Quakers Working Together for Peace

and Reconciliation in the Africa Great Lakes Region

After the workshop that I attended, I wished that my husband would get this extraordinary chance too. Fortunately, God answered my prayers! He participated in the last one you conducted. My home has become a paradise! Before we attended these workshops, my husband was always furious. He was treating us as slaves. My home was a hell. Since he had participated in the HROC workshops, he has now time for the children and me. When he comes from work, he greets us, tells us how tings have been for him and asks us how we have been doing too (what he never did before). Now he consults me before making any decision. You understand that there is reason for me to be this joyful woman.

Participant in an HROC workshop (Healing and Rebuilding Our Community) of Burundi Yearly Meeting. HROC is adapted from the AVP program.

The Wider Quaker Fellowship wishes to thank the following organizations for permission to use their materials: The Africa Great Lakes Initiative, for the articles by Cecile Nyiramana and Laura Shipler Chico, and *www.eBlessings.us*, a Christian web site that sells 3rd-world crafts to raise funds for its missions, for the cover illustration, a banana-leaf painting of Rwandan village life.

Quakers Working Together for Peace

Introduction

"The countries of the Great Lakes Region of Africa—Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania—have been beset with violent political movements and their after-effects since before independence in the early 1960's. These conflicts have escalated in Burundi (1993), Rwanda (the genocide in 1994), the eastern Congo (1996, 1998), and Uganda (1986) and have continued to the present with the possibility of large-scale renewed violence and war." [*from the web site of the African Great Lakes Initiative:* aglionline.org.]

There also happens to be a significant Quaker presence in this region; in fact, the single country with the largest number of Quakers in the world is Kenya. Missionaries from what is now Friends United Meeting have worked in Kenya for more than a century, and Kenyan missionaries have spread Quakerism into Uganda and Tanzania from there. Missionaries from (now) Evangelical Friends Missions have worked in Burundi since the 1930s, and moved from there into Rwanda and the Congo.

In the wake of the inter-ethnic fighting in Burundi and Rwanda, Friends there began to explore what they, as Christians and Quakers, could do to help promote reconciliation among their citizens and prevent further wars. Obviously, in such ravaged countries, outside resources were needed, so Quakers there have partnered with Friends' Peace Teams, Norwegian Quaker Service, and other Quaker-sponsored groups to bring in both material assistance and peacemaking "know-how." The work is guided by Rwandan and Burundian Friends' assessment of their own countries' needs, and seeks to promote long-term healing and reconciliation for all people, of every religion, economic/social status and ethnic group.

Among the programs in use are the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) in Rwanda and two programs in Burundi: Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS) and Healing and Rebuilding our Community (HROC) in Burundi. The Great Lakes School of Theology in Burundi is educating (mostly Quaker) national church leaders in the entire region. All these efforts have been supported in various ways by Friends from Europe and North America. In addition to stories about Rwanda from two different writers, we are including some testimonials from Burundian participants in the HROC workshops that were spun off from the AVP program.

The Witness of Rwandan Friends after the Genocide of 1994

By Cecile Nyiramana
Rwanda Yearly Meeting
(Translated from French)

As you will see, Cecile Nyiramana is a remarkable woman. She survived a difficult childhood. Then during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Cecile, an ethnic Tutsi, (then five months pregnant) spent three months hiding under a bed in the home of friends. She and her family left Rwanda after the genocide, spending two years in a refugee camp, where her son was born. During their stay in the camp she learned her mother had been murdered by ethnic Hutus. After their return to Rwanda, her husband was imprisoned in 1999 as a suspect in the genocide, along with thousands of men of Hutu descent, and remains there at this writing. Cecile has chosen to help other women who have suffered similarly. She founded Women in Dialogue, a ministry of Rwanda Yearly Meeting, which brings together widows of genocide victims with the wives of imprisoned suspects, and teaches them to work together in their communities for healing and reconciliation.

Rwanda is a small country in central Africa. The country has had much ethnic unrest. For example, the revolution leading to independence from 1959 to 1962. In 1959, many refugees went into exile. In 1973 there was a coup d'etat with ethnic unrest leading to killing and more exile. This was the Second Republic. All these refugees living outside the country began preparing opposition to the government in power and organized armed forces to return to their native land. In 1990 the war against Rwanda--called the war of liberation--began. It ended just after the genocide July 1994.

