrator but instead, chose to forgive and live in community with them. MiParec trainers were also able to share testimonies of themselves or others that had had real life experiences of peaceful reconciliation between people of differing ethnicities. It was evidence to them of the positive effect that forgiveness has on transforming a situation and the surrounding community.

After reading one comic pertaining to sexual pressures in exchange for school grades, one student was given the courage to share openly with her peers of her own experiences of sexual pressure and abuse. A teacher had demanded sexual favors as a payment for passing grades even though she deserved them honestly. Her honesty encouraged others facing similar pressures to confide similar issues and seek justice. Through further discussion centered on the comics and personal testimonies, they were astonished to see the potentially devastating outcomes of accepting the short term benefits of gifts or grades. Through the work of the MiParec peace workers and the comic, students discovered ways to escape such overwhelming pressures, the courage to talk about these issues openly and suggestions as to where to look for help in seemingly hopeless situations. They were strengthened in their resolve to support and protect each other from future incidents.

What makes the comics such powerful tools in this situation is that they are addressing deep and serious issues with young people in a manner that is not only palatable, but enjoyable. Our hope is that these comics will be providing practical tools for the younger generation to lead the way in restoring their country into a peaceful and unified nation.

*Deanna Hiebert was the Mennonite Central Committee Co-Representative for Rwanda/Burundi from 2003–2008.*

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## A Cause for Celebration

After spending many years in prison, a man charged with killing many members of his neighbor's family because of their ethnicity, was about to be released back into his community. Both families were consumed with fear due to rumors of revenge and retribution circulating throughout the village. Tension escalated as the day approached for his release. MCC partner, MiParec (Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross), heard about the stress and friction felt within the village. They quickly sent a team of peace workers to the area to help prepare the community for a peaceful reintegration, hoping to curb yet another cycle of revenge.

They brought both families together so they could vocalize their feelings about what had happened and to express their fears of the present situation. At first the families could not stand to be under the same roof. But after many such meetings, there was a gradual softening between the two families. Seeing the hurt that he had caused, the accused man asked for forgiveness and, together with his family, they vowed to begin a process of compensation that involved farm work over a long period of time. Throughout this time, a relationship began to form between the son and daughter of these two families. As a final act of peace, the man responsible for killing many members of his neighbor's family, gave his daughter to be married to this family's son and thus revealed his commitment to a peaceful future between them.

The day of their wedding was a huge celebration. It was a time of great rejoicing. It was a beautiful wedding and a powerful symbol of peace and reconciliation.

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# The Africa Great Lakes Peace Seminar: Living and Reflecting our Mutual Humanity

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by Bridget Butt

*Following the excerpt from Mark Twain's "War Prayer" which she adapted to central Africa, Bridget Butt describes the French-language annual Great Lakes Peace Seminar course in peacebuilding for peace workers in Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Congo. —Editor*

**A war chapter from the Old Testament was read, the first prayer was said, and was followed by a drum roll that shook the building.**

**Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not.**

**"Blight their lives! We ask it, in the spirit of love."**

—Adapted from Mark Twain's  
"War Prayer"

**It was a time of great and exalting confidence.** The community was up in arms, the war was on, in every heart burned the holy fire of the struggle; the drums were beating, the youth were massing, and the elders gathered tightly around pots of beer . . . strong oratory stirred the deepest depths of their hearts; in the churches and prayer Christians preached Divine protection and strength, and invoked the God of Armies beseeching His aid to a good cause in outpourings of fervid eloquence which moved every listener. It was indeed a powerfully moving time, and the few rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

Sunday morning came—last night there had been a surprise attack against the enemy; the church was filled; —The service proceeded; a war chapter from the Old Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by a drum roll that shook the building. Then came the "long" prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was, that an ever-merciful and benign Father of us all would watch over our noble young combatants, and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their mission; bless them, shield them in the nights of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in His mighty hand, make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset, bullet-proof; help them to crush the foe, grant to them imperishable honor and glory.

An elderly stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, leaning on a staff, his eyes fixed upon the preacher, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his white hair bright upon his head, his seamy face unearthly. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing, he ascended to the preacher's side and stood there waiting. With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued with his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words, uttered in fervent appeal, "Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector!"

