

## **Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities** **By David Zarembka, Coordinator**

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.*  
Isaiah 11:6

*Being in the group, where you talk about your stories, is comforting. Hearing someone else's story, you could realize that you are not alone in the struggle. And when it came to telling others about your story, it was like some thing heavy was pulled out from the heart and you felt happy.* Rwandan Participant

In September 2002, David Bucura, Legal Representative (General Secretary) of Rwanda Yearly Meeting of Friends, was insistent that the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) bring trauma healing to Rwanda. After the 1994 genocide, it was clear that Rwandans needed this on a massive scale.

The Friends Peace Teams is composed of sixteen American Yearly Meetings. The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI), which I coordinate, is its largest program. In October 2000, AGLI and Burundi Yearly Meeting of Friends began trauma healing by helping to start the Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS). To take on another large, overwhelming program needed prayerful discernment.

In partnership with the American Friends Service Committee—Africa Region, a one-month training session was held in early 2003 for 15 Rwandans and 3 Ugandans. Prior to this, AGLI had been working with Rwanda Yearly Meeting to introduce, revise, and promote the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). AVP consists of three day workshops which emphasize experiential learning using a series of exercises, role plays, small group discussions, “light and livelies” (fun activities to break up the seriousness), and group building.

Adrien Niyongabo from Burundi had helped initiative THARS and had been one of the trainers for the Rwandan workshop. Under his leadership the Rwandan developed a community trauma healing workshop which is now called “Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities.” Again with support from the AFSC—Africa Region, the Rwandan were able to begin a three month program where they tested and refined the process by conducting 25 workshops for almost 500 people. AGLI later sponsored three similar workshops in Uganda and four in Burundi.

In the Rwandan workshops ten of the participants are Tutsi survivors of the genocide and ten are Hutu from the families of the perpetrators or in some cases “released prisoners” who confessed to participating in the genocide. Although most of the people at a workshop are from the same community and know each other, they have not communicated with each other for almost a decade. When they gather the first day each group sits apart, does not make eye contact with the others, and exhibit other signs of nervousness. I am astounded when I think of how the three facilitators are going to deal with such hostility!

*I am very happy to see that the person who had the courage to hide my husband and myself when the killers were looking and following us is now with me in this room. We need to accept that there are trustworthy persons within each ethnic group although we passed through horrible periods.* Burundi participant.

The most important aspect of the first day is to develop a secure environment where everyone feels free to talk and respected by the others. This may be the first time since the genocide that this has happened.

*In this workshop, I have discovered that there are many kinds of trauma. Before I was thinking that only having lost family members is traumatizing. But now I have seen that the wrongdoer can be traumatized by the horrible things she/he did.* Genocide survivor.

*I am a survivor [of the genocide]. I always had bad dreams and saw people coming to kill me at night. I did not know that I was traumatized, but now I am feeling OK after talking about this.* Genocide survivor.

The agenda on the first day includes understanding psycho-social trauma, a new concept for most Rwandan participants, causes and symptoms of trauma, small group discussion on “the effects of trauma on you”--the Tutsi and Hutu are purposely combined in the small groups. Later the groups share their insights. The day ends with a normalization exercise to relax and calm people before they return to their homes and families for the night.

*I didn't realize that I was traumatized. I was surprised to find myself with many of these trauma symptoms you told us. Thank you so much for helping me to know what I am suffering from.* Rwandan participant.

*We were blind. Learning about trauma healing skills has allowed us to shed light on our past, present, and our future. Personally, I realize that the fact that we have been bearing all the bad events in us has brought back the violence once again.* Rwandan participant.

The second day begins with learning good listening skills, followed by learning the stages of grief and loss and how to come out of the trauma. Constructive and destructive ways of dealing with anger are presented in the afternoon,.

*Myself, as well as my neighbors, have lost many relatives and the situation we are in is unbearable. But I discovered that the main issue is that we have been keeping all inside us. We did not want to tell God, neither our friends about them. Grief can destroy one's life and body. We now find new skills. God and friends can comfort me.* Uganda participant.

*Having participated in this workshop, it has lifted me to another stage of understanding. I have a neighbor with whom I am in conflict. I discovered how I*

*have been acting under my anger. Now I am ready to meet with him and tell him that I have acted wrongly. I will ask for forgiveness. Yes, I have been an evildoer.*  
Rwanda participant.

On the third day, the trees of mistrust and of trust are introduced. This is an apt analogy for the African rural setting. The participants list the roots and fruits of mistrust on a drawing of a tree. They conclude by cutting down that tree (retaliation, revenge, capital punishment). Next they discuss the roots and fruits of trust, eventually concluding that the bad roots need to be replaced with good roots which then yields good fruits (rehabilitation, resurrection).

*When we talked about the mistrust and trust trees, participants expressed how the mistrust tree is real in their hearts and what has been the consequences of such evil. They openly manifested their willingness to uproot that mistrust tree because, they said, it is the origin of all horrible times they passed through for generations.*  
Rwandan participant.

*We have to plant the trust tree in our hearts so that every Rwandan can eat its delicious fruits.* Rwandan participant.

The afternoon of the third day is a “trust walk” where each Hutu participant is blindfolded and led around by a Tutsi participant and then the roles are reversed and the Tutsi are blindfolded and led around by the Hutu.

*Each time I tried to find something to hold on to, my friend told me, ‘Don’t worry, I see for you’ and I believed.* Rwandan participant.

*The agenda was composed of role plays, trust walk, tree of mistrust/suspicion, tree of trust and group discussion. What a good day!!! It was very touching, inspiring, full of love to see how ex-prisoners [Hutu accused of participating in the genocide] and survivors [of the genocide] were holding each other and carefully they walked together.* Rwandan participant.

By the end of these workshops, people, who only three days before would have stayed out in the downpours of Central Africa rather than seek shelter with their opponents, who would have refused to ask for water if they were thirsty because they were afraid they would be poisoned, leave talking and laughing with each other inviting each other over for dinner.

*We may have been thinking that we are the only ones in our camp that have suffered more than any one else, but we heard how others passed through very difficult times, too. My mother lost 4 children. After the second day, I told her about our lesson and she started to tell me a lot about the death of the four. When she was done, she hugged me strongly, and we slept.* Ugandan Participant.

*I am happy for this program because we are together, even though we came from different sectors, churches, even tribes [Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa]. I discovered how to build a good society after seeing the tree of trust. Rwandan participant.*

So my dream is to see the families of the hijackers from 9/11 together with the families of the victims of the twin towers together in a “Healing and Rebuilding Our Societies” workshop. But I am just dreaming! The peoples of the Great Lakes region of Africa have suffered so much more than we have, but they have also come much farther than we have in healing and reconciliation from their tragedies.