

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Pacific Synod (SPS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is in a companion relationship with the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR). In July of 2006, a fourteen-member delegation representing the SPS traveled to Rwanda, Africa to be with their Rwandan church. Burl Waits' wife Diane Lowe was the arrangements coordinator and a member of the delegation. Upon return to Sacramento, Diane wrote a series of reflections of her experience in Rwanda. Following the photo (of Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, General Secretary of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda, greeting Diane upon the delegation's arrival at Kigali Airport) is the first of Diane's reflections:



REFLECTIONS OF MY TIME IN RWANDA, AFRICA, July 1-11, 2006. – Diane Lowe Part I

After the long and tiring journey, I reached Kigali Airport to find a warm and enthusiastic welcoming party for our Lutheran church delegation. What great fun!

We boarded the SUV's and headed for our hotel. Turning off the paved road onto a dirt drive with huge potholes we arrived on the hotel grounds of tropical gardens. Entering my hotel room I felt as though I had stepped back into a movie filmed in the 40's. The spotlessly clean room and bath revealed a mosquito net over the bed, precious little water pressure in the tub, a toilet that sometimes flushed, a patio door knob that fell off when touched, was a welcome sight after two days of cramped airplanes and was to be my home for the next week. I could hear the sounds of road traffic with its constant honking of horns in the distance not to be outdone by the cawing noise of crow-like birds on the hotel grounds.

First things first. We would need local money. Our group of fourteen plus drivers divided into two SUV's which was to be our mode of transportation throughout our stay and we headed for the money changers. In the city, the stretches of paved streets are crowded with bicycles, trucks, mini-vans, SUVs, cars and motorcycles all jostling for position while the pedestrians ignored the honking horns. Every few feet was another near-miss collision. In front of the money changers' little store fronts, armed police milled among the pedestrian and vehicle packed street while we darted through the crowd to enter the shop. I had just exchanged \$400 when someone was sent to warn us to quickly return to our vehicle. The money changer then followed and climbed into our SUV to continue the transactions in the vehicle which offered more protection. Oh, my gosh, another 1940's movie!

Returning to the hotel for dinner, the restaurant offered a good menu (pizza, fish, goat, beef, chicken) in a relaxed atmosphere where there is no hurrying African time. The perfect weather

(never too hot nor too cold) was appreciated and the room fee included a full breakfast buffet with wonderful tropical fruits, hard-cooked eggs and the best coffee anywhere.

Back on road in the morning and breaking out of the inner-city into the suburbs, the streets remain crowded with vehicles challenging a variety of street walkers made up of men in business suits, women in long skirts with bananas on their heads, some groups of school children wear uniforms and others not, small motorcycle taxis, and lots of bicycles. I was told Rwanda is the most densely populated country per mile in all of Africa. I believe it. I've now been introduced to Rwanda urban life.

Rural life reveals even more walkers carrying a variety of lodes, mothers carrying babies in cloth slings, children carrying yellow plastic jugs of water much too heavy for them, adults carrying stalks of bananas (the staple food in Rwanda), long-horned cows herded by boys with a stick for prodding, and dirt roads with huge potholes and deep ruts. This is the dry season and everything is dusty. I wonder how they can walk or push bicycles through the mud road in the rainy season. I feel an urge to help someone, but I just look. I wonder how they stay so clean. Most children have shaved heads and adults have very short hair. No one is over-weight. The adults are young. I haven't noticed a senior citizen yet. I'm old!

There are people everywhere, but I've seen no litter. We drive past little shoe box shaped houses made of mud with laundry drying on bushes and people tending their vegetable plots. Rural Rwandans are largely farmers and grow their own food. Poverty is everywhere and children stop to watch our vehicles pass by. We see a crowd gathered at a farmers market where Rwandans exchange foods and other supplies as well as neighborhood conversation. Children are playing. I am in another world.

REFLECTIONS OF MY TIME IN RWANDA, AFRICA, July 1-11, 2006 --Diane Lowe Part 2....

It's early morning and The Reverend John Rutsindintwarane, General Secretary of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR), is picking me up at our hotel in Rwanda's capitol city of Kigali. He has arranged an appointment for me with a professor at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST). I have a letter to deliver from a friend in Sacramento who hopes to teach at KIST. It is invigorating being in the early commute traffic in Kigali with Pastor John who is always pleasant. Car horns are honking and people are scurrying. Pulling onto the KIST campus we are issued a pass at the security gate. It seems that everywhere I go in Kigali there are security guards. I'm told this is a caution that originated with the genocide and now the security guard business has become an important source of employment.