This genocide took place over about 100 days from April to July. This genocide involved massacres of Tutsis and some Hutus opposing the ruling powers. Around one million people died during the genocide with many serious injuries, and traumatized people who lost hope. We have just passed the Tenth Anniversary of the genocide and the world willl always commemorate it on April 7 each year.

It has left many consequences: Innumerable orphans, many widows, many refugees, many people who had been raped, between 125,000 and

130,000 prisoners, and those refuges from 1994 who left the country for the Congo and Tanzania. Note also the number of people who died while attempting to flee in 1994. There were also many cases of advanced trauma and many psycho-socio-economic problems.

All this completely destroyed neighborly relations among Rwandans. New relations had to be built among those who escaped the genocide, those presumed guilty of genocide, repatriated refugees from 1994, and other refugees remaining within the country. The Rwandan Yearly Meeting of Friends also had to face this unprecedented disaster.

After the Government of Unity and Reconciliation stopped the genocide in 1994, it began a massive repatriation of the refugees of 1959, 1973, and 1994. There were also displaced persons all over the country who needed to be reintegrated. And everyone was traumatized. Plus, there were also people wounded and traumatized who needed urgent care. The Yearly Meeting of Rwanda, in support of the policies of unity and reconciliation, involved itself, thanks to the help of external Friends, in the following areas:

1. The organization of many seminars on conflict management, trauma healing, unity and reconciliation.
2. Help locating moral, spiritual, and material support for orphans and widows.
3. The reintegration of repatriated refugees.
4. Helping prisoners morally and spiritually.
5. Reconstruction of churches destroyed by events, to try to win the hearts of despairing Rwandans.

From 1995 through today, the Yearly Meeting of Rwanda has given seminars on:

- Healing from trauma, but because of the number of affected people, there is still much to do. This is because when one is traumatized, one cannot accept reconciliation;
- Conflict management;
- The preparation of agents of peace throughout the country;
- Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP);
- Forgiveness, to facilitate reconciliation.

These seminars have been productive and today we have reached a number of Rwandans and have been able to form a group of agents for change who help us follow programs for peace-building in our country. We have organized several debates for people from different walks of life on the feasibility of reconciliation for Rwandans. Because of numerous prisoners, the Rwandan government has opted for Gacaca[1] courts. These will soon liberate many prisoners, which will again cause cases of trauma. That's why we would like to prepare ourselves to face this problem. Also the liberated prisoners will have nothing. No clothes, no shelter, no work. And they will have to face other socioeconomic problems. We must prepare something to help these people. They will also have trauma problems and must be helped. It is clear we have much work to do

As for orphans, we have tried to procure tuition for them, but since there are so many of them, there are many who are still not in school. The widows, who are even more numerous than the orphans, have been helped with trauma healing, material and spiritual aid. But there are still many who are homeless and barely surviving.

AIDS also has spread quickly over our territory. We have put much effort into raising awareness about the fight against HIV/AIDS, helping those who already live with this virus and giving them hope. We have raised awareness among Christians who are living with those already infected, and we work against stigmatization and help AIDS orphans.

We thank the donors who have helped us, especially Quaker Service-Norway, Mennonite Central Committee, the African Great Lakes Initiative, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Friends World Committee for Consultation. May God bless you.

Although we have been able to do much thanks to these donors, there is still much work to do, especially in the area of healing from

---

[1] Gacaca *(ga-CHA-cha) courts are the traditional, grassroots-level means of settling disputes within communities in Rwanda. The Gacaca courts will be judging lower-level cases for those accused of participating in the genocide. AVP has been asked by the Rwandan government to train as many Gacaca judges as possible in methods of nonviolent conflict resolution.*

traumatization, after the upcoming massive liberation of prisoners by the Gacaca judicial process. We can't forget that there will be new imprisonments of the guilty, which will aggravate trauma even more for Rwandans. We will have the large task of inviting Rwandans to tell the truth, so as to contribute to the success of the Gacaca process.

Also in the context of preventing conflict and increasing tolerance, we will continue to work on educating youth for peace-making to further encourage the message, "No more genocide." In this same sense, we would like to have lots of peace makers trained in conflict management. We benefit from inviting the other historic peace churches to come work in our country in order to combine our efforts toward the same end of developing a culture of peace, to confront violence. At present, we are the only historic peace church working in Rwanda.

