

Rwanda – The Beginnings

-Rev. William Milligan-

In our Sovereign Lord's timing, He brought us into a spiritual and ecclesiastical partnership with the Gitarama Presbytery in Rwanda.

I recall it this way - our Presbytery's old European partnership had grown cold and many felt we needed a fresh relationship established – so the Diaconal Committee started the process.

About that time, the Louisville offices were offering Presbytery's international mission interrupters. We looked at the list and happened to select a pastor from Rwanda – Oliver Munyansanga. His impact was very timely and powerful as he shared in homes, in churches and at an all Presbytery retreat about the genocide, the country of Rwanda and about the Presbyterians in that nation.

That led us to request a formal partnership arrangement with the Gitarama Presbytery in Rwanda. Excitement grew as we formed a small group of folks from several churches to actually travel there and make contact for us personally. We met folks like Eugene Rubands. The rest, as is sometimes said, is history.

From the start, our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Rwanda has been rooted in understanding, serving and fellowshipping together as the Body of Christ with a mutual desire to know Him better and to make Him known more widely.

Our stated agreement of partnership reads:

To listen and learn from our sisters and brothers in Christ in Rwanda on how to worship, how to cope with oppression and how to care for one and another more effectively; To have exchange of representatives so as to establish a personal connection and sense of mutual support; To provide support and assistance to one another's needs as quickly as possible; To be the Body of Christ together, to demonstrate our unity (John 17), our inclusivity and our fulfillment of Christ's great commission (Matthew 28);

--To this end we mutually pledge ourselves to this partnership--

SECOND TRIP TO RWANDA -- SEPTEMBER 14-26, 2007

-Betty Grunstra-

Donna Doutt, Boyd Edmondson, Betty Grunstra, and Terry Semsick from Kiskiminetas Presbytery left on September 14 to return to the Gitarama Region of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda to renew friendships, visit partner churches and share our love of Jesus Christ with each other. We returned home on September 26th having accomplished our goals.

After a delay at the Atlanta airport, we missed our connecting flight from Brussels to Kilgali. There were only two flights on Saturday and Tuesday into Kilgali so we spent Sunday and Monday in Brussels. Unfortunately, we were to attend a big celebration of the church in the Gitarama Region and had even purchased special dresses to wear to this occasion, and we missed it. We were very disappointed, as were all our friends who were looking forward to this great time together.

Since the trip in September 2006, many churches in our presbytery had found partner churches in the Gitarama Region. Our suitcases were filled with gifts for these churches. I had a communion set and a table covering for the Buha church. Donna had several communion sets. Terry had crosses that a young person in the Blairsville Church had made for us to give to many people. Our suitcases were filled on our return trip with gifts for churches in our presbytery from their partner church. We could not bring the hands of bananas, pineapples, or other fruit that were given to us but they were sure very good to eat.

The time spent in Rwanda was busy. Each day we went over narrow rutty roads to visit people and churches. One day we came to a bridge made of narrow saplings that we decided we could not cross. Some of the saplings did not meet close enough for safety. This was our only defeat.

Gilbert, Emmanuel's son, was our constant driver and kept us safe on these roads. Pastor Eugene was always with us. That made 6 people in the van. We usually had at least 10 people in it and picked up another one at each stop.

The partnership committee entertained us each day for dinner. We were together in informal ways. Jean Claude Batiste had everyone at his house for discussion and food. It was good to hear their expectations and we shared our thoughts.

We ended up our visit by staying with Gertrude in Kilgali. She has 10 children that she has raised since the genocide. They are successful students and outstanding citizens in their community. It was a great honor for Eugene and Gertrude to return to the USA with us. They had a time to visit churches here in our presbytery before returning to their country.

The countryside in Rwanda is beautiful. People in the churches were so eager and excited to see us. Our gifts were greatly appreciated. My host family loved me and was beginning to

learn English. It was difficult to leave them because they all showed their love of Jesus Christ through their music and church services and their caring for us.

The Third Trip to Rwanda – Sept. 2008
-Ginger Gresh and Melanie Bearer Mertens-

The 2008 Rwanda team was quite a large group that consisted of ten people. Rev. Wayne Yost, Rev. Rick Hurley, Terry Semsick, Bridget Matson, Valerie Brewer, Ginger Gresh, Melanie Mertens, Rachael and Terry Stockdale and Betty “Muraho” Grunstra.

Following our extensive travel we were met at the Kigali Airport by a huge welcoming committee. The group was quickly ushered to their host family’s homes for a quiet dinner and much needed rest. The majority of our time was spent traveling throughout the beautiful countryside in two SUV’s over bumpy, rocky roads, to visit partner churches, enjoy fellowship, participate in services and exchange gifts. At each destination the travelers were met by large crowds of happy, singing, dancing and exuberant people. You could see the joy they had for “Imana”, or God, as they played their drums and danced around. Numerous worship services were attended as well as a Partnership Committee Meeting to renew partnership terms and rekindle the fires that keep the partnership going. Much progress has been made in the Rwanda area since the initiation of the partnership.

The highlight of our trip was the dedication service at the Kabadaba Parish Church. Terry and Rachael Stockdale were participants in that service because of their earlier partnership with Kabadaba. They were very instrumental in the building of the Kabadaba Church. It was a beautiful and emotional service lasting three hours. There was much singing and dancing involved and a great feast was prepared for the committee afterwards.

It is noteworthy to state that the Rwanda people were always very loving and kind and exceptionally generous in sharing what little they had. We were treated like Royalty everywhere we went. The joy of the Lord was very evident in these people’s faces and in their actions. Maybe as our partnership grows our joy will grow and be as evident in us as our brothers and sisters in Rwanda.