KIST campus is large and I'm glad John seems to know how to find the professor. We are no sooner out of the vehicle when two men come up to greet John. John has friends everywhere! We head up steps into a building and enter an office. John is now hugging a very attractive lady. He introduces me to his cousin and she ushers us into an office. At this point I'm beginning to suspect the professor I'm seeking may also be on the administrative staff. We are invited into a private office and seated across the desk from a large, well-dressed, impressive looking man. After introductions, I ask *"What is your position here?"* (Nothing like cutting to the chase!) He handed me his card. It read Professor Silas Lwakabamba, Rector. I said, *"I came to make a deliver to a professor. Are you also the university's president?"* His face broke into a broad welcoming smile as he replied *"Yes, how can I help you?"* (Oh, my gosh!)

After quickly stating my business and the president agreeing to make arrangements for my Sacramento friend to teach in Kigali, I took advantage of the moment to make another inquiry. I asked Silas if he had heard about a company currently laying fiber optic cable in Rwanda which would make it possible for video conferencing. He replied, *"Yes. I'm chair of the board of directors for that company."* (Man, oh, man!) Silas went on to express interest in establishing

video conferencing at the university and I promised that my husband (who is in the video conferencing business) would help him. I left KIST floating on a cloud! If we could establish video conferencing in the heart of Africa, I could see and talk with Rwandan friends from my home in Sacramento any time free of charge! Special speakers (doctors, lawyers, teachers, anyone) could teach classes in Rwanda from anywhere in the world via video conferencing. There would be no limit in bringing Rwanda into the 21st century. My mind was racing with possibilities. On our ride back to the hotel John kept grinning and nodding his head while I chattered on. Arriving at the hotel, we found our delegation waiting for us to begin their day's outings. So much to do and so little time to do it all. Everything is so very exciting.

A little background here is necessary....During the Rwandan genocide of over a million people in 1994, much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed. Lutheran World Federation (LWF) arrived in Rwanda for emergency relief in 1994 and later began established community development projects. LWF provided agriculture assistance, built houses, dug wells for water, and so much more. LWF is now a much-respected household name in Rwanda...indeed throughout much of Africa and the world. Twelve years after the genocide most emergency relief agencies have left Rwanda. LWF is in a six-year phase-out plan and will be leaving this still hurting and deprived country in great need. The plan is to turn all LWF projects over to the LCR. LCR leaders are pastors untrained in community development....with one exception. Pr. John studied community development in the USA. The handwriting is on the wall for John and his task is beyond huge! The Bible assures us that with God all things are possible. That assurance is the only way John can pull off his plan for establishing community development by beginning with local Lutheran congregations.

Since Pastor John's return to Rwanda in January 2006 he has worked with each of its 15 Lutheran parishes to determine a single objective that parish wants most and then implement a plan to accomplish the goal. Today our delegation was going to visit some of the parish projects. We arrived in Nyagatare Lutheran Parish. LWF had turned over one of its vacated compounds to LCR in this place near the Tanzania border. Local parishioners determined their community development plan would be to use the property to open a child care center and kindergarten. The progressive town has a large hospital and university campus. Working parents need child care and could pay for it. The parish would be providing a good service to the community while providing an income to the church. Great thinking!



Pastor Theonist Ruhinda talked with us in the compound's little open-air chapel with such a loving, grateful and sincere heart that one could not help but be emotionally and spiritually moved when listening to him. A lump formed in my throat. He told us that with faith in God he was establishing a new Lutheran congregation at this site and it had grown from 5 to 58 members joining in five months with new members coming in every week. I asked Pastor Ruhinda, "*Why is the Church in Africa growing and the Church in the USA getting smaller?*" He quoted the Great Commission as read in the Bible's Book of Matthew. The scripture passage is a directive to practice evangelism. He explained that he and parishioners go door to door in the village to talk

with people. They listen to the people and offer to pray with them. If he determines a definite need, he gifts a little money. I asked where he gets the money. He explained that when offering is received during Sunday worship, it is divided into little envelopes to be given back to local people where it is needed the most. If there is money left over, it may remain with the congregation. Wow! Their mindset is to first use offering money to give back to the needy in the name of Jesus Christ! All too often in the USA we take care of our own church needs (or luxuries) first and then think of the needs of others.

Weather here is beautiful in the high 70's, the terrain is gentle rolling hills, and the people are warm and welcoming. Using the rest room facility in the former LWF compound is interesting. It reminds me of public restrooms in some of our federal parks in the USA except this one was Asian style (a hole in the ground to squat over).