At any rate, at our peace center, called Friends' Peace House, we are trying to cooperate with other international organizations who are working towards peace in Rwanda. Our link is called "Coexistence." We also work with the National Commission on Unity and Reconciliation.

Dear friends, we ask that you pray regularly for peace in Rwanda, that you think of us. Please also keep in your thoughts the victims of this tragedy, hoping that once they have gone through their trauma, they can accept reconciliation. Pray also that they face that truth which alone can lead us to reconciliation. Thank you.

Cecile Nyiramana at Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting in July 2005.

My Life Was Full of Pain, but Now I'm Healing

By Cecile Nyiramana

My name is Cecile Nyiramana and I was born in 1969. I'm married to Emmanuel Rudatinya. Together, God has blessed us with two children: Mary Justine Uwase, 10 years old, and Justin Cedrick Bikarimana, 8 years old.

In my family, there were many struggles. My father was polygamous, with three wives, and my mother was his second wife. I'm the second child, with two brothers and one sister.

I was born in Kigali town, the capital of Rwanda. My family wasn't poor - they could get enough food for the children. We were six, because my father was separated from his first wife who had two girls. My father was a worker for PTT (Poste Telegramme Telephone). He was a drinker and not kind to my mother. She was beaten every day.

I will never forget one day, when I saw my mother with a great bag full of her clothes on her head. She took my little brother and sister by the hands, and got out of the house. She took a yellow truck and went back to her parents, leaving me and my brother with my father. One week later, my father got married to his third wife. He called my mother to show her his new wife. When I saw my mother, I believed she would stay with us. I didn't know that she could leave us alone again. My father asked her to leave the children with us and to let him be free. I was five years old.

Before leaving the house, my mother told me, "Be careful with my kids. You become their mother and protect them. And when you meet a great danger or problem, never cry or tell anyone. Keep silent, because you will never meet somebody who will be able to understand you."

I was very traumatized by the situation. I couldn't believe it. I started to be serious, to try to protect my sister who was very young - only two years old. And in that matter, I grew up differently than other children. My oldest brother was very angry about the situation. He was nervous and got into trouble about everything. So he was beaten every night when my father came home from work. My father told us that our mother was not kind to the children, and that is why he asked her to go back home.

In 1976, I started primary school. In 1984 I entered secondary school. My objective was to become a worker like my father so that I could find out where my mother was and help her. One day, after I had finished my secondary education, I met her. It had been sixteen years since I had seen her. She was married to another man, and had another little girl. She was not happy. My brother and I planned to build a house for her, but we couldn't because we had too little means.

In 1992 I reached University in Gisenyi, which is near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, and there I met my husband. In the second year, the war started, so I didn't have the chance to finish university or to get my degree. This is another grief for me, and until now, I haven't been able to find the means to finish my studies. In 1994, just before the genocide, we got married. We planned to help my mother, but then the horrible genocide came and my mother died with her pain and grief. This was a terrible period for me.

In marriage, I thought I would find happiness once in my life. My husband loved me so much even though he is of Hutu descent and I am of Tutsi descent. It was the first time I had met someone different, kind, who could keep my confidences. With him, life was different. He was the first person who understood me, sharing my grief and pain, and who knew how to make me happy. But during the genocide we were persecuted together. He protected me by taking me to friends of his and asking them to hide me. I spent three months hiding in their home to survive. Just after the genocide we fled the country and when we came back, he was imprisoned in 1999. [*Ed:* Large numbers of Hutu men who had been in the country during the genocide were imprisoned as suspects after it ended.]

His imprisonment was another event that shook me up a lot. When we were together, we encouraged one another. I was with him only, because I stayed without my father, mother or brother. Now, I was alone, with our kids. I had fallen in the same situation as when my mother left us. But here, it was terrible to see him in prison, suffering. It was not easy for me. I started again to live in loneliness. I lost hope and confidence. But God assisted me and tried to give me joy and hope.

