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Africa Great Lakes Region **January – March, 2009**

‘Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf’

Native North American proverb

‘The first duty of love is to listen’

Paul Tillich

We left for Rwanda with severely reduced funding this year. In fact, we almost cancelled the trip as we did not have the funds required to bring together classes of chaplains for training in Restorative Justice. But the holy desire to be with our brothers and sisters there persisted and we set off – Pierre, Jeff and I for the first month after which Eileen joined us.

We became convinced that what the Lord had in mind for this mission would be revealed day by day. Living on the precipice is not always comfortable, but it is very exciting! From the moment we arrived, our apartment was filled with chaplains, old friends from previous years, young people who were growing up before our eyes and searching for a life path, a way out of their poverty and dismay. What struck us first was how sick everyone was: health problems, emotional problems, extreme fatigue, depression and malnutrition. The devastating effects of the RD Congo Nord Kivu war are obvious. The ever-grinding efforts at development in Rwanda and Burundi are leaving many raw edges. Things are improving and things are getting worse. While we were there, we witnessed the withdrawal of Rwandan Army troops from RD Congo – they marched past our house on the RDC – Rwanda border on their way home. There was much jubilation! Within 48 hours we were told that the rebels were back in control of many little villages in the area. The result of this particular action is tens of thousands of people, mostly women and children in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps. The Goma Central Prison has had major riots which have resulted in fires and the complete destruction of the health dispensary to which we had contributed last year. There is nowhere to take the seriously ill. Many prisoners in the entire Great Lakes region are suffering from tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS. In the Goma prison, more than half the inmates are ex-military. In Gisenyi, the majority is still inside for genocide crimes, but young women are still getting life sentences for having or helping with an abortion. Many juveniles, some 13 years old, are charged with rape, but very few men. In Bugesera, where we are involved with a housing project, it is estimated that 90% of the women and girls are victims of sexual assault. Many of the women still suffer from health problems related to sexual assaults dating as far back as 15 years. It is a constant struggle to find money to send all the children in a family to school. Tuition fees vary, but school uniforms and



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materials are always required. In addition to all this, the official language in Rwanda has changed from French to English and teachers and students alike are struggling, trying to find a way to learn English.

It is in this context that our chaplains are working. They go to prison as often as they can, despite receiving no salary and no transportation allowance. They go, sometimes having to bribe the guards to let them in. (This has become standard practice in some prisons where the guards themselves have not been paid for a long time). They go, knowing that the prisoners they see will beg them for food or medicine which they do not have to give. They go, aware of the fact that many of the people they see have not been officially charged with a crime and will be there for years without a lawyer or a trial.

They go because they know God loves each of these men and women, all of these young people, as much as he loves them, or you, or me. They go because Jesus said He was there and we visited him.

So, what did we do? We decided to focus on a ministry of hospitality and listening. MANY people slept over, came for meals, listened to music and shared. The stories spilled out as did the tears. We played 'pigs' and 'crazy eights' and soccer. We laughed and sang together and ate and prayed, and cried some more.

We used two new teaching modules this year: **Visioning in a Restorative Justice Perspective** and **Cultivating Peace: A Protocol for Victim – Offender Meetings in a Restorative Justice Perspective**. We offered the **Visioning** module twice: 4 days with the FEP (Fraternité Evangélique des Prisons) leaders, and then again with 13 chaplains from Goma who came and stayed with us for 4 days. The participants looked intentionally at their past and present experiences and formulated plans for their future both personally and professionally. They set out long and short term goals and began immediately to work on the short term ones with great enthusiasm. Two small offices were set up, plans to gather information and support each other physically and spiritually were put in place, and strategies to install and stabilize prison chaplaincy were discussed at length. Both times were wonderful with the participants doing 80% of the talking and our team listening and learning.

The **Victim – Offender Protocol** module was offered first to 8 chaplains to train them for mediating between genocide perpetrators and genocide victims. Part of this session included a day with Mme Beatrice Karengera, a trauma counsellor who works with the 'Speak. I am Listening' (Mbwirandumva) Initiative in Kigali. She shared her work with women victims, the scars left on their lives and their terrific efforts to rise above them

This session was part of the **Gisenyi 400** project where 400 prisoners, subsequent to our visit last year, had written letters to their victims asking forgiveness. The chaplains had committed to assisting each of these prisoners with the delivery of these letters but had felt powerless to do so without training and financial and material support. We decided to meet these 400 prisoners inside Gisenyi Central Prison and take them through the



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Protocol so that they would know exactly what to expect during the process. Each group session had its particular challenges and joyful insights. Each time, the perpetrators realized the difficult row they had to hoe, but also that their future depended upon their taking responsibility and seeking forgiveness from their victims. How do you return to your village and family and rebuild a life otherwise?