The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside—which the startled preacher did—and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes, in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said:

"I come bearing a message from Almighty God!" The words smote the house with a shock. "He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd, and will grant it if such shall TRULY be your desire. . . . For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think."

"God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him Who heareth all supplications. You heard these words, the uttered part of your servant's prayer: 'Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!' Upon the listening spirit of God fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

“O Lord our Father, our young combatants, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their enemies bodies to bloody shreds with our guns and machetes; help us to cover their smiling maize fields with the mangled forms of their dead; help us to drown the thunder of the early rains with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags, hunger and thirst, sports of the flames of the sun and the damp cold of the nights, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the fertile fields with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

(\*After a pause.\*) “You have prayed it; if you still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits!”

It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.

*(Adapted from Mark Twain’s “War Prayer”)*

The Great Lakes Peace Seminar (GLPS) is an annual one-month training program for peace workers from Rwanda, Burundi and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). GLPS grew out of the successful experience of and overwhelming demand for short-term certificate courses in peace-building in the war-torn Great Lakes region of central east Africa. GLPS represents one of the first French-language peace institutes in the region, offering courses in conflict analysis, peace-building, reconciliation, peace theology, trauma healing, and peace and development. Training is facilitated by a diverse group of facilitators representing a variety of experiential and educational backgrounds, including trainers from the Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) in Zambia that is supported by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), as well as from other Mennonite and Quaker institutions. The greatest strengths of the Great Lakes Peace Seminar, however, are not in its course offerings, or the skill of its trainers, or language and geographical accessibility, or its network of institutional support; its greatest strength is the opportunity it gives for those who would work for peace to come to know and understand our mutual humanity, and the practical lessons of how to build peace on this rock-hard foundation.

The Great Lakes Peace Seminar was begun in 2005, in a partnership between the Mennonite Central Committee and a Burundi organization—the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross (MiParec).

As host to the annual Seminar, MiParec offers a role-model to satisfy the thirst for inspiration of the GLPS peacemakers. The MiParec center boasts an impressively large training complex, funded autonomously through MiParec’s own income-generating activities. MiParec’s volunteer staff represents a diverse cross-section of Burundian society, including a large number of youth. Many have remarkable stories of personal transformation through their contact with MiParec activities. Those activities include support to a network of hundreds of peace committees, weapons collection activities, peace education in schools and support of community mediation activities. GLPS participants are invited to look and listen and learn as much as they can absorb through field visits and active participation in the life of MiParec. For many, the role-model provided by this organization that is active in peacebuilding, community mediation and restorative justice in Burundi is the highlight of their training experience.

Another frequent highlight for Seminar participants is the normal and natural experience of the conflict they will live and learn from during the GLPS itself. While the first days of this month-long experience of living and working and playing together is usually colored by the rosy blush of new acquaintances and new beginnings, discussion and analysis of regional conflicts quickly brings differences of experience, perceptions, stereotypes and prejudice to the fore, and the fireworks

## Finding Peace is Not a Private Matter

I interviewed several ex-prisoners and victims about their experience in a workshop organized by Friends Peace House. It was very moving. One of the most memorable quotes came from a young man named Claude, a child during the crisis who saw his family killed. He lived his life tormented by fear. He said he learned that finding peace was not a private matter. He had to confront his enemies and be reconciled to them. “If I am to have peace, all must be at peace!” was his conclusion.

He was very surprised to find that returning prisoners were as fearful as he was and completely destitute when they came out of prison. He has since been reconciled to the killer of his family and they have become friends. Together he and his new friend even feel empowered to fight the real enemies that stalk their country: poverty, ignorance, and despair.

—by Paul Mosley

Paul Mosley began as the Mennonite Central Committee Representative for Rwanda/Burundi program in 2008.