I grew up in the Catholic Church, and my father attended the Adventist Church. But in December 1998, together with my husband became a member of the Friends Church. The Friends started to h

me. They invited me to their seminars about conflict management and AVP in 2001. Just after attending an AVP workshop, I felt many changes in my heart and my mind also, and overcame my pain and grief. Since then, I decided to go to others and to recognize the good things which are in others. Since I know how violence is not a good thing, and so I try to help other women with husbands in prison, to see together how to break that dividing wall in Rwanda. I decided to bring these women together with women who are genocide survivors. It was not easy to do that, but as a Quaker, I had to do something for peace and to call others to live in peace after asking for or giving forgiveness.

I know I was violently treated because God wanted me to help those who know violence and be for them an advocacy instrument. I thank my Yearly Meeting for intervening in my situation and helping me and letting me get out my trauma and encourage me in my initiative, Women in Dialogue. Now in my church, I am president of the Peace Committee in Kigali Quarterly Meeting and an AVP facilitator. I also help in the church's Women's Department.

Now, I have three groups for women who meet to talk about healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. Now, even though my husband is staying in prison awaiting the *Gacaca* process, I believe that he will be released and I already have gotten hope from God, whose child I am and whom I serve.

Now my country has a chance to have a good Government of Unity and Reconciliation, which promotes and supports every effort at peace-making. For me, Rwanda is a good example of unity and reconciliation for the world. I thank the good God because he gives me happiness and joy, and calls me to work in peace ministry and peace building. I'm sure that one day I will see Rwandans living together and in the future we will have sustainable peace.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

My grief starts from 1993. The year of 1993 has left in me a big wound. I was always jealous for those who still have their parents. But now, I realized that it is good to put myself in God's hands and start to live friendly with my neighbors.

Youth Participant in an HROC workshop in Burundi

The Road to Gikongoro: Sitting in an AVP Workshop

by Laura Chico

Laura Shipler Chico, MSW is an attender of Adelphi Friends Meeting in Adelphi, MD. She currently lives in Rwanda with her husband, Matt Chico, where she serves as a Friends Peace Teams/Africa Great Lakes Initiative Advisor in Trauma Healing and Peace Building for the Friends Peace House. She has worked in the United States as a counselor for survivors of domestic violence and torture, and worked in Asia as a peace builder with exiled and refugee women from Burma.

Rwanda has been called the "land of a thousand hills" and winding through the countryside toward the southern-most province of Gikongoro, the expression seems like an understatement. Peering out the window of a crammed mini-bus (a 14- person van carrying 20 people), and bracing myself against the potholes as the bus jerked from side to side without the advantage of shock absorbers, I occasionally would try to count the hills that stretched off into the horizon in every direction. I never was able to count them all before we would round a bend and a whole new set of hills would come into view. Rwanda is such a small piece of land (the size of Maryland, I've been told) with nearly 8 million people living here, that I shouldn't have been surprised that almost every piece of land is cultivated. The hills are terraced and quilted with small farms, and even the narrow strip of land along the side of the road has been claimed to grow small amounts of corn or beans or other crops I don't yet know.

It is quite picturesque, Rwanda is, and the tranquil pastoral scene seems remote from the country's bloody history. But I turned to my companion, Marie Paule -- a poised and warm AVP facilitator who is working with me to write a report on AVP here in Rwanda -- and said several times, "It is so beautiful here!" She would respond with a neutral nod, as if only to acknowledge my comment but not to agree. At first I thought this was modesty, but when I questioned her she said, "In French there is an expression that Rwanda has a thousand hills, and a thousand problems." And I felt the sadness seep in. Even that which is so beautiful here is inextricably intertwined with pain, and the ground itself is soaked with blood.

When we arrived at the AVP workshop the next morning, the participants were already there, sitting quietly in a semi-circle of chairs waiting for the facilitators to begin. This early arrival is unusual here in Rwanda, where time is "elastic" and the unpredictability of transportation and the lack of reliable or affordable communication often leaves people waiting patiently for an hour for everyone to arrive for a meeting. We learned later that eighteen more people had come to the workshop though they hadn't received an invitation, and had to be turned away! The others had claimed their seats, and weren't moving.

In the workshop were 11 men, 10 women (3 of whom had no shoes) and two babies who played quietly at the edges of the circle and only demanded their mothers' attention when they were hungry. These men and women are all judges for Gacaca - a traditional arbitration process (literally meaning "on the grass") that has been revived to handle the overwhelming numbers of genocide-related cases. Gacaca has the enormous task of seeking the truth of what happened during the genocide, documenting all information gathered, and processing lower level cases (those who looted, destroyed property, or were coerced into killing), and finally seeking that sticky balance between justice and reconciliation. It is no small task, and the judges have received trainings from various organizations to better prepare them for the challenges they face. AVP is among the trainings offered.