On the road again and off to another site of Lutheran congregation community development. We bounce along in our vehicle on the dusty, red dirt road full of pot holes and lined with pedestrians. Children are everywhere. In villages some children are clean in school uniforms with happy faces. Other children along the rural roads are wearing dirty, ragged clothing and sad faces expressing caution. Far too many are orphans who lost parents to AIDS, malaria, bacterial infections from unclean water, lack of healthcare or poor nutrition. The stream of children and adults lugging the large yellow plastic water containers along with people carrying stocks of bananas on their heads or pushing lodes on bicycles seem endless. I see a woman in a T-shirt and long wrap-around skirt carrying a large stack of branches and twigs on her head for firewood and with a baby in a sling cloth on her back. I wonder how much farther she has to walk. I'm told some people must carry lodes for several miles. There is so much to take in. I want to never forget any of it. At home we have no clue.

To be continued....

RELECTIONS OF MY TIME IN RWANDA, AFRICA

July 1-11, 2006 -- Diane Lowe Part 3...

"Take courage!" Pastor John Rutsindintwarane calls to us grinning from ear to ear as we hang on to our seats in the back of in his green Land Cruiser while bouncing along dirt roads filled with giant holes. We hold on tight and laughat first. Then we began noticing our tender tailbones and appreciate the importance of 4-wheel drive vehicles in Rwanda. My sedan at home wouldn't last two minutes here.

This is another great day in our Lutheran delegation's stay in Rwanda. Our mission is to deepen the companion relationship between our Sierra Pacific Synod of the ELCA and the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR). Entering the Akegera National Park we learned that the park had been about 250,000 acres size, but is now down to about 95,000 acres. In 1995, when 200,000 refugees returned to Rwanda, the government designated this park land for refugees because there was no other space in the already over-populated country. They would have to start from scratch in the bush. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) went right to work then building mud-brick houses and resettling 30,000 families. The majority of refugees came from camps in neighboring Tanzania where a few had been introduced to Lutheranism. In 1994 there were no Lutherans in Rwanda. Yet when the horrible event occurred, the dedicated LWF rushed in and was on the scene working as an extended arm of Lutherans worldwide. Today, most members of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) still live in rural east side of the country. Only one month ago, LWF met another group of refugees coming in from Tanzania and Pastor John was on hand passing out blankets, food, plates and cups. I feel so proud of him and the work of our LFW here. The world should know!



Plains Zebras, Rwanda ©Stacy Boorn

We are going on a safari! This is a real first for me. Giraffe, zebra, buffalo, elk, warthog, stork, baboon, elephant, lion, hippo and moreare all in this park. No roads here, so our two vehicles packed with 17 people forged full speed ahead over open spaces, around stumps and through the bush, thumping and bumping. Again I hear, *"Take courage!"* I can hardly believe that at age 68 I'm actually on my first safari. I see zebras at a watering hole, then giraffes eating from tree tops....how exciting! Then more and more animals. Good Lord, what a morning! At noon we are eating our picnic lunch near a weaver bird's tree. A park ranger explains that the male bird builds many complex nests in one tree. The female bird then checks out each nest and selects one to become their home. (Now that's my kind of woman!) Another half day has zipped by and half of our group starts the long ride back to Kigali and our hotel. The other half remain in the park and that night had quite a story to tell. It seems that Pastor John had rolled his driver's side window down partway to toss out a few almonds to a baboon. Well, that monk was no fool! In a flash the baboon's long arm and upper body was through the opening, reach over Pastor John, grabbed the entire bag of nuts, and was out again before startled passengers knew what hit them. I chuckle now recalling my dear 85 year old aunt in Sacramento having seriously admonished me before our trip, *"You be careful of wild animals in Africa!"*

Rwanda is called the land of a thousand hills and each hill is named. We drive through neighborhoods of Kigali spread out over its rolling hills. I see no high rise buildings. Weather is mild and pleasant. What handsome people! No one is overweight. Is that due to so much from walking, good eating habits or lack of food? Each Rwandan has a personal story held deep inside the heart. No longer a divided people (as was imposed on them by the Western world) the previously-required individual identity cards have been abolished, thank God. We are told that bribes demanded by corrupt government officials are also a thing of the past. There is hope.

Our delegation is staying at Hotel Chez Lando in Kigali. Chez Lando's manager survived the genocide for over a month in a two-foot high crawl space above the ceiling in a house under construction. Miraculously, she, her husband, and children were then smuggled out into a

refugee camp in Uganda. Today she operates the hotel and has only one sister still alive. Their brother Lando was the hotel's original owner/manager. He, their other six siblings, his own wife and children, and the entire hotel staff were slaughtered that horrible spring of 1994. As I ponder this now, I still feel a shivering chill.