**Another highlight for participants is the normal and natural conflict they will live and learn from during the Seminar itself.**

**A fiery exchange between Congolese participants and their Rwandan colleagues is inevitable, as is that between Rwandan and Burundian participants.**

**The Seminar is a time of multiplication of those who would oppose war.**

begin! A fiery exchange between Congolese participants and their Rwandan colleagues is inevitable, given the DRC's ongoing accusations of Rwandan support of the violent rebellion in Congo's North Kivu province, a rebellion that has caused the displacement of over one million Congolese over the past year. Similar exchanges are common between Rwandan and Burundian participants, as they struggle over the very practical question of how to discuss ethnicity, with "Hutu" and "Tutsi" considered dangerous foreign terms for ethnic propaganda and genocide in Rwanda. And those same ethnic appellations are considered as an ancient identity to be transformed and reframed in the Burundian context. Participants also encounter the simple day to day challenges of personality conflict, and adjusted expectations. "Cows that graze together, will lock horns," says the popular Burundian proverb. This experience of conflict lived and observed calls forth some of the most remarkable mediation and conflict transformation interventions on the part of the participants themselves.

Participants frequently leave the GLPS saying that it has been an experience that has changed their life. They describe new relationships and friendships. They discover a common humanity as they share their stories of trauma and brokenness: orphans aban-

doned by their communities, victims of HIV/AIDS, victims of sexual violence, survivors of massacres and abductions.

As a result of the opportunity for learning and living offered by the GLPS, participants have gone back to begin new peace committees, begin alumni networks, begin new peace organizations, and especially to live their new understanding and love for those others from communities and countries encountered in a new way at the GLPS.

And finally, the Great Lakes Peace Seminar is a time for prayer. It is a time of multiplication of those few who would oppose the war. It is a time to pause and think and transform our war prayers into peace prayers, based on a clearer understanding of our mutual humanity and the terrible scourge that is war and violence.

*Bridget Butt has almost 20 years of work experience in Africa, with Christian Children's Fund of Canada, Christian Aid, Mennonite Central Committee and Quaker Service Norway. In 2006, Bridget joined with several African colleagues to form "Change Agents for Peace International" (CAPI), a Kenyan-registered international organization working in East and Central Africa and Sudan. Bridget has also been a guest speaker at the GLPS since its inception.*

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## Searching for Sustainable Peace in Conflict-Ridden Burundi

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by Onesphore Manirakiza

**We organize workshops on university campuses where Hutu and Tutsi students can dream together about solutions. At one of these, a student came with a grenade hidden in his bag.**

I was born in Burundi five days before the civil war in 1972. On a Sunday morning my parents woke up and saw houses burning. They quickly realized that their ethnic group was being targeted in their town. They wasted no time in fleeing. While fleeing, they realized that I was losing a lot of blood from my umbilical cord (remember, I was five days old at this point). I was close to death and my mother suggested that they throw me into the forest. However, although I would slow the rest of the family down and possibly compromise their escape, my dad refused and said that they would wait until I died before leaving me behind. Obviously, I survived. I spent my first three months of life in a camp for internally displaced people (Burundians who had fled their town/region for another area due to the fighting). Later, when I heard the story of how I had nearly died, my life was changed as I came to under-

stand that I am living for God's purposes.

When I became a Christian in 1988, God convinced me that I could contribute to the transformation of my country. In high school, I started bringing people together and uniting them but I had no tools for doing it. I first met Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 2004 while I was a university student. I had been invited to participate in the MCC-supported Great Lakes Peace Seminar (GLPS). This conference was a great opportunity for me to learn how to manage conflict together with other Burundians, Rwandans and Congolese. I left the conference with skills to improve my work in peace.

Harvest for Christ was started with the idea of being a catalytic movement for the transformation of Burundi through evangelism and peace initiatives. We are involved in promoting cohabitation between students



from different ethnic groups. We organize workshops on different university campuses where students from Hutu and Tutsi backgrounds get a chance to share their stories, think about the conflict in Burundi and dream together about solutions.

At one of these workshops, a Tutsi student came with a grenade hidden in his bag. He had no respect for or trust of Hutus, and he did not believe that a discussion between these differing ethnicities could be productive. So, he was planning to kill Hutu students during the workshop. During the workshop his worldview was changed. Afterward, he came to us crying, and said that he had never known that Hutus had also suffered.