The workshop began the way AVP begins--with an introduction from the facilitators, introductions from participants, establishing ground rules, an ice breaker that got people moving and laughing, and so on. I watched as the facilitators began to create a new culture within the room, with Adjective Names (I was Lucky Laura and Marie Paule was Peace Paule), and insisting that after someone speaks the next person says, for example, "Murakose, Lucky Laura. Nitkwa Peace Paule" (Thank you, Lucky Laura, I'm Peace Paule). There were some ripples of resistance to these new ways of interacting. In Rwanda, one's name is very important, and to some the giving of Adjective Names has echoes of baptism with Christian names. To make matters more challenging, Adjective Names don't work in Kinyarwanda, because of the complicated language structure, so usually the names are in English or French. In many workshops, at least one or two participants are wary of being called something new, but again and again the Rwandan

facilitators would insist. I imagine that most Western facilitators would have given in quickly, figuring that the Adjective Name is simply not culturally appropriate. But the Rwandan facilitators here saw a deeper value in pushing people outside of their comfort zones, encouraging them to relate to one another across ethnic groups in a completely new way. And sure enough, I watched the magic of AVP unfold as the group began to gel and create its own safe space away from the pulls of everyday Rwandan life.

On that first morning, after participants discussed Active Listening, they turned to a partner and told that person about a time when they had done something good. This seemed to me the perfect way to begin self-disclosure, since so much of life in Rwanda is wondering what bad things the person next to you has done or will do. So the partners talked and listened, and then a few shared their stories with the large group. There were stories of saving people's lives, releasing prisoners of war from jail, taking in orphans, and so on. Stories that make the few things I could think of for myself seem small and modest. After the sharing had completed, several participants raised their hands. (Actually, they pointed their index fingers in the air, keeping their elbows close into their stomachs - but it is the US equivalent of raising one's hand).

"How can we know that what these people say is true?" they wanted to know.

"I mean," added one woman, "saving someone from a crocodile with just a stick! It's hard to believe."

The facilitators fielded the questions, but moved on quickly. I suppose they weren't surprised by how almost impossible it is to trust one another in a country where your neighbor suddenly turned on you or your husband killed your children and tried to kill you. But for me, the question landed in my stomach like lead. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised either, but that question was never one that I encountered in my many workshops in the US, even with the toughest, most traumatized youth. Maybe it was because they were judges? I hopefully wondered this out loud to David Bucura, AVP coordinator in Rwanda and one of the facilitators. Maybe it's because now they are immersed in looking for the truth? David said, "You see, here in Rwanda, because of what happened, people do not trust each other." So much for my hopeful theory.

Later on, the facilitators introduced an activity called "Serial News." They asked five participants to volunteer to leave the room, and they chose one more to stay to listen to a short, detailed story. Then one by one, the volunteers came in, listened to the story from the person who came before, and then retold it to the person who followed. Even though I didn't understand a word, I was laughing just as hard as everyone else, tears pricked into my eyes as the story changed and changed some more, to the point of becoming unrecognizable. This activity, I later learned, is one of the most valuable that AVP offers Gacaca judges. Many said that after seeing how stories can change in the retelling, they will no longer believe hearsay or rumors but they will be sure to go to the source.

"Before AVP, do many judges just believe what someone tells them, even if that person didn't witness it?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh yes," came the answer, from judges and Gacaca coordinators alike.

It was humbling to witness how essential AVP is to the process of reconciliation here, how deeply it touches the core.

In Rwanda it has struck me that people believe, deeply, in transformation—the capacity of the human soul to repent and be renewed. Perhaps they have to believe in this possibility in order to live next door to neighbors who might turn sour without warning, but whatever the source, the openness to transformation is profound. Throughout the workshop the facilitators connected the lessons not only to Gacaca and Rwanda's violent history, but also to violence at home, against women and children. It was warming to see the two male facilitators speak out as strongly against rape and domestic violence as the women, and to promote the power of partnerships and joint decision-making. On the third day, the facilitators asked the participants how they would use the lessons they had learned so far. As we moved around the circle, we came to an elderly man who gave this testimony:

"*Before, I was a bad man. Even at home I was having conflict. Now I am talking softly and they at home are wondering what happened to me.*"

The man went on to say that he had been changed by AVP and that he would be kind to his wife and children now. The room erupted in applause for this transformation, and then testimonies continued. Not everyone, but at least several more inspired more spontaneous applause

and warm congratulations on the inner change that had been effected. Later, I asked Bucura: "Why do people believe the transformation testimonies but not the earlier stories of when people had done good things?"

