

Quakers Building Bridges of Peace In Burundi



On Saturday, April 30, 2016 Friends gathered at Jamestown (NC) Friends Meeting to hear Elie Nahimanna, the Administrative Coordinator, Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities – Burundi, speak about the Quaker response to the ongoing conflict in

Burundi. Elie's visit was arranged and hosted by the [North Carolina Peace Resource Center](#).

History of Burundi



Burundi, a country about the size of Maryland, is squeezed between Rwanda to the north, Tanzania to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. With a population of about ten million people it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Burundi was one of many countries to fall victim to European imperialism, first by

Germany in 1903 and then by Belgium in 1916. Although not racial, some distinction between the two main indigenous tribes, the Tutsi (herdsmen) and the Hutu (farmers) had existed for centuries. The two tribes interacted peacefully until Belgium projected its European racist ideology onto the Burundians in a tragically successful attempt to divide and conquer its vulnerable colony. By giving social, economic, and political power to the minority Tutsis,

Belgium set the stage for the cycles of violence that have plagued Burundi since it gained its independence in 1961.

On October 13, 1961 the democratically elected national hero Louis Rwagasore and his family were assassinated. From then to 1993 the national leadership operated with ethnic divisions and tragic consequences. Any hope of improvement Burundi might have had under the leadership of another political hero of democracy President Ndadaye Melchior was dashed when he, too, was assassinated in October 1993. The consequences of these two unforgettable assassinations remain locked in the memories of Burundians. From 1993 to 2005, there was a major civil war pitting the Tutsi-led minority government against the Hutu-led rebels. The 2005 peace accord, which ended that conflict, recently broke down when President Pierre Nkurunziza began seeking a constitutionally prohibited third term. In an effort to maintain power the Nkurunziza's ruling party has [refused negotiations](#), choosing instead to use force to silence legitimate opposition. This led to a coup d'etat on May 13, 2015 that lasted for 24 hours. As a result private radio stations were banned, more than 500 people were killed, over 600 people were put into jail, and more than 200,000 people went into exile. The violence continues, threatening to plunge Burundi into a Rwanda-like genocide.

Builder of Bridges



Elie, a Hutu, was employed as an engineer in the 90s working on (re)building bridges. He shared with his audience his experience with a 23-year old American nurse who came to Burundi to offer assistance. She asked his advice on how to build bridges between people. From that encounter Elie began his work for peace in Burundi. Elie is the Administrative Coordinator, Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities –

Burundi. He is pastor of Rohero Friends Church located in Bujumbura. Since 2008, he has been the Bujumbura representative for Mi-PAREC (French acronym for Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross). Since October 2015 he has promoted community Peace Dialogues in areas of Bujumbura hard-hit by the current violence. He is also the Coordinator of the Quaker Peace Network-Burundi, a coalition of fourteen Quaker peace organizations. Elie is working to foster peace in Bujumbura, the capital city, by implanting Peace Committees on university campuses as a way to create a new and peaceful generation to contribute to breaking the cycle of violence in Burundi. In these various capacities, Elie has taken a leading role in building trust and reconciliation among members of the Tutsi and Hutu communities.

The Quaker Response

The work that Elie does is part of the international network of [Friends Peace Teams](#) (FPT), which is a Spirit-led international organization working to develop long-term relationships within communities in conflict. FPT is active in Africa through the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI), Asia West Pacific (FPT-AWP), and South America through Peacebuilding en las Américas (PLA).

The peace work of Quakers in Africa can be traced back

more than twenty years. When the crisis began in 1993, Quakers began significant peacemaking and reconciliation work in the country (see inset above). Those programs led to a succession of other peace initiatives: Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services

History of the Quaker Response to Violence in Burundi

- 1993: Peace Primary school in Magarama
- 1994: The Kibimba Peace Committee began
- 1996 MIPAREC
- 1999, Evangelical Friends Church of Burundi and American Quakers founded AGLI/FPT, to offer alternatives to violence.