We arrive back at Hotel Chez Lando. Not in the mood for a heavy dinner, I decide to get a little bowl of soup. It's early. Only a couple people are in the restaurant. The amiable waiter tells me that one of the three soups on the menu is already cooked and waiting to be served. Perfect. I'll take it! Please bring it now. OK. I watch the waiter leave and return to mill around the almost empty room. Not wanting to be perceived as an ugly American, I wait and wonder how long it can take to ladle a bowl of soup. Thirty minutes go by, so I ask about the soup. "It's coming," he says. I remind myself that I'm on African time, not American time.

That evening our delegation gathers in our Bishop David Mullen's hotel room for evening prayer. He asks me to read aloud a passage from the Bible. I begin reading. Electricity goes off. No light in the room. Only silence. Lights come back on. I continue reading. Lights go out again. Again silence. Lights return and I continue reading. The short lesson is read in four parts with each divided by still darkness...a reminder that electricity in Rwanda cannot be counted on.

Later back in my room and anticipating the next day's itinerary I am a little anxious and excited. Each day of this amazing journey has been uniquely fascinating thanks to Pastor John and his detailed planning, but tomorrow should be my really special day. It is to be the day that I go with Rwandans to the remote village of Nyarubuye in the southeastern corner of the country to visit my home congregation's sister parish. One more time I review the gifts and messages I will take from sisters and brothers in Christ in Sacramento. I want everything to be just right. We have been exchanging correspondence and photos all year, but now was to be the real thing. The Nyarubuye Lutheran pastor and parishioners had made a plan and would be waiting for me. Would they like me? I so hoped they would.

For now though, I must remember the events of today and especially the safari. There is so much to tell when we get home. I should be writing in my journal now. I'm too sleepy. As I take down the mosquito net and stretch out on the bed I can hear the sounds and cheers from nearby Remera Stadium through the open patio door. A gentle breeze floats into my room carrying the fun-filled sounds. Ahhhh, how Rwandans love their soccer...called football here. I doze off...

....to be continued.

REFLECTIONS OF MY TIME IN RWANDA, AFRICA
July 1-11, 2006.....Diane Lowe Part 4

This is it! We are all so very excited. This is the day members of our delegation from Sierra Pacific Synod (SPS) of the ELCA to the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) have prepared for and looked forward to the most. This is the day set aside for us to split up to visit our respective sister parishes in Rwanda. My home congregation, Lutheran Church of the Master (LCM), Sacramento, is linked with Nyarubuye Parish in the southeast corner of Rwanda near Tanzania. The adrenaline is running high as thirteen of us load up our two vehicles with gifts from our congregations and items we are delivering.

Our SPS Bishop David Mullen will stay behind in Kigali for conversations with LCR's Bishop Kaliisa Wilson. And we're off! On a paved highway we head for the rendezvous point where we will each go our own way.

Waiting for me are three Rwandan members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Kibungo office staff, a van and driver. One of them is also the adult son Gerard of the pastor of Nyarubuye Parish. Gerard works part-time as a LWF project director and part-time as the LCR's Youth Director. Gerard and his wife have three young children and are raising two teenage orphans. Families commonly take in orphans in Rwanda. Gerard and I have been exchanging e-mails all year. He passes messages through me from his father to LCM. After introductions and greetings we hit the road. I'm am soooooo excited! They say it will be a 1 ½ hr drive over rough dirt roads winding upward to the village of Nyarubuye. Parishioners there have been waiting all morning for us. I'm told to sit in the front seat of the van next to the driver. He doesn't speak much English. I'm grateful for Gerard and Francis in the back of the van ready to translate for me. Nyarubuye was one of the hardest hit areas during the catastrophic 1994 genocide. Over half of the town of 25,000 people was wiped out. Nyarubuye Lutheran Parish has two congregations, Nyarubuye and Mahama. Mahama has a small mud brick building in which to worship. Nyarubuye has an unimproved hill top with high hopes for putting up a building one day. Goats are running loose all over the rocky grazing land. Thinking this reddish color earth must have a lot of iron in it, I comment to Gerard, "*The dirt is so red here.*" After a pause he questions, "*What color is your dirt?*" I reply, "*Well, we have different shades of brown.*" Thinking back on that conversation now, I have to laugh.

