

# Horizons

July/August 2018



Empathy and Compassion

THE MAGAZINE FOR PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN



# Forgiving and Forgiven

## Forging a New Path in Rwanda

BY CATHRYN T. SURGENOR AND HANS HALLUNDBAEK

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Is it possible for us to do the same?

Rain was falling gently as Frederick, standing just outside our covered shelter, gave his barebones testimony. At the time of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Frederick was 26. The roads to escape his village had been blocked. He found Tutsis hiding in nearby sorghum fields and killed them. “I was in prison for nine years. Two pastors came to the prison and talked to us about the value of a human life and took us on the journey of repentance—first to God, then to victims, then the country as a whole. The president released us. Then we went in front of victims to admit what we had done and repent. It was very hard.”

Then Janette talked about her experience. “April 8th, they killed my parents. I hid in the bathroom. I was 16. I lost all my relatives. We went into exile for two months to hide. After we were freed, I wanted to die. When the president released the prisoners, we were so afraid. Pastor came and told us [that the men who had been released would be coming back to our village]. When we saw them, we were in great pain, a day of tears. We sat across from each other. The time came when they confessed and showed us where the bodies were. We took time to pray and get close to God. Now I am not afraid. When I have to go away, I leave my children with [Frederick]. The wives of those who [did the killing] didn’t believe it. We have been weaving baskets together and talking. Now they believe. We have come back to life. We are not worried. Please communicate what happened—that it was real.”

These were just two of the witness statements we heard while we were in Rwanda in May for the 8th International Conference on Human Rights and Prison Reform (CURE). We met Janette and Frederick and other

witnesses while visiting Mbyo, a unity and reconciliation village. It is one of eight villages in Rwanda established by a partnership among the Rwandan government, pastors with International Prison Fellowship, and the survivors and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, a 100-day period in 1994 when 800,000 to 1 million Rwandans were killed.

### About Rwanda

A condensed history of what happened in this beautiful East African nation is necessary to understand the genocide and subsequent process of reconciliation. Even more than 20 years after the genocide, questions remain about responsibility and motivations for the genocide, the deteriorating and then armed relationship between the Hutu and Tutsi and whether the genocide could have been stopped sooner.

Almost everyone connected to the country before 1994 is complicit in the lead-up to the genocide—the Hutu and Tutsi people, the Rwandan government, and Germany and Belgium, who colonized the region for nearly a century. The international community and the United Nations also were complicit (at least) in their nonengagement. A number of historians believe that the United States funded Tutsi armed forces in Uganda and France.

Rwanda is geographically small—roughly the size of Maryland. It’s located in bucolic hills at a latitude slightly south of the equator and on the longitude of Eastern Europe. Hutu arrived in central Africa in the first century and Tutsi in the 15th century. The majority Hutu made a living by farming, while the Tutsi were nomadic pastoralists who measured their wealth in cattle. The main difference between the two was economic, with Tutsis generally being wealthier and holding more power. Many Hutu were indentured servants to the Tutsi. Gradually the two tribes intermingled and intermarried.





The 2018 International Conference on Human Rights and Prison Reform brought advocates for reconciliation to Rwanda. Reflecting on the power of reconciliation to heal the wounds of Rwandan genocide, advocates explored blame, responsibility and forgiveness in various contexts.

### Colonial Complications

When colonizers—first from Germany and later from Belgium—came to this area in the 19th century, the Hutu and Tutsi lived in relative peace. The European colonizers were keenly focused on extracting products and wealth from their new territories. Their management style emphasized efficiency, organization and distribution of labor. The Belgians believed that the Tutsi—whom they saw as taller and having larger skulls, longer noses than the Hutu—were likely of European ancestry, more like them. They assigned the Tutsi the day-to-day governing of the country and gave them access to better education and government positions.

The colonial Belgian government required identification cards that labeled each person Hutu, Tutsi or Twa (the indigenous people of the area). Often, the ethnic designation on the cards was decided not by a person's declared heritage or even physical appearance, but, rather, by the number of cattle held. People with

many cattle were considered Tutsi; those with few, Hutu.

Not surprisingly, Belgium's preferential treatment of the Tutsi ignited various conflicts between the Tutsi and Hutu. These conflicts escalated as the colonizers started to withdraw. When a Hutu politician was killed in 1959, rumors held that the Tutsi were responsible. In the following Rwandan Revolution, Hutus gained more political power and threatened and killed Tutsi people. Hundreds of Tutsi were killed and thousands fled or were displaced. Belgium's rule ended in 1962, and the territory under its rule was divided into Rwanda and Burundi. The tensions

Learn more about CURE's work around international prison reform, [www.internationalcure.org](http://www.internationalcure.org).

International Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errands (CURE) is a grassroots organization dedicated to the reduction of crime through the reform of the criminal justice system (especially prison reform).

between Hutu and Tutsi people continued in both countries, as well as influencing and being influenced by the relationship between these two groups in nearby Uganda, Tanzania and Congo. The joy of being a free and sovereign state soon dampened, as conflicts between Hutu and Tutsi plagued the fledgling governments of Rwanda and Burundi.

### Genocide

Smaller and larger clashes occurred as tension increased in the next three decades. The majority-Hutu government radicalized the Hutu population with virulent radio broadcasts that referred to the Tutsi as "cockroaches" and "snakes." As the government escalated mistrust, it was also distributing weapons to be used against the Tutsi. (The current government insists that the French also participated in this preparation.)