Harvest for Christ also works with church leaders in order to improve their relationships with one another since they are sometimes involved in conflicts. Some of the conflicts are due to ethnicity and others are due to a lack of spiritual maturity. Recently, we became involved in an intense conflict involving three churches in a town called Ijenda. Until recently there was only one evangelical church in this area. Then there was a disagreement in the church and one group left to start a second church. A year later there was another dispute in that second church, and another group split off to start yet a third church. When Harvest for Christ was doing outreach in that community, we realized that something was wrong within the churches and felt the Lord convincing us to do something together with them. Our work started in a small restaurant in Ijenda where the senior pastors of the three churches were invited for a meal. It was the first time for them to be together and share food since the conflict began years before. In Burundian culture, it is a significant step to eat together with others with whom you are in conflict. After some discussion, they understood that there was a need for reconciliation within the members of their respective boards. Harvest for Christ organized a workshop for them, and relationships between them slowly started again. In time, those that were traumatized by the situation were healed. One year later, as I was preparing another workshop for them, the respective boards met to ask for forgiveness of each other. As a sign of reconciliation, the second workshop took place in the first church from which the two others had begun. Since then, there has been a good relationship between these churches. Together they have organized conferences, they visit each other, and the name of the Lord is praised in that city. I do believe that the church is the peace agent which can make a difference in the community.

Mary is a deacon in her church congregation at Mbuye. She attended one of our reconciliation workshops and was inspired to become a peace agent. After the workshop, she decided to help reconcile divorced couples. It has been one year since she started and six couples have already been reconciled with each other.

To bring sustainable peace in Burundi there are many things which need to be done. One is the training of strategic groups (such as students, church leaders, and people leading the country) and the creation of a space for them to tell their stories, to mourn together on our dark past and to dream together for the future. The other thing that has to be done is to multiply the resources in our country by developing the agriculture sector (90 percent of the population gains its livelihood from agriculture), improving medical care, and giving opportunity for all to receive education. One of our proverbs says that, "people who are sharing a small amount of food, call each other greedy." By multiplying these resources we are creating a climate for sustainable peace.

Harvest for Christ plans will continue to contribute to the process of creating sustainable peace. Peace will come when people's ideas and perceptions are changed about who they are and who others are. The plan is to increase the number of workshops with students. We are encouraging our peace commissions on campuses to start peace clubs where students come and discuss peace and reconciliation. We also want to organize peace festivals on campuses where people will speak about peace in front of the student community. We are certain that these activities will help change the minds and perceptions of students—the future leadership of our country. We will continue to organize conferences for pastors and church leaders.

Part of creating lasting peace is also fighting poverty since "an empty stomach has no peace." We are beginning work with marginalized groups like the Batwa of Burundi and other poor people in order to give them a chance for education, for medical care and to improve their agriculture practices and production.

Sustainable peace is possible, even in Burundi. This is our belief and our goal. Together, we can make it happen.

*Onesphore Manirakiza is a trained lawyer. He is the founder of Harvest for Christ, a partner organization of Mennonite Central Committee in Burundi.*

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# Women Reconciling After Genocide in Post-War Rwanda

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by Doug Hiebert

**She was on the wrong side of the ethnic divide.**

**F***emmes en Dialogue* (Women in Dialogue, or FED) is a ministry within the women's department of Friends Peace House, an organization promoting peace, reconciliation and trauma-healing. The Peace House—and its departments which include women, youth and children, and trauma-healing—was birthed out of the Evangelical Friends Church of Rwanda in 1995 in response to the tragic events of 1994.

Women in Dialogue (FED) is a ministry that brings together women from opposing sides and seeks to bring reconciliation and hope to those involved. The program was founded by Cecile Nyiramana who is herself a survivor of the 1994 war and genocide. Her story and the founding of FED are quite remarkable.