Still In route I ask about the neat little rows of mud brick houses with tin roofs and am told orphans live in them without benefit of an adult. The orphaned children cling together to become a family. The houses were built by the LWF have no indoor kitchen, toilet nor plumbing.

After an hour of bouncing on the rutted dirt road I see big rocks all around. The driver is challenged to maneuver the vehicle around the rocks. In Kinyarwanda language Nyarubuye means the land of stones. Makes good sense as we drive another half hour trying to avoid large, sharp rocks and thus tire punctures. Extreme poverty is especially evident in Nyarubuye wherever I look. I've not seen worse in Rwanda. We arrive on Nyarubuye's hill top. Gerard calls to my attention the marsh land in the valley below which is now used for rice paddies. The seeds came from LWF. Why am I not surprised?

He points across a field to a group of people on a barren hill top under a plastic tarp in the blazing sun. The parishioners are waiting for me! We drive out over the rocky grazing land and are stopped by a gully. The parish lay evangelist comes rushing toward our vehicle to meet me. "*Welcome. Welcome.*" I hear the words over and over again. Under the tarp I'm ushered to a seat of honor. Children are staring at me. Francis whispers to me "*The children have not seen a white person before.*" I search each little face and smile broadly hoping my German/Swedish green eyes don't frighten them. One by one they begin returning my smile. This is so fabulous!

Standing erect and proud Pastor Mahirane faces me and reads a formal letter he has written in English and then invites me to speak to the people. What a beautiful, precious, sincere Lutheran pastor he is. The love of Jesus shines through his broad smile and gentle voice. His little congregation begins singing and I immediately recognize the melody of "Rock of Ages" floating out over the hillside. We are surrounded by the love of Jesus on this mountain top in the heart of Africa. I feel it in my very soul. Thank you, Lord! It doesn't get any better than this.

I'm told Pastor Mahirane walks or bicycles between his two congregations which are several miles apart. I wonder how he can even maneuver a bicycle around the rocks on the road. I wonder what he does in the rainy season if there is no money to ride in a mini-van taxi. I learn that he did have a small motorcycle, but it finally gave out. He would like another, but there is no money to buy one. Lutheran pastors in Rwanda are unsalaried, so the stipend he receives from our sister-parish fund is a God-send to him.

We exchange gifts and I mention to Francis that I have brought a bag of soccer equipment from a congregation in Roseville, CA. I look at the young Rwandans and say "football." Spontaneously, the boys throw their arms straight up and let out a cheer. The best goal ever made in the NFL could not have brought a more thrilling response. This is all so absolutely terrific!

I'm told I must leave now to stay on schedule. There are hugs and good wishes all around. I'm riding on an emotional high and assume we are returning to meet up with other members of our delegation. I'm wrong. Pastor Mahirane has something show me. I don't know what, but it seems important. On the road to this place we are stopped by a government official. Francis and Gerard jump out and have a conversation with him. I don't know what is being said, but I'm not comfortable that we were stopped. They return to our van and say we have permission to continue. Evidently, we were supposed to get a permit to enter this place. It is the memorial of Nyarubuye Catholic Parish Church where 10,000 local people were tortured and killed during the genocide of 1994. It is quiet and somber here as we wait for a gatekeeper to unlock the entrance to the church courtyard. The grounds and mass grave cemetery are immaculately maintained. A Catholic priest speaks to us. The gatekeeper is Lutheran. Interestng...

Pastor Mahirane leads me inside the church courtyard and takes my arm. The other three follow silently. He speaks softly as he tells me exactly what happened on each spot we approach. He says...

"See that log? That is where people had to put their hands and feet to be chopped off.

"See this spot? Here stood a little building where girls were raped.

"See that log? That is where people had to put their necks to have their heads chopped off.

"See that wall? That is where babies were thrown to break their heads open.

I wanted to turn quickly, leave this place and not hear any more. I sensed I was supposed to hear it and suppressed my urge to run. He continued...

"See this pit toilet? This is where women were dropped after raping them.

"See this oven for priests to bake bread? This is where body parts were roasted and eaten."

Why do I have to hear this, Lord? Why? Is it because they need to tell me? Is it because I'm supposed to tell our people at home? Why me? How could these horrid things have happened? This is your church! Rwanda claimed to be 96% Christian at the time of the genocide.

Pastor Mahirane leads us inside the church building. I see three tables: one displays rows of human skulls with machete cracks in each, another displays leg and arm bones, another displays worn sandals and other personal items including a rosary. Pastor Maharine speaks,

"See the clean, white painted walls? They were full of blood and bodies were stacked high."

