

## Healing Mutaho

By Adrien Niyongabo and David Zarembka

*If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times he comes to you and says, "I repent," forgive him. Luke 17:4.* On our second day, when a catholic religious teacher (who was attending the workshop) was given an occasion to share God's word as it is our habit every morning, he taught about forgiveness using the passage above. He emphasized that as a community that has passed through difficult periods, we have the responsibility to find how we can be able to forgive even what could be called unforgivable. This brought in the room this sense of communion that every body was clapping hands at the end of the sharing.

Mutaho is about 25 miles north of Gitega which is right in the center of Burundi. The Mutaho area was one of the areas in Burundi most destroyed by the fighting. The commercial center of Mutaho—once a large square with two story buildings on all sides and a market place in the center—has been completely destroyed (see picture). Many Hutu and Tutsi in this area killed each other during the conflict in 1993. The two groups became separated as the Tutsi moved to IDP (internally displaced persons') camps, while the more numerous Hutu stayed on their plots in the countryside. The former neighbor friends became enemies. This is how the situation remained for the last ten years with little communication between the two groups.

AGLI and the Healing and Rebuilding Our Community (HROC) program of Burundi Yearly Meeting decided to concentrate workshops in one IPD camp and its surrounding community. We wished to facilitate six workshops, each with ten Hutu from the community and ten Tutsi from the IDP camp in each workshop for a total of 120 participants. The aim of HROC workshops is to help people cope with societal problems linked to the psycho-social effects of the war. One month after each workshop was completed we proposed a follow-up day to see how the workshop had effected the participants and to reinforce the thrust of the workshops. Lastly when all six workshops and three follow-up days were completed, there would be a community gathering/celebration with all 120 participants gathered together.

Each workshop is three days long. The first day develops a secure environment where everyone feels free to talk, an introduction to psycho-social trauma (a new concept to most of the participants), causes and symptoms of trauma, small group discussions on the effects of trauma on the participants, and ends with a relaxation exercise. The second day begins with good listening skills, learning about grief and loss, how to recover from trauma, and destructive and constructive ways of dealing with anger. The third day introduces the tree of mistrust and the tree of trust, leading to a trust walk where each Hutu participant is blindfolded and led around by a Tutsi participant and then the roles are reversed. The workshop ends with testimonies and evaluation.

Here are some stories from these testimonials:

*It is a reality that we all are carrying very heavy burdens from what we passed through. Speaking for my self, I have been holding big grief within me for many days. Thanks to a Hutu family that had accepted to hide me after my mum, brothers and other relatives were badly killed. Although I escaped, I witnessed the death of my loved people. It is hurting!! Coming from my exile, I found that there is nothing that I could do to bring back my loved ones. I decided not to revenge. Rather, I started to create good relationship with the killers of my family members although it looks bizarre to some individuals. Still, I have my big trauma to deal with. Thanks so much for having invited me in this workshop. I feel much lighter than when I came. I got a wonderful opportunity to speak about my sufferings. The workshop has been healing for me. Thanks again! Tutsi Participant*

*I am very sorry to see how our friends do not have back yards in the IDP camp [having a house without a plot where you can plant vegetables and other crops is a sign of poverty]. This is not good and moreover, I know that it is not their preference. My hope is that they will come back to the communities and stay with us. I see this gathering being a way to that. Hutu Participant*

*I liked the fact we came from different churches as Hutu and Tutsi. Days ago, we could not gather like this. I was amused by how nobody could notice all those differences during our workshop. It is like we were from the same family. I hope we will continue to behave that way once back in our community. Workshop Participant*

One of the more interesting aspects of these workshops is that although they are dealing with societal problems, it is clear that the hurt from the conflict includes anger and violence in the family. It seems that the societal violence and family violence are closely linked. Often the result is more peaceful family relationships as indicated in these stories:

*I would have been the big loser if death had taken me away before having attended this HROC workshop. I had seen how happy are those who came from these workshops you are organizing and I wondered what they were given. I was overloaded with my bad feelings and this workshop has been an opportunity for me to put down some of them. More, I had been quarreling with my wife and many times I used violence over her. Thank God that I have learned how I can manage my anger. I am ready to change and bring peace in my family. Workshop Participant*

*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 workshop, he has now time for the children and me. When he comes from work, he greets us, tells us how things 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. Workshop Participant*

We decided to do two of the workshops with youth. If there is another round of violence in Burundi, it is these hurting youth who will be the major recruits for the groups that will promote any violence that occurs. These workshops gathered young people, half Tutsi and half Hutu, from Mutaho area. Most of these youth were under 10 years old in October 1993, when the separation began—thus, they have lived apart longer than they ever lived together. They were invited to attend these workshops where they would share their stories, their past. There was no confrontation in our workshops. Instead, both of them were so sad because of what happened to their community and they felt regret at being in such a situation. The youth were ready to learn new skills and to find a way for healing. They spoke of the depression from the torture they endured and the many losses of loved ones and other destruction. This would explain the unhappy faces that participants had at the beginning of the workshop. As usual, towards the end of the workshop, they were more open, hopeful, joyful, energized, excited, friendly and they decided to act differently from what they had been doing. Here are some comments from the youth.

*These teachings are special. The more we did things, the more I got released. Really, they are unique! It would be hard for people to kill each other when they have been laughing and crying together in such gathering. You end up by becoming friends.*  
Youth Participant

*I discovered that the tree of mistrust that was within me was too big. I could not think at any time that I could speak from the heart to those who are not from my ethnicity. Very few are the times I am happy. Little by little, as we went on with the workshop, I got this joy that I can't tell and found that there are still loving people. Yes, I have found a way to uproot my tree of mistrust.* Youth Participant

*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

During the first workshop, a Tutsi woman 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 [former chief of the commune who is accused of organizing the killing of Tutsi in the Mutaho 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 camp. I will show him that love has replaced hatred. I will be happy that day.*

Later Pastor Sebastien Kambayeko, a facilitator in that workshop, reported the following:

*A group of Tutsi widows living in the IDP came to him and told him how the two trees: Trust tree and Mistrust tree have impacted them. From their sharing, they*

*emphasized that in order to give a place to the Trust tree, as single parents, they need to prepare the way for their children and grandchildren by forgiving their wrongdoers. Thus, one of the ways to do that would be to support the idea expressed by one of them during their last workshop. This idea was to go to Gitega prison and meet the Mutaho Hutu former officials, tell them that “Maybe, they would doubt about our act because what they did to our families is woeful, but we will not give up. We would go there for a second time, sit with them and talk. We need peace for our next generation.”*

The last report was that the women had gone to Gitega to ask the Provincial Administration for permission to visit the prisoners.

The follow-up workshops had two main topics: in the morning small groups shared “What did I get from the HROC workshop I attended and how is it helping me, in my life and my community.” The afternoon, focused on “Level of Trust in my Community.” It is clear that many of the participants had taken to heart the message—it is necessary to care for others whomever they may be. Here are examples:

*These teachings helped to change people’s minds really. Before we attended these workshops, we feared to meet with the person from the opposite ethnicity even if you did not know anything bad about him or her. But now, there is no more fear and the hatred has been replaced by love. I am a Hutu. Whenever I was passing near the IDP camp, in my mind, it was like all the Tutsi we crossed were suspicious about me. But now, when I pass near the same IDP and see these people, we hug each other laugh and chat. I think that this is lesson and model to those who see us! The HROC workshop has made us to be a model in our community. Hutu Participant*

*The skills that I got in the workshop that I attended have enabled me to be compassionate in helping others. A few days ago, on the queue at the hospital waiting for our turn, I saw a woman sitting under a banana tree, crying and saying things like a crazy person. I immediately went to her, sat beside and holding her in my arms. She kept on crying! After a while, she stopped crying and looked at me very surprised. I told her that I felt pity to see her alone. I asked her what happened and she revealed to me that her child had passed away. I listened to her and we finally sent somebody to go and call her husband. This was a great experience for me. I could not accept that I would have been empowered to that level. Workshop Participant*

*Now I am able to manage my anger. Before the HROC workshop I attended, I used to be angry to the point that I would later plan to come and kill the one who made me angry. Now I am eager to accept that problems can erupt among people and still there is a way to resolve them instead of killing each other. I now feel proud of myself because my neighbors keep coming to me asking for advice. For sure, they know better than any one else that the changes in my behavior are real. Workshop Participant*

*I am a muchingantahe [a wise man who helps adjudicate local cases]. I used to ask for bribe to one of the two parties in conflict so that I may give him or her favor. Just*

*after the last day of the workshop I attended, one woman came to me with money in hands. Trying to hand it to me, she said that she wants me to help her to win the case opposing her to her neighbors. I listened to her and when she was done, I quietly told her that I could not touch her money. Instead, I suggested that she could go and meet the one with whom she in conflict and try to talk about the issue. Two days later, she came back happy for they were able to resolve the issue by themselves. Another man came with the same intention but still I refused the bribe. I told him that I am no longer the same person they used to see. HROC has changed me! I am happy that people in my community know that I have abandoned that worthless habit and that they can unify by themselves. Thanks for the HROC workshop because I have got light and courage. I have become conscious that bribe is one of the roots of mistrust tree. And I have up-rooted it! Workshop Participant*

In the follow-up workshop for the youth, the youth said that if the adults stay with the hatred, then young people should play the mediators so that the new generation may inherit a “restful community.” Here is the report of one young woman:

*I am a Tutsi living in the IDP camp. I was around ten when the war reached our area. I remember that day when Hutu beat my young brother to death. My mum asked our Hutu neighbor to escort her so that she could take my brother to the hospital. Pitilessly, he told her “Don’t you know where you have buried your husband? Take him there too!” Hopelessly, my mum and I went to the hospital but my brother died in mum’s arms before we could reach the hospital. We turned back and took the trail to the cemetery. Only two of us, two females, buried my brother. This would never have happened before the war. After we were done, we went home crying. Since that time, I considered the Hutu man as a monster as well as his wife and children as we say in Kirundi “the mouse’s baby is victim of his mum’s hate.” After the HROC workshop I attended, I used to sit and meditate. One day, I decided to rebuild the destroyed relationship with that family. Unfortunately, the man had died. Still, I went to his daughter, who is almost my age, and told her my sad story. I openly told her that this was the only reason that I hated them. She was very sorry to hear what her father did to us. In tears, she humbly asked if I would be eager to forgive her father though he had died, her family and her too! I responded to her that that was my aim for coming and talking to her. We are now friends, real friends. I have forgiven! Without HROC workshop skills, especially the tree of trust, I am not sure if I would have come to that decision. Young Tutsi Participant.*

On January 23 the Mutaho gathering/celebration was held. Most of the 120 participants attended as did 15 of the 16 HROC facilitators—3 from Ruyigi missed their ride at Kibimba and took bicycle taxis the 23 miles to Mutaho! Most of the leader of the Friends Church together with the local Catholic priest and government officials attended. A drumming group and the choir from the local Mutaho Friends Church both performed. The usual prayers, sermon, and speeches were given which emphasized the need for peace and reconciliation in the community. But then one woman commented, “We need many more of these workshops since there are over 100,000 people in the community.” It is ironic that so little can do so much since it is clear that the people who attended the

workshops used the skills and knowledge that they acquired to help others in the community and become leaders in promoting the development of peaceful relationships. Nothing could be so challenging!

In the world Friends are a small group. What we do best is to bring two sides of a conflict together in a non-violent setting to settle the differences in a peaceable way. This is how we bring the Peaceable Kingdom of God here on earth.