**During that seminar the participants were challenged to reconcile.**

Cecile, a Tutsi, was engaged to a Hutu man a year before the tragic killings of 1994. Though there was some opposition to the union, they went ahead. During this time, they were both students at the university in Gisenyi, on the far west side of the country on the shores of Lake Kivu which separates Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As the situation leading to the 1994 war and genocide began to unfold, life began to get very difficult for Cecile and her husband. People began to speak out about their mixed-ethnic marriage. Pressure was put on them to separate from each other. Then the massacres began and Cecile found herself on the wrong side of the ethnic divide. People sought to physically harm her. Although not the case with all mixed-ethnic marriages, her husband protected her. He took her to his family and had them hide her. For the next 100 days of conflict, she remained safe there. Others of her family were not so fortunate: her mother's family, and her mother, were all killed. During this time, Cecile was pregnant with their first child.

**If women from both sides could be brought together and reconcile, perhaps transformation was possible.**

When the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) gained power in Rwanda and stopped the killing, there was fear that revenge would be taken out on the perpetrators. As a result, there was a massive Hutu exodus to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Cecile was part of this mass migration, along with her husband. Typically, the camp was horrible. But for Cecile who, again, was on the wrong side of the ethnic divide, the camp was a living hell. She was daily mistreated, verbally abused, and her life threatened. However,

her husband protected her and allowed nothing to happen to her.

Finally, in 1997, they returned to Rwanda. Although a welcome change, the situation in Rwanda was difficult for other reasons. The country was in chaos and people were being sought out and implicated in the events of the previous years. This culminated, for Cecile, with the arrest of her husband at the end of 1998. Although he had done everything to save her, he was now being arraigned for supposed involvement in the genocide. It was at this moment that she felt she was at the end of her world: her husband was imprisoned, she was alone with two children (the second was born in the refugee camp), no house, no job and no means to support her family.

However, a few weeks before her husband's arrest, the two of them had been baptized into the Friends Church of Rwanda. The church had begun to hold seminars dealing with conflict and reconciliation. Cecile was invited to one of these seminars and her life has never been the same. During that seminar, the participants were challenged to reconcile with those who had killed during the war and genocide and even to forgive. Initially, this seemed preposterous to Cecile. But as the seminar progressed, she found her heart beginning to soften, to heal and finally she was able to release the burdens she had been carrying. She realized that she could reconcile and pardon. She then began to ask what she could do to make a difference. Cecile's desire was to do something so that the horror of the killings would never happen again. Cecile felt that the answer was to work with women since they suffered the most. Women were always the victims of abuse and rape and attacks, yet they are the ones responsible for families. If women from both sides could be brought together and could reconcile, perhaps transformation was possible. And who better to work with these women than she herself since she could understand both sides: she had a husband in prison accused of being a killer, and her entire family had been killed.

The objective for Cecile was to construct relationships between women from the two sides. If the women could just humanize one another, then barriers could be broken down and healing could come. And so began the work of FED. Cecile invited women to come to a seminar where she would teach on peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, conflict and con-

flict transformation. Slowly she began to see results. The amazing thing continues to be that, as the women begin to spend time together and share their stories, they realize that they are all the same and have the same struggles. They have lost their husbands, either to prison or to the grave, and confront huge challenges to simply eke out an existence and support their children. Here are some of the incredible stories of reconciliation that are becoming almost normal in the work of *Femmes en Dialogue*.

Seraphine is a Hutu. Her husband is in prison, accused of acts of genocide. Antoinette is a survivor, and much of her family was killed. Both women were participants in one of the first FED seminars that Cecile organized. These two women initially wanted nothing to do with each other. To make matters worse, Seraphine was sure that Antoinette was continuing to look down on her in a haughty sort of way. They refused to greet each other and, in fact, Antoinette wanted to take revenge on Seraphine for the deaths of her family. However, as the seminar progressed, both women's hearts began to be softened. Near the end of the seminar, both women shared their stories. When Antoinette told her story, she shared how she and her family had been attacked by a group of men with machetes and left for dead. Miraculously she survived though she bears the scars to prove it. As she told her story, she pulled down her shirt at the nape of her neck to reveal a deep, ugly scar. This explained her "haughty" look: some of her nerves had been severed in the attack and had lost some motion in her neck. As Antoinette told her story and showed her scars, Seraphine's walls of hatred and emotion broke down and the two of them embraced as they forgave one another. Now, these women visit one another, eat together, and work shoulder to shoulder. They have also encouraged others to reconcile.