With that I turn and walk out. I feel Evil all around. The others follow. Outside the courtyard, Gerard asks if I would like to take a photo of the mass grave. I decline and immediately get in the SUV. I need to leave this place...fast. My emotions are stretched beyond capacity from the

marvelous high with the love of Jesus under a tarp on a hill top only to be plunged to the deepest low possible in this memorial site where the Evil One had used God's own church as the place to do his dirty work. The Bible tells us that Evil is alive and well. We know, too, that in the end God will prevail just as sure as Jesus rose from the dead that first Easter morning. I cling to that blessed assurance now. I feel sad and weak. We drive away in silence.

After a while our vehicle pulls up to a very modest little home. People are everywhere. It is a celebration. They have been waiting for us. I realize we are at Pastor Mahirane's home and that a feast has been prepared. I step inside the house to see a long table of many beautifully prepared dishes of food. I'm told they were expecting the Bishop and our entire delegation. (Oh my gosh. Miscommunication on that one! I'd better try hard to eat a lot.) Pastor Mahirane introduces his family and friends who have worked so hard to prepare the delicacies they thought Americans would enjoy. They even included spaghetti! I think what the groceries must have cost them. I'm humbled by it all.

I sit on the sofa facing the front entrance to the house. The doorway is covered by a curtain ending about six inches up from the ground. Neighborhood children lay on the earth looking under the curtain to sneak a peak at me. I grin and wave to them. They squeal and run away only to return and we start the fun over again. These children were not born at the time of the genocide, yet they must live with the results of it. They are the hope of Rwanda's future. Through educated children Rwanda will rise again like a phoenix from the ashes. It is important that our Lutheran congregations continue with this ministry of companionship which brings more hope and opportunity to these people than we can possibly know.

Good Lord, what a day! I've been on an emotional roller coaster. I'm totally drained.

Later this night I meet Bishop Dave in the hotel hallway. I tell him what I've seen. He reminds me that when Anglican Bishop Tutu visited Nyarubuye Catholic Church in 1994, Bishop Tutu knew he was seeing a place used for the Evil One's atrocities. Bishop Tutu said it made his faith in God even stronger. Yes, I could understand that. The difference between Good and Evil is blatant.

I feel the need for a hot bath and bed. Prayers flood my mind. Oh, Lord God, what is it that you want me to do with what I seen and felt and heard today? So many others have told the Rwanda genocide story over the past twelve years. It is not new. People can read about it in any library or look it up on the Internet. What are you asking of me? I will wait for your guidance. I fall asleep.

....to be continued.

'Speak, I'm Listening' is pressed on my mind this morning. The very attractive director Beatrice explained the name of her program and facility we toured a couple day's ago in Rwanda's capitol city of Kigali. Suffering the loss of her family during the country's dreadful 1994 genocide, she was working at a foster children's placement agency. It was helpful in her grieving process. One day an older girl came into the agency to leave her baby. Already overrun with orphans, Beatrice lashed out "*You should take care of your own child! Where is your husband? Get a job!*" With that the girl burst into tears, put her baby down, and ran out the door. One look at the abandoned infant and Beatrice sent a staff person to go after the girl. He did and brought her back. Beatrice said to the distraught girl, "*Speak, I'm listening.*" Still crying, the young mother explained that her baby was the result of a genocide rape, she had no family, no means of support, and was desperate. With that Beatrice realized there would be far too many abandoned babies if something wasn't done. Was God calling her? Beatrice walked into her boss' office and said, "*I'm leaving this job. I know now there is something else I must do.*" Thus, 'Speak, I'm Listening' was born.

Now, over a decade later, Beatrice and her staff of 12 gave our delegation of 14 from the Sierra Pacific Synod (SPS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) a tour of the facility. Walking through classes of young ladies using peddle sewing machines, others doing lovely hand embroidery, and still others creating note cards with designs using tiny strips of banana leaves, I was invigorated by the courage of the girls. We were shown a large oven where students have the only bagel-making place in all of Rwanda! All items made at 'Speak, I'm Listening' are sold to support 40 girls at a time in the innovative one-year program. Each will have counseling, learn a trade, be given basic marketing skills and receive a \$40 loan to begin her own business using her newly developed skill. Beatrice provides each student with one meal a day, and, for some, it is their only meal that day. Swept away with enthusiasm for the program we bought gift items in their store and the girls entertained us with some African singing and dancing. What a treat! Then they pulled our Bishop David Mullen into the dance. Next thing I knew they had me out there, too! Now everyone was joining in. Great fun! Dancing is a way of life for everyone in Africa and it is terrific.

