

Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, Director, Congregations Rebuilding Community in Rwanda & General Secretary, Lutheran Church of Rwanda.

News from John Rutsindintwarane

Villagers in Mumeya, a village in Rwanda's Eastern Province, have identified acquiring a dispensary as the first step in bringing their remote community out of its isolation and to improve health as well as eliminate the 30-km walk to the nearest hospital. This decision was reached by community leaders after conducting more than 2000 hours of one-on-one interviews and weeks of discussion, analysis, questions, research, and consensus building among hundreds in the community.

The effort began last June, when Lutheran Pastor Silas Nzajyibwami of the Mumeya parish said his parishioners wanted to know more about faith-based community development and how it could work in their isolated community of 4,800 inhabitants. (The nearest paved road is 30 minutes away by four-wheel drive over a rough road, even in the dry season.) He invited leaders from local Catholic, Adventist, and Anglican churches to discuss their concerns with fellow Lutheran Pastor John Rutsindintwarane, a graduate in Theology and Development at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, who had acquired practical experience in community organizing in Oakland, California.

Recognizing that lasting grass-roots change can only come from within the community, Pastor John explained to local church and village leaders at that first meeting how to listen one-on-one to others in the community to identify problems and strengths. A Local Organizing Committee of 22 people was elected, consisting of women, men, teens, and elders, and by mid-October, this group had conducted more than 2000 hours of one-on-one interviews in the area. They heard stories of how pregnant women had to be carried by neighbors, sometimes in the middle of the night, on a stretcher 30 km to the nearest clinic. Sick or injured individuals would cross the fast-moving Akagera River and climb the hills to reach a hospital 35 km away in Tanzania. Some people died from injuries or childbirth when they did not reach medical help in time. After weeks of deliberation and analysis, it became clear that access to medical care was what most people identified as their first priority, and the decision was made to construct a clinic.

With coaching from Pr. John, the Organizing Committee took the next steps. They contacted the mayor of Kirehe and the district planning officer. Pr. John says that this, in itself, is a breakthrough for ordinary villagers, who do not normally expect to have a mayor or government official listen to them. Before each meeting with a church or government official, one or more members of the local organizing committee coach the presenters on what questions to ask and provide other relevant information to prepare for the interview.

A local construction engineer has answered many of their questions regarding budgeting and construction, whether local labor would be utilized, etc. The committee developed a proposed construction budget for the entire project and also drew up a separate budget for items they will need immediately to build a latrine and storehouse for supplies. By the end of August the community had begun to dig the latrine and to make mud bricks for its construction at the site donated by the village for the clinic. At local rates supplies and

donated labor to that point came to approximately 1.5 million Rwanda francs or \$2,700 in US dollars.

After ongoing weekly training and follow-up sessions, as many as 480 trainees, both men and women, grab their picks and shovels to break up rocks and move them from nearby hills to the building site to be used for the foundation of their clinic. By mid-October, an estimated 240 metric tons of rock had been moved to the site and split.

Many local Catholic priests and bishops have already been contacted, and more will be contacted soon. (Roman Catholics make up the largest segment of the population, and until recently ecumenism has been rare, but the villagers have succeeded in bringing four denominations together for this project.) Villagers met with Sister Martha, a nurse from the Catholic Sisters of Teresa, who advised them on clinic design and budgeting and referred them to additional resource people. John commented that Sister Martha was impressed by the knowledge of the project demonstrated by the villagers and by the quality of their questions.

Particularly touching was one villager's response to the visit of Catholic Bishop Rubwejanga. He thanked the bishop for coming and expressed gratitude that Lutherans and Catholics were working together with them to build this clinic, which the village has been requesting since 1973.

Still ahead—a visit with the Minister of Health, for which people have been carefully preparing. One gets the feeling that—one way or another--this village will get its clinic.

ANOTHER ITEM: Three farmers chosen by the Mumeya community attended the LWF weeklong demonstration farm training in Ryumba, a village 30 miles west of Mumeya. John describes this training as “urgently needed” because Mumeya receives little rain and children suffer from kwashiorkor and other preventable diseases. These farmers returned with an enthusiastic report on how drip irrigation, zero grazing, preventing soil erosion, and boosting soil fertility has improved agriculture, and reduced reliance on purchased food. They encourage others in the larger community to learn from them so these improved techniques can help reduce poverty and improve nutrition in Mumeya.

John will continue to send reports, more or less monthly on Mumeya and other regions in Rwanda.

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About Pastor John Rutsindintwarane: Once a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, Pastor John was one of six such pastors who accompanied refugees back to Rwanda from refugee camps in Tanzania following the 1994 genocide. He has been a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Rwanda since its formation in 1995. One of his responsibilities as General Secretary of the LCR, is to relate to Lutheran churches internationally, with other denominations and organizations, and with local and national government. In that capacity, Pr. John has been engaging local parishes and community

leaders to work with each other, with other agencies, and with government to unite and strengthen their communities so as to equip them to improve their quality of life.

He began formal research in Rwanda as part of his graduate studies in peacekeeping and conflict resolution at Eastern Mennonite University and later when studying Theology and Development at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, a program for pastors from developing countries. After graduation in 2005, he spent several months working with People Improving Communities through Organization (PICO), in Oakland, California. Begun by Jesuit Fa. John Bauman, PICO has fifty community organizing units in the United States and in six Central American countries that focus on building community relationships as the basis for improving health, economic opportunities, and other quality of life issues among the disenfranchised. These goals meshed with John's vision of bringing Rwandan churches together to promote reconciliation and healing along with spiritual and economic growth in communities, particularly rural communities, torn apart by genocide. Fa. John Baumann and John's advisor from PICO, Ron Synder, have maintained contact with Pr. John and recently returned from Rwanda, where they reviewed progress in Mumeya.