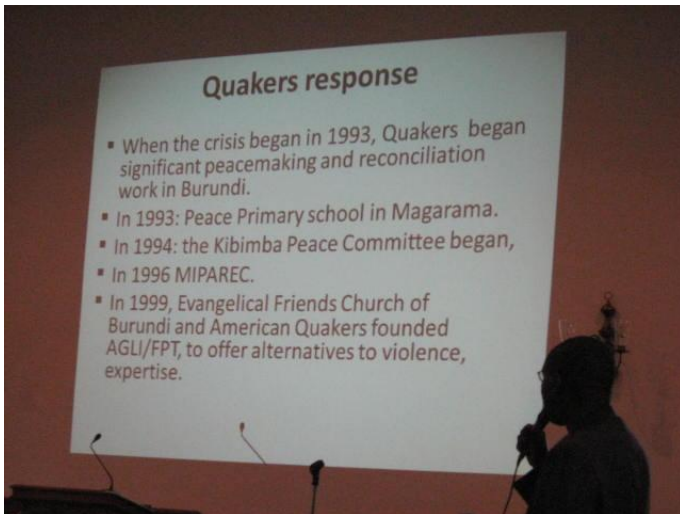
(THARS) in 2000, Friends Women Association (FWA) in 2002, and the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC) in 2003. The HROC programs are a mainstay of Friends Peace Teams initiatives. The HROC programs in Burundi, as elsewhere, include

Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and any other affected religious group. Elie emphasized the importance of dealing with the trauma left in the wake of these violent outbreaks. Untreated, the trauma leads to festering emotional wounds that the victim deals with by engaging in further violence. The key to

HROC Philosophy

- In every person, there is something that is good.
- Each person and society has the inner capacity to heal, and an inherent intuition of how to recover from trauma. Sometimes the wounds are so profound that people or communities need support to reencounter that inner capacity.
- Both victims and perpetrators of violence can experience trauma and its after-effects.
- Healing from trauma requires that a person's inner good and wisdom is sought and shared with others. It is through this effort that trust can begin to be restored.
- When violence has been experienced at both a personal level, and a community level, efforts to heal and rebuild the country must also happen at both the individual and community level.
- Individuals healing from trauma and building peace between groups is deeply connected. It is not possible to do one without the other. Therefore, trauma recovery and peace building efforts must happen simultaneously.

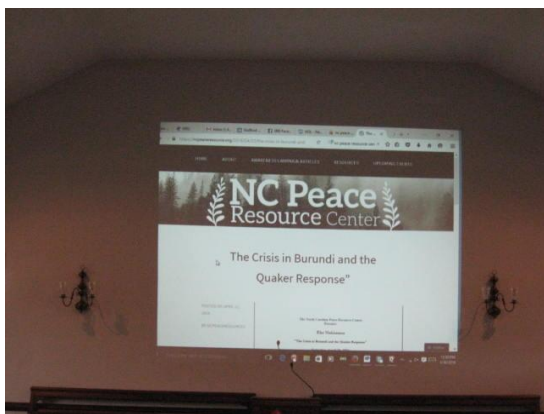
preventing future violence is to teach young people how to engage in peaceful dialogue. The Quaker peace initiatives, therefore, include preemptive as well as reactionary efforts. Elie's groups are dealing with the current crisis in Burundi by creating and supporting the following programs: HROC Burundi is accompanying 15 Peace and Democracy Group (PDG) communities in 8 provinces; 12 peace committees within the universities; 6 peace primary schools; holding 13 community peace dialogues of 4 days each in Bujumbura; Seminars on HROC with 2000 pupils; and sharing of personal testimonies



Elie Explains Quaker Response to Violence

During the Question and Answer period, Elie recommended two books: *A Thousand Hills* and *Left to Tell* for those wishing to learn more about the conflict in Burundi. He closed with an expression of gratitude for contributions of Americans to his peacemaking work.

Elie Nihamanna's presentation left little doubt that the Quakers in Burundi, and the Friends Peace Teams in general, are effectively implementing the [Quaker Peace Testimony](#). But there is still much work to do. The goal of the HROC-Burundi initiative is to collect \$40,000 to build a peace center with two offices and a space for peace workshops. Anyone wishing to contribute to the ongoing struggle for peace in Burundi may do so by sending donations to: Friends Peace Teams, ATTN: African Great Lakes Initiative, 1001 Park Avenue, St. Louis MO 63104.



The North Carolina Peace Resource Center wishes to express its gratitude to Jamestown (NC) Friends Meeting, pastoral minister Frank Massey, for providing the venue and (of course) the food.