

## Freedom and Peace through Forgiveness

### *John SSF*

*Last October John accompanied a party of sixth-formers from Sherborne School on a visit to Rwanda. Below are some of his recollections.*

A three-hour minibus journey south from Kigali provided ample evidence that we were in the "land of a thousand hills". We had arrived at Murambi, a lush, remote beauty-spot surrounded by woods and distant azure mountains. Our destination was a vocational school where no lesson had ever been taught. Before its completion it became a rounding-up point for hunted Tutsis, approximately 50,000 of whom were massacred here on 20th April 1994. Most are buried in the mass grave, but wandering the classrooms we were confronted by hundreds of tangled, decaying corpses piled on wooden platforms, many of them children with pierced skulls. The eerie silence penetrated us. This brutally raw memorial flung the horrors of genocide in our faces. We met Emmanuel, a bullet-pocked survivor who lingers here every day where, somewhere, his wife lies buried with all of their five children. Though since remarried, he is still too traumatised to work, but drinks less these days.

Equally stunning were the testimonies of murderers and survivors we met in Kirehe who had been reconciled to one another through the ministry of REACH (Reconciliation, Evangelism and Christian Healing), whose director, Anglican priest Philbert Kalisa, was our guide. Alphonsine, 19 at the time, was repeatedly raped, cut with machetes and left for dead by the Interahamwe (Hutu killing squads). Rescued by a neighbour, she and her brother Emmanuel, who fled to Tanzania, alone remained of their extended family. Angry that Emmanuel received Hutus in his house, it took Alphonsine years to forgive, but as he put it to her, "How can we live alone?" Faustin, a school friend, served a lengthy prison sentence for the murder of their brother. After his release he came to beg their forgiveness, and has since helped to build Alphonsine a house of her own, an act of reparation and healing for them all, and one of REACH's peace-building initiatives. He regularly walks miles to visit them. They share meals, and laughter.

Pregnant and on the run in the bush with two daughters, Stephanie was captured and taken to see her husband for one last time. She was chased away before he was dismembered. Her prayer was not to become hard-hearted like the perpetrators; later she came to know Christ. Now she is the proud owner of a new, virtually empty house, a haven for her girls and 14 year-old son, Daniel. She reflected, "God created Adam, and Eve from Adam. But of the two, who was a Hutu and who was a Tutsi? I realised that people had no reason to kill each other. Other people who feel disturbed come here and we pray together".

Stephanie's frequent guest was Anastasia, formerly a minor local government official, who ordered the slaying of one Tutsi neighbour. She told us, "Because of what I did, I became a murderer, a refugee and a prisoner. I didn't even deserve to be a citizen of our country again, but here I am. I came

to learn that when you have made an offence like that, you need to confess." Considered by REACH to be like anybody else, Anastasia contributes her skills in art and crafts to income-generating projects for widows.

Philbert's vision first met with a concerted response from an interdenominational group of pastors and youth leaders in Kayonza, where we were feted with a spectacular display of drumming and dancing, and listened to the youth choir of Hutus and Tutsis sing songs about rebuilding a united, peaceful Rwanda. Shared cultural activities and sport are key to preventing a recurrence of violence. We toiled inexpertly amid African laughter at the laying of foundations for a youth centre, and celebrated the official opening of a newly-cleared football pitch, a gift from Sherborne School.



Back in Kigali we visited Peace International school, a few ramshackle classrooms huddling together on the red hillside of one of the slum districts. Operating independently of the state sector, the school welcomes pupils aged 4 - 16 from among the city's poorest, including orphans and Congolese refugees. Despite minimal resources, the dedication of the Christian staff has enabled some to progress to university, and others to vocational training which gives them a livelihood. The headmaster, Father Dennis, works five months each year in forestry in Canada to help pay the teachers' salaries.

On the outskirts of the capital a new building is about to take shape. Land, government permission and building materials have all been secured for the construction of the first phase of a Centre for Peace and Reconciliation to serve not just Rwanda, but the wider population around Africa's Great Lakes. Today Rwanda is a tightly-run country exhibiting hopeful signs of reconstruction. The atrocities that marred the lives of those we met have left nobody in this small nation untouched. For many the journey to freedom and peace through forgiveness has not yet begun. To witness the transformation in these brothers and sisters, though, is to be humbled and inspired, and to be left wanting to go back and play a tiny part in ensuring a life-giving future.

Read more at [www.reach-rwanda.org](http://www.reach-rwanda.org)

Donations to REACH made payable to SSF may be forwarded to John at the friary in Leeds. *f*