It was an immense privilege to be able to put together four meetings inside the prison between victim and offender. This involved meeting beforehand with the victims in their village, asking if they would be willing to come to Gisenyi, hosting them at our house to prepare them for the meeting inside the prison, and finally accompanying them for the actual encounter. Two of these encounters were very moving and ended with the victim hugging the offender. Two others were much more difficult and will require more work as hearts are slowly changed. The victim is never pressured to accept the letters, forgive the perpetrator or agree to a meeting. Sometimes, the gesture will be made by the perpetrator and there will not be a positive response by the victim. The chaplain will help the perpetrator to understand and accept this. At other times, the road has already been paved. One of the chaplains went to meet a victim in a remote village. He did not know her and at a crossroads in the village asked for directions from a woman passing by. She replied that she was the person he was looking for and she had been at church praying for the person who had killed so many in her family. Yes, she would be willing to accept his letter and talk with the chaplain!

We are very keen to help the chaplains continue this process of healing in this part of Rwanda. The future health of the country depends on it. The dust has settled 15 years after the genocide, but the wounds are often as fresh as if it were the day after. There are still 396 letters to deal with, and others are writing letters as they see the healing benefits. This process needs to continue and not lose momentum.

The second project we care deeply about is Twungubumwe Bugesera Collectif. For several years now, under the leadership of genocide victim Pascal Niyomugabo, ex-offenders have been helping widows and victims build a village and start sustainable agricultural projects such as apiculture, gardening and crop growing and cattle raising. Our chaplains are very supportive of this project. It is a living testimony to the spiritual dynamite found deep inside the human spirit. If you could see these people working together, you would come away shaking your head in amazement! This year, we were privileged to use a gift from Jean Coutu to provide roofing and housing material for 17 hand made mud-brick houses. Seventeen more families now have homes! Their gratitude was overwhelming. We did not have enough money to supply the cement needed to install the doors and windows (\$25USD per house), but perhaps soon...

With your gifts and support, we were able to give blankets, children's clothes and bananas to the women and children in Gisenyi Central Prison. We were able to help with a healthy meal on Thursday for the TB and HIV-AIDS prisoners in hospital. We gave over 200 t-shirts away to juveniles in prison, soccer balls, and underwear for the girls. We



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supplied teaching aids for children and literacy programs in several places as well as small soaps, toothbrushes, band-aids, pain medication and vitamins. We handed out hundreds of notebooks and pens to prisoners, administrators and Gacaca members. We offered chaplains clothing and some bags of rice and beans. We purchased sewing machines for two victim-offender initiatives. We left books on Restorative Justice and justice issues in several places including the Theological Faculty at the University of Butare. We spoke at the Kigali Independent University and the Goma Christian radio station. When leaving, we gave our office and teaching supplies as well as mattresses, sheets and towels to the two fledgling offices in Gisenyi and Goma. All of this is because of your generosity and commitment.

Finally, we expect four international students for the Queen's Theological College intensive session on Restorative Justice this May.

This is because of your generosity!!! We are so grateful to be your hands and feet in this work!

This year's experience has helped us to focus in on what we feel are the strengths and calling of Just.Equipping.

Sustainability is critical. We cannot start projects that only we can carry on. Neither can we spread our travel and team teaching around the world. As a result of this, we have decided for the present to focus our support on the nationals who are working as chaplains in the Africa Great Lakes region. We are always delighted to be of service to administrators and members of government when asked, and we will always visit with inmates and victims and bring them any material support we can, but we want to prioritize those working in chaplaincy and justice issues. They are the ones who, once supported, strong, healthy and well-organized, will carry on this vital work. They are there for the long haul. They know the cultural context in which they are working. They have a vested interest in a strong and just future for their country and their families. They are the wounded healers.

We want to share the following goals with you:

- Return to the Great Lakes region in October-November and again in January – April 2010, to continue work on the Gisenyi 400 project and the Bugesera project.
- Offer teaching modules on Accounting and Restorative Justice and Ethics and Restorative Justice, as well as the Basic Restorative Justice and Pastoral Care training weeks in Burundi.
- Find a house which we could use both for the teaching teams as they go and also as a hospitality centre – a little sanctuary – for chaplains.
- Respond to the desperate requests from the Nord Kivu area for help with the violent, retributive warring mentality and corruption which is so prevalent.
- Find computers, printers, office and school supplies and fees.



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- Support chaplains with seed and travel money for their ministry in prison and with ex-offenders and victims. \$10CAD a day would support a chaplain and his family at a very basic level.
- Find health professionals who would volunteer their time and resources to come and work with the chaplains, offenders and victims in this long process of healing.
- Seems impossible, doesn't it?

With a grateful heart,

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Executive Director

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