In the *Femmes en Dialogue* chapter in Ruhengeri province there are two women who have a remarkable relationship. One woman's father was killed in the war and genocide and the other woman's husband is in prison for killing him. Initially it was nearly impossible for them to be near each other in the same group. After the third session—on trauma-healing—the woman who lost her father shared what had happened amidst many tears. She explained that it was the husband of the woman sitting right in the same group who had done the killing. The wife of the accused did not know this and upon hearing the accusations didn't know what to do. They cried together and, as soon as possible, she went to the prison and pressed her husband to confess and ask pardon. After a long time, he agreed to do so. The woman whose father had been killed went to the prison and the man asked for forgiveness from the whole family. Then, later, in the traditional courts, the man asked for forgiveness from the community, country and, again, from the family. Soon after this, he was released from prison and they now live peacefully together.

Cecile is an exemplar of the Jesus way. She experienced forgiveness, she extended forgiveness, and now she is replicating forgiveness. As women are now very often the heads of household, the work of Cecile and *Femmes en Dialogue* is far-reaching and it has the potential to transform whole communities. The key moment in this work is when the women realize that they are all the same. When the women recognize that they are all humans, simply trying to survive, a breaking point is reached and a better future is possible.

*Doug Hiebert was the Mennonite Central Committee Co-Representative for Rwanda/Burundi program from 2003–2008.*

**They have lost their husbands either to prison or the grave.**

**One woman's father was killed and the other woman's husband is in prison for killing him.**

**Cecile is an exemplar of the Jesus way.**

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## Conscientious Objection and Promoting a Culture of Peace among Youth in Rwanda

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by David Bacura

The Evangelical Friends Church of Rwanda (EEAR) began its activities in 1986, and has flourished in almost all provinces of the country. When the missionaries came, they focused primarily on evangelism. They ignored teachings on peace though peace is a central tenet of the Friends church which is

one of the historic peace churches. In 1994, Rwanda lost many citizens to the devastating war and the church also lost many members. Following that war and killing, there was suspicion among the population and very little trust between people.

**By the end of the training, the youth were convicted to work for peace.**



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The *Peace Office Newsletter* is published quarterly by the Mennonite Central Committee International Program Department. Editor is Lawrence Rupley. Consulting Editors are Amy Erickson and Alain Epp Weaver. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

Additional subscriptions welcome—see address below. To keep paper and energy waste at a minimum we ask you to inform us if an address should be changed or if a name should be dropped from our mailing list. Telephone: (717) 859-1151. Printed in the U.S.A.

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As legal representative of the EEAR and one of the leaders of Friends Peace House (a ministry for peace and reconciliation connected to the church), I became concerned with the lack of peace education and peaceful living among our own congregants. That is when we started the program called “Conscientious Objection and the Promotion of a Culture of Peace Amongst Students.” Our main objectives were to promote peace among youth and to teach them the peace doctrine of the Friends Church as well as the role of conscientious objection. Other goals are to teach youth the importance of non-violence, and to encourage them to take part in various peace clubs established within our churches and to help them become peace agents in their church, community and country.

To send the message of peace among youth and promote a culture of peace and non-violence, the Friends Church began the program in three regions of Rwanda (Ruhengeri, Cyangugu and Kigali). Sixty youth leaders have been trained through this program. The youth appreciated the peace theology training and wondered why teachings

on peace had not been taught in the Friends church before so that conflict could have been averted. Some wished that the program could be extended into each local Friends church. Others expressed that they would never personally enroll in the army. By the end, the 60 youth could identify that a true Friend/Quaker doesn’t participate actively in war, but on the contrary, manifests his neutrality, intervenes on behalf of victims, and participates in community or social work.

We were encouraged to note that by the end of the training, the youth were convicted to work for peace. We were pleased to see them begin to apply what they had learned, especially in creating peace groups in their communities. Individually, the youth decided to be peacemakers in their places of work, at school, and in whatever they do.

*David Bacura is a pastor of an Evangelical Friends Church in Kigali, Rwanda. He is the coordinator of the Great Lakes Mediation Program (Rwanda, Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo) and is the chair of the EEAR Peace Commission.*