Our purpose in Rwanda is to strengthen the SPS's companion relationship with the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR). Being at 'Speak, I'm Listening' gave us even more understanding of the enormous needs of Rwandans and the vast work still ahead for LCR.

It is Sunday morning now, our last full day in Rwanda, and we are going to worship service. What a perfect way to begin our final day! Turning off a paved road and onto an unimproved dirt incline on one of Kigali's rolling hills, we arrive at the only Lutheran church in the city. A good-sized and modern structure, this site also doubles as the LCR Bishop's office. It has a land-line telephone thanks to one of our congregations in Lodi, California, which provided the \$1,000 to purchase a telephone poll and line last year.

Adult and children's choirs are in place. Our SPS Bishop David Mullen will preach this morning with the help of a translator. LCR Bishop Kaliisa will preside. There is some shifting of seats in the congregation as English-speaking parishioners are being intentionally placed among us to act as translators. Such hospitality!

Wow! What an imposing and regal figure Bishop Kaliisa Wilson makes in his striking and colorful formal clerical dress. This is a far cry from where he was only last year. One of the many pedestrians jostling for space on a busy Rwanda street, Bishop Kaliisa had been hit by a motorcycle and remained in a coma in a Tanzania hospital for many weeks. During much of this time and the recovery period, Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, second in command as the General Secretary of the LCR, was studying in America. Via cell phone between continents, Pastor John addressed issues and encouraged the LCR pastors. With God, all things are possible!

The choirs sing with enthusiasm accompanied by a keyboard and their own hands clapping out the African beats. Some songs include dance movements. What a joy! At sermon time the children are excused for Sunday School. A good idea, since the worship service lasted 2 ½ hours. Is that a record worship time for Lutherans? Our Bishop Dave takes this opportunity to present a special gift from Lutherans in the SPS to the LCR.....a check for over \$5,000! (Finally, Bishop Kalissa would be able to schedule that much-needed medical examination in Tanzania. Hooray!) To our delight, the LCR presents each of us with a gift. Lutheran sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, love is spoken here.

Fellowship time! We are ushered outside after worship for an African tradition, a fun-filled auction. The auctioneer is speaking Kinyarwanda. Next thing I know I'm handed a prize....a bag of fruit. I have no clue what is said, who my benefactor is, nor what kind of fruit this is, but we've having a terrific time! Someone else gets a cabbage. What a kick!

Team spirit is strong as our delegation of 14 climb into the two SUV's that have become our second home with Pastor John at one wheel and Wellars from Lutheran World Federation (LWF) at the other. People on the streets go about their business. They are all so young. The few people over age 45 were likely out of the country (perhaps in refugee camps) for many years where they may have had easier access to clean water, somewhat better healthcare and adequate food. Such is the case of the original five LCR pastors coming from refugee camps in Tanzania in 1995 including Pastor Mahirane. Today much of Rwanda's 1994 genocide's carnage is hidden to the visitor. Many Rwandans survived death only to live physically maimed or traumatized and now largely stay inside homes or shelters.

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Pastor John decides to show us more of Kigali. We drive by a small light blue building and he points out blatant bullet holes in its wall. I wonder if it's where United Nations troops were killed in 1994. We drive on and pass by a hillside of gorgeous luxury homes. I ask, "*Who lives here?*" He says, "*Diplomats and business people.*" We drive through another neighborhood not as grand, yet still upscale. Many Americans live here. We drive on. Stop! It's our American embassy! I'll take a photo. ...Well, it takes the embassy's guard all of two seconds to put stop to that notion. Do I look like a bad guy?

To be continued.....

RELECTIONS OF MY TIME IN RWANDA, AFRICA, July 1-11,2006 --Diane Lowe

Part 6.

Delighted... Saddened... Enlightened... Amazed... Exhausted... and so much more. Seated in a circle in the only Lutheran church in Kigali, Rwanda, on this typically warm Sunday afternoon, the special bond between us is obvious. This is the final meeting of our delegation from the Sierra Pacific Synod (SPS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and clergy from the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR).

Emotional intensity is evident as each person offers personal comments on the week's incredible experiences. I knew the pastor from my home congregation's companion parish in Rwanda could not be here today. I had left gentle, loving Pastor Mahirane from Nyarubuye Parish, one of the hardest hit areas in the 1994 catastrophic killing of over a million Rwandans in a three-month period, at his home yesterday. He is several hours' drive from Kigali and has no vehicle. We had said our good-byes.

Going around the circle, it is now my turn to speak to our Rwandan friends. *"We've heard stories and seen results of the genocide and our hearts ache for you. While we have been deeply impacted, we are mere spectators and cannot begin to grasp what you have experienced. We know only with our minds the truths you know first hand and hold deep in your hearts. The mere thought of that is overwhelming for us."* My voice quivers.

Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, General Secretary of the LCR, whispers to me, *"Pastor Mahirane is here."* My heart leaps. What? How? Where? Then I saw him coming toward me through the enthusiastic group now on its feet for a few more photographs. His calm manner, wide smile, and soft brown eyes with deep wrinkle lines at their corners speak volumes. As we embrace, I feel him tremble inside his suit coat and tears blurred my vision. He and I sit down side by side in the circle and the discussion resumes. Feelings of humility and gratitude come over me as I contemplate how much time and effort it must have taken him to get here. Again, he trembles, and I wonder if he is ill. The sincere love of Christ emanating from this man of God in the heart of Africa is beyond my ability to describe. My expression of appreciation to him for coming today seems pitifully inadequate.

The three-hour meeting concludes with SPS's Bishop David Mullen and LCR's Bishop Kalissa Wilson highlighting our now-cemented companion relationship and direction for its future. Photographs, promises, appreciation, sentiment and enthusiasm take over as our time together ends. We are blessed with a professional photographer in our delegation (Pastor Stacy Boorn from San Francisco) who promises to share her photos from Rwanda with us. I'm really counting on that now!

Renewed and exhilarated, our SPS delegation wants our last dinner in Rwanda to be special and decides to dine at Hotel des Mille Collines made famous by the movie "Hotel Rwanda." I saw the movie only 16 months ago back home in Sacramento. It had stirred my initial interest in Rwanda. Now I would actually be on site where one hotel manager sheltered and saved with his ingenuity over twelve hundred refugees during the 1994 genocide.

Walking into the famed hotel entrance scenes from the film came flooding back to me. That's it! That's the lobby furniture in the movie. I remember the disgruntled hotel desk clerk who was "partying" on that sofa with a lady friend in the film. Oh, dear! I remember the desperation of the people crammed in this place. The true story becomes very real here. This is uncomfortable for me. I remind myself that it is twelve years later now. The hotel has been renovated and is a popular facility. We take the elevator to the fourth floor and its "high-end" restaurant. A beautifully set table awaits us on the terrace this characteristically warm, balmy Rwanda evening. A look over the balcony to the swimming pool below and, again, visions of movie scenes return. I remember people scooping up precious pool water when there was nothing else to drink. Now

here I am enjoying a fine cuisine. The reality of it all is hard for me to put together. Rwanda has come so far in only twelve short years and yet it still has so far to go. Indeed, in another nearby central African country, mass killings continue even now. How will Rwanda be affected by its neighbor's actions? How will the world react this time?

After dinner the ride back to Hotel Chez Lando where we are staying is quieter tonight. Camaraderie is strong. Together in purpose, conversation is unnecessary. Our last evening in Rwanda has come to a close. My bags are packed for the long flight home tomorrow and the next day. We will fly 1½ hours from Rwanda to Kenya, then wait in the Nairobi airport 7½ hours before flying 8 hours to England, and then wait another 3½ hours in the London's Heathrow airport before our 10 hour flight to San Francisco. We've crammed so much into our short time with fellow Lutherans in this unique country on the other side of the world. My brain feels like a totally saturated and dripping sponge even though I've experienced only a tiny glimpse of life in Rwanda. There is an undeniable courage, sense of purpose and energy here. Rwandans are innovative and bright. They are saying, *"Yes! We can do it. Give us a chance. Partner with us."*

It's Monday morning now. OK, wake up. Grab a bite at the breakfast buffet (oh, that marvelous Rwandan coffee!). Our oh-so-familiar vehicles are loaded up for the last time and we head for the small Kigali airport. All is quiet at the terminal entrance. Baggage is unloaded. The end of an unforgettable, life-impacting Rwanda experience has arrived. Thank you, Pastor John. Thank you, LCR.

Then, ...*SURPRISE!* Bursting out of the airport lobby doors come none other than Bishop Kaliisa leading the pack of LCR clergy. They had been waiting inside terminal just to see us off. Oh, my gosh! Each time I think the Christian love and hospitality shown to us couldn't possibly be any better, it is. Yes, you guessed it. Here he is...dear, remarkable Pastor Mahirane smiling from ear to ear. God is good.....so very, very good.

---by Diane Lowe

Read all six parts of this series of writings on the website www.RwandaProjects.org