In 1994, the powder keg exploded. The presidents of Rwanda and Burundi (both Hutu) were killed when their plane was shot down on



## PRESBYTERIAN GIVING CATALOG



### YOU'RE A WOMAN ON A MISSION

You have a heart for your church and a passion for helping those in need.

Bring your church closer together and closer to people around the world through the Presbyterian Giving Catalog.

**GET INSPIRED.  
GIVE TOGETHER.**

[presbyteriangifts.org/get-involved](http://presbyteriangifts.org/get-involved)

April 6. April 7 marked the start of the Rwandan genocide, the largest genocide in recent history. Roadblocks were set up, and to find and kill Tutsi. In the 100 days following April 7, one quarter of Rwanda's total population was systematically hunted, gathered and brutally executed. Between 800,000 and 1 million people—men and women, old and young, Tutsi and moderate Hutu—were killed.

As the radicalized Hutus swarmed through towns, villages and countryside, they killed fellow Rwandans with anything from rocks and wooden sticks to rifles and machetes. In a reversal of Isaiah's vision of turning swords into plowshares, farm implements were turned into weapons. Roughly 8,000 Rwandans were killed each day for 100 days.

### Remembering and Talking

In addition to Frederick and Janette sharing their stories with us in Mbyo, Claudine talked about her experience. "I was born of those who were victims. I asked how they survived. They hid, then fled to Burundi. Those who committed the crimes confessed to my parents. Now the women [from both sides of the conflict] weave together. As kids, we meet in clubs and play games together. We thank our government."

It's not just individual Rwandans testifying to their experiences; the country is committed to remembering the events, telling the stories and engaging in the process of reconciliation and healing.

Before arriving in Mbyo to hear from individuals, we had stopped at a former Catholic church, now a memorial to the massacre that took place there. We entered the sanctuary to find the pews piled high with the ragged, bloodied clothing of women, children and men who had been slaughtered. Then we went down the stairs to the basement. Two rooms were piled high with coffins that reached above our heads. Two or three were slightly ajar, so we could see they were filled with bones and skulls. Prior to 1994, when other massacres occurred, Rwandans counted on churches as places of sanctuary. But in the spring of 1994, this trust was shattered. Four thousand people had crammed into this church and more were outside. They were killed. In some places, Catholic priests participated in the massacre, outed churches as hiding places or simply allowed the killings to happen. Pope Francis recently apologized for the church's role.

Protestant churches, including the Presbyterian church, were also complicit, with ministers pointing to Tutsi hiding places. According to Kay Day, PC(USA) mission co-worker in Rwanda, Presbyterians acknowledged their role and apologized 18 months after the genocide ended. Since then, churches and their international partners, including the PC(USA), have been working toward reconciliation in accord with the new government.





**Left:** Flowers placed at mass graves honor the lives of loved ones killed during the Rwandan genocide. **Right:** Reconciliation villages and other reconciliation programs have been vital in healing mistrust between Rwandans that arose from tribal designations of Hutu and Tutsi labels.

### Restorative Justice

For the CURE conference, representatives from 18 countries came together in Kigali, Rwanda, to learn more about reconciliation in the framework of justice. We compared the role of prisons in our societies and discussed the impact of those prisons on prisoners, their families and the broader society. We explored how the restorative justice approach used in Rwanda offers a way for Rwandan people to rebuild a country that was ravaged physically, economically, socially, politically and spiritually.

As we listened to testimonies and reflected on reconciliation, we recognized that blame for the genocide does not solely reside with the Hutus. For generations, both Tutsi and Hutu have vied, often violently, for

power. The wider lesson is, of course, that tribal tension, fighting and massacre is not just a Rwandan or African problem. It is part of the growing pains of the human race, partly a result of our limited view of the world. Ethnic, racial, cultural and religious differences have prompted much violence—two World Wars, the massacre of Native Americans and their culture by Europeans, and the genocides of Jews, Armenians, Darfurians and Rohingya. While terrifying in its size and ferocity, the Rwandan genocide is far from unique.

However, the determination of this small nation for unification and healing is unique and praiseworthy. It is an example that the world needs to notice, praise and follow. Repentance, forgiveness and redemption are not only time-proven conditions for

peaceful human co-existence on our increasingly crowded planet, but also firm pillars of the Judeo/Christian faith tradition. In the practice of these concepts there is much we all can learn from the Rwandan experience.

Or, in the simple yet profound words of a teenaged girl in Mbyo, “Now we don’t have any Tutsi and Hutu; we are in clubs and we dance together.” Mbyo and the other seven reconciliation villages demonstrate that it is possible for people to repent, be forgiven and build new lives of shared community. 🍷

Cathryn T Surgenor is a retired PC(USA) minister who remains active in encouraging reconciliation and social justice. Hans Hallundbaek is the Presbytery Prison Partnership coordinator for Hudson River Presbytery.

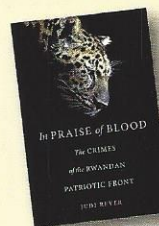


### Learn More



<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/04/140407-rwanda-genocide-today-anniversary/>

In 2014, *National Geographic* created a three-part series on the Rwandan genocide in 2014.



### *In Praise of Blood: The Crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front* By Judi Rever

Journalist Judi Rever presents another take on violence in Rwanda in 1994—that Tutsi also killed Hutu in significant numbers. Pulling from interviews and UN documents, this work adds another layer to understanding Rwanda’s past and present.