"Because they just volunteered this," was the answer, "no one asked them to share this."

That made sense to me -- that people need the space to be real. But I also wondered, watching the previously stone-faced group laugh and smile and listen deeply, if maybe AVP had started to do the impossible: to plant a small seed of trust that might, with generations to nurture it, one day flower.

After an HROC workshop, a Tutsi woman participant reported: *I am happy that I leave this workshop with a new dream that there will be a special day. That day, I see myself going to the Gitega prison where our former administrator* [a former local official who is accused of organizing the killing of Tutsis in the area] *is kept. I will ask to see him. I will be bringing him food. I will hug him. He will not, maybe, recognize me. I will tell him that I come from Mutaho IDP* [internally displaced persons'] *camp. I will show him that love has replaced hatred. I will be happy that day.*

Pastor Sebastien Kambayeko, a facilitator in that workshop, later reported that a group of Tutsi widows had gone to Gitega to ask the provincial government for permission to visit prisoners.

Trauma Healing in Burundi

Peggy Senger Parsons
Northwest Yearly Meeting

Peggy Senger Parsons holds a master's degree and national certification in counseling, and is a recorded Friends minister. She has pastored in three churches and is in demand as a speaker among Quakers and others in the western United States. She lives in Oregon with her husband and family Peggy spent several months in 2003 in Burundi, teaching seminary students at the Great Lakes School of Theology and working with victims of trauma through the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Service (THARS), both programs of Burundi Yearly Meeting. We are including a few anecdotes excerpted from a "blog," or web log, that Peggy kept while in Burundi to keep folks back home up-to-date on her activities.

On the Fashion Beat-

Burundians dress up—all the time. They put on the best that they have for any occasion, especially if something important is happening. They love color and love mixing it up. They value good cloth. Burundi seems to be at the bottom of the world's hand-me-downs market, however. In the open market downtown you can buy used clothes from the US. They pick them for color and weight of fabric, but love having slogans on their t-shirts even though they do not have a clue about what they are wearing (there are some very funny sights).

As many of you know, I thought long and hard about what clothes to bring. I ended up bringing all my best summer dresses, and heels in several colors. I only wear pants around the house, although I could wear them in town if I felt like it. It was clear from the start that this was a good choice—they really appreciated my style. But on the fourth day of preaching class, during break, I noticed that my female students were talking about the "muzungu" [foreign woman] and were working up their courage to ask me something, so I just opened it up "What do you want to know, sisters?" "Teacher Peggy—we want to tell you that we appreciate the fact that you brought your best dresses to wear to teach us. We have seen other Quaker women, and except for Dawn, they come in their old clothes, denim skirts and t-shirts and flat shoes, even flat shoes with socks on, like men. We decided that this meant that they did not really respect us, for who wears your old clothes to a house of a

person you respect? You have shown us that you have great respect for us because you have made yourself beautiful for us." I tried to explain to them the choice of simple dressing, and the choice of sensible dressing for travel, but this failed. So at last I told them that these women dressed just like that at home—and they were amazed and ashamed, "Oh, we had no idea that those WERE their BEST clothes. How sad; we should not have judged them" So I will wear the heels and the dresses, and I will not bring them home....

From the postings on "The Widows of Gitega"

... I am speaking at a conference called "Let's unite to stop the violence against widows!" THARS, Gitega is sponsoring this event at a Catholic retreat house. There are 30 women invited, all widows, from young to old, one pregnant and 6 with nursing babies.

In Burundi the widow is very near to the bottom of the power ladder. The only people lower are street children. Widows have no protection, legal or physical. You can steal from the widow, or rape the widow with impunity. Because the widow cannot afford bribes, she rarely has recourse to law. Her in-laws frequently turn against her, her own family does not want her back, and if she speaks to a man who is married, she is suspected of planning to steal a husband, so her married friends turn against her too. Often her biggest problems come from her former in-laws who want the house or land back, and are willing to push the children of their dead son or brother into the street to get it.

