

## TRANSFORMING POWER IN RWANDA

There is a proverb in Kinyarwandan (the language of Rwanda) which says

“God goes about the world doing good, but he sleeps in Rwanda.”

If you have seen the spectacular beauty of Rwanda, you would think that this could be true. Carl Stauffer, a Mennonite non-violence trainer in South Africa, held a trauma healing workshop for survivors of the Rwandan genocide and one of the survivors changed this proverb slightly to say

“God goes about the world doing good, but he fell asleep in Rwanda.”

If you had lived through the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, you would no doubt wonder what happened to God during those terrible times. When I visited Rwanda in January 1999, this question was quite prevalent. While people understood the mechanics of the genocide and how it had been planned and executed at the top by leaders wishing to consolidate their control of the country, they still did not comprehend the answer to the question, “How could we have done this to each other?” Christians realized that while the shadow of Christianity had made Rwanda one of the most Christian countries in the world, the substance of Christianity—“love your neighbor as yourself”—had not been conveyed to those nominal Christians. Muslims were saying, “The genocide show that Christianity doesn’t work.” Until Rwandans, including the Quakers, answered this spiritual question, they would be unable to move on to constructive, positive healing processes.

In February 2000, when Friends Peace Teams’ African Great Lakes Initiative organized an Alternative to Violence Project training program in Uganda, three Rwandan Quakers were invited to participate in some of the workshops to see if they would want this introduced to Rwanda. They replied in the affirmative. In February/March 2001, AGLI sent a team of four facilitators from the United States and three from Uganda for five weeks to train the initial group of Rwandan facilitators in conducting AVP workshops. During the rest of 2001 and the first part of 2002, the newly trained Rwandan facilitators conducted their own Basic AVP workshops to gain experience.

The enthusiastic acceptance of AVP in Rwanda is due to the fact that it addresses this spiritual question. The concept of Transforming Power gives hope that people in the future can and will chose nonviolent solutions over violent ones, regardless of what they have done in the past. Some of the exercises seem as if they were developed for the Rwandan situation (but of course they were not). In the “Dots Exercise” people are given various color dots and told to divide themselves into “dot groups” without talking. This is as arbitrary as dividing people who have the same culture, speak the same language, and frequently inter-marry as Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa do. Rwandans understand this immediately. Likewise in the “masks exercise” (where half the participants are given

masks and made the ruling class while the other “serf” half must obey all their reasonable commands and then the roles are reversed and the former “serfs” lord it over their former “masters”), Rwandans see the direct parallel with their national problem. I find it surprising that in this latter exercise which lasts forty-five minutes to an hour and everyone knows is only a “game,” Rwandan participants become exceedingly emotionally involved. It therefore speaks to their condition, as the Quakers like to say.

In Rwanda after the genocide, 120,000 genocide suspects were put into extremely overcrowded prisons. But the justice system had been destroyed. Most of these people have been sitting in jail for the last seven or eight years. To deal with this problem the Rwandan Government launched the “Gacaca” Courts (ga-CHA-cha). These were formerly community courts where people resolved minor disputes. So while the present system builds on the past, it is also a major extension of that tradition. There are 9000 lower gacaca courts in the country with 19 judges elected by the people (but with governmental approval). Therefore each gacaca court covers about 1000 people and will determine the cases of about 15 genocide suspects. Leaders of the genocide are tried under the western style justice system in Rwanda or at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania.

Rwanda Yearly Meeting and AVP-Rwanda have decided that their part in restoring their country is to bring AVP to as many of the gacaca judges and the prisoners who are being released back into society as they can reach. By January 2003, they have facilitated six workshops with the gacaca judges and five with released prisoners.

David Bucura, Coordinator of AVP-Rwanda and General Secretary of Rwanda Yearly Meeting, in his report on the first nine workshops, writes:

“The participants were interested by the workshops and the representatives of the Gacaca Commission asked to extend it in many provinces and to train as soon as possible many Gacaca Judges and newly released prisoners. They insist we continue with Gacaca Judges and newly released prisoners because the Gacaca Justice is now going in all provinces. We choose to start at the grassroots where the majority of the Gacaca courts are. The participants were women and men, boys and girls, Hutu and Tutsi. We hope to have Twa for the next workshops. All participants were astonished by the AVP workshops especially the methodology used in it. Most of the participants changed and they decided to use everywhere the TRANSFORMING POWER. They accepted to go and to ask for people the pardon and to forgive others. They gave us testimonies (Hutu and Tutsi). The newly released prisoners asked us to train their friends from prison because they are still having angry and want to revenge those who accused them. All participants accept to take part in changing our country and to have a good participation in Gacaca process. They saw how Gacaca Justice is the Restorative Justice. They understand how Peace is needed in Rwanda. They accepted to abolish the Tree of Violence by not to continue with the cycle of violence.”

Currently in January/February 2003, an international AGLI team of Ray Boucher, George Walumoli, and Vickie Nakuti is in Rwanda training additional AVP facilitators and more important, teaching six Rwandan how to conduct Advanced and Training for

Facilitator AVP workshops so that the Rwandans themselves can train more facilitators as they need them. AVP-Rwanda has also translated the Basic AVP manual into Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda) so that it is more accessible to the general population.

In neighboring Burundi, the AVP program is just beginning with the initial training in April/May 2002. AVP-Burundi, with the support of Search for Common Ground, has done one Basic AVP workshop with the “peace keepers” and plans to do more as funds are available including one in March with the assistance of Carolann and Ray Boucher (Hartford Meeting). The “peace keepers” are civilians in a community, trained and armed by the Government to help keep the peace in the community. Since these people are accustomed to violent methods of resolving conflicts, introducing them to non-violence through AVP workshops is a challenging, but important peacemaking effort.

Will these efforts at promoting non-violent conflict resolution through AVP and its Transforming Power be successful? How will we know? In August 2003, AGLI plans on sending Peter Yeomans (Germantown, PA, Meeting) who was one of the team members to introduce AVP to both Rwanda and Burundi to conduct an evaluation of the workshops done by that time. He plans on interviewing gacaca judges, released prisoners, gacaca commission and prison officials, AVP facilitators, and others involved in the AVP program to assess the impact that the program has had. His report will be available and a summary will be included in a future issue of Peace Team News.