So I am here from far off planet America to speak to the condition of these women. I have been asked to talk to them about women's rights.

They came in their best – wrapped in color – one yardage for a skirt and another around the shoulders. I am told that most of them borrowed the clothes. Some of them even have shoes - plastic slippers we would call 'flip flops'. For them this is the best three day vacation of their lives, the simple Catholic hostel is the Ritz, the food is the best they have eaten in a long time. This is the first intervention, just to pull them up out of grinding poverty for a few days.

The second intervention is that they have been invited to a conference. In Burundi only important people go to conferences, and only the rich attend any kind of schooling in adulthood. They have told

all their neighbors and relatives that they are attending this event, and it has raised their prestige. The gift of a notebook and a pen is significant, especially since only seven of them read or write, but just owning paper and a pen makes you special. Their stay is paid for, and they are given a small "transportation" allowance. When they are given this stipend at the end of the second day, they hold an impromptu dance. I don't believe that a single one of them will use the allowance for a bus ride home. They will walk home, however far that is, with their babies on their backs and the stipend will buy food and pay the small but impossible school fees for one of their other children. And some of those children will have a notebook and a pen....

Sweet Honey from the Dry Rock

I notice on the second day of the widows' training that one of the nursing mothers has gray hairs. I will call her Sarai. Her baby boy is 14 months old, with a full mouth of teeth, but about the size of a six month old baby, and not really walking yet. They are both too thin. While we were waiting for lunch Felicity asked a polite question about the baby. Sarai says that she did not give birth to him, that she got him at four months when his mother died. "His father was too poor to keep him – so I took him". "It took a full month of nursing for my milk to come in – I had not nursed a child in fifteen years, but when it came in, it came in good." And then she pulled one long breast out and gave it a mighty squeeze and squirted milk in my general direction – she got a good three feet in distance. The other women applaud. Later we find out that this woman is homeless, she has nothing, she is at the absolute bottom of the ladder. She probably has AIDS and likely also the babe. But it did not stop her from taking compassion on the child of another, and putting him to her dry breast and calling forth sweet honey. I named the child Lucky.

The Last Day

... It is time to say goodbye, and the women decide to dance first. They start to sing. Rhythmic, harmonious, and with joy they take the floor. Their arms sail, their feet keep the beat. Every part of their body moves, as they weave in and around each other, singing. I am sitting at the head table drumming out the beat, enjoying their joy. How can people who have so little break so quickly into joy? How can women so oppressed break into complete freedom of expression? They sing a song

of blessing on their teachers, thanking God for providing us to them. They surround us with the dance and with their genuine affection. This becomes too much for me, and I rise and join them. Dancing into their circle. The whoops and hollers at the sight of the mazungu dancing with them raises the roof. They really let loose. I lose the heels. Felicity joins us. The dance is extremely close and extremely sensual, even as the words of the songs are all in praise to God. Without being taught, I know just what to do. We dance for an hour, without stopping. Everyone is soaked in sweat; the smell is tremendous, we are happy. One last dance of Goodbye, and Felicity and I are taken away just before dark.

I thought I had nothing to teach these women. I thought that my world was too far from theirs to cross the barriers. I thought that I would find them broken by their condition. I thought wrong.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

I thank the Almighty God for what I am doing now. It is my calling. I am very excited and very pleased doing the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities work because that is my goal, my purpose. I am still optimistic that little by little, we will make our communities a home to live in again. Thanks to Burundi Yearly Meeting and African Great Lakes Initiatives/Friends Peace Teams for their willingness to help me nurture my devotion to peace work through Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities.

Adrien Niyongabo, co-founder of both the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS) and HROC programs of Burundi Yearly Meeting, and coordinator of HROC.

About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

Reprinted 2005,
with permission of the authors
and the editor of the AGLI Newsletter,
by the
WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation,
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498 □ USA
Tel: *215-241-7293* □ Fax: *215-241-7285*
E-mail: *wqf@fwccamericas.org*
Web: *www.fwccamericas.org/whatwedo/wqf.html*

Friends World Committee
for Consultation
SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
de los Amigos
SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS