

Opening a Space for Peace

Rebirth of a people...Burundi...Central Africa

*A joint mission of
Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction (JRMD/YRWD) &
The Heritage Institute (THI), USA*



**Map of Central Africa
Showing Burundi -a
small country
bordered by Rawanda
on the north, the
Congo to the west and
Tanzania to the south.**

August 28, 2004

**Mike Seymour's Report on Trip to Bujumbura, Burundi August 12-24,
2004**

Greetings:

I'm just back from a life-changing journey to Burundi, Central Africa, where I spent the last two weeks working with Prosper Ndabishuriye who is General Coordinator of an organization (Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction) which is involved in peace making through building homes for refugees, holding peace conferences and promoting leadership development. I met Prosper at a conference titled The Practice of Peace last November which was held at The Whidbey Institute on Whidbey Island and was impressed with his account of how his team of volunteers, consisting of members from both ethnic groups—Hutu and Tutsi—are modeling cooperation and bringing peace to a country that has seen years of war due to ethnic conflict. . The web site for this organization is www.jrmd.org.

As this note is fairly long, read it when you have some leisure time if you are busy now. In a few days I'll send you a link to pictures from the trip.

Heartfully,
Mike

First Impressions

Having been in other high-poverty places—like India and Korea 40 years ago—I was less shocked than I might have been at seeing dilapidated buildings that haven't seen paint since the Colonial era, endless roads with potholes or no surface except rocks, streams of people walking along the sides of the road (or a jitney bikes)—there being few cars outside of the capital city of Bujumbura. Homes are modest mud brick dwellings, perhaps 400-600 square feet in size, for the most part. The usual litter of paper and plastic can be seen most everywhere, and in some areas (like the Buiza district in Bujumbura City) is really bad-- poor air quality because everyone cooks with wood or coal. The first thing I notice is I'm automatically taking shorter breaths—as if that could keep the particulates out of my lungs. But the air quality improves the next day as the weather is drier. In fact, I arrive on the only rainy day they've had in months that summer—a fact not unnoticed by Prosper who says there is a Burundian tradition that the one who comes with the rain brings blessing. (The good omen proved true, for me as much as anyone). Quickly, I got used to the “poverty.” There was something that seemed normal to me about it which I can't quite explain now that I'm back here on Whidbey amidst relative wealth. Burundi, mind you, is the third poorest country in the world out of 177 countries listed in the UN—and the per capita income is something like \$100 per year. I tried to imagine if I listed all these 177 countries on a text document, on what page would Burundi appear—somewhere at the end of page four, I think. This kind of math is hard to fathom—and what's amazing is to see so many people not only alive, but also thriving and smiling. One wonders how much of a mythology we've built up in the west about what is a minimal, necessary life style!!!

The military is everywhere. In developed countries, we're not used to seeing so many soldiers in uniform—many with automatic weapons—signs of continued insecurity due to the years of Hutu-Tutsi ethnic conflict, which has claimed over 600,000 lives and countless displaced families. As if to ensure we didn't forget the kind of environment our peace efforts are working in, several days after I arrived the rebel Hutu faction (some 25,000 strong which are all around the capital city region) attacked a camp of Congolese Tutsi refugees in Gatumba near the Congo border that was being

guarded by Burundian government soldiers. Over 160 refugees, including soldiers, were killed. (If you want more on this go to: <http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0408/S00151.htm>.) The day I left, a large Thai airliner came in with a contingent of fresh, Thai UN troops - and there is lots of concern for the possibility of an escalation of tensions and mutual reprisals on both sides.

The Work-the inner part

The work is always both inner and outer-interlocking universes turning in tandem with one another, so I cannot understand the outer journey apart from the inner one, both for myself, Prosper and the many people who shared in this by either being in Burundi at the time or by being there virtually in prayer and spirit-as many of you were—and we thank you for your presence. Very simply, for me another window in my personal journey opened quite suddenly and wonderfully as I realized by day 2 or 3 that indeed my heart had been mysteriously knit to the Burundian people and that I was being called to step outside the box, beyond personal comfort zone and exercise greater faith and play on a bigger field of work than I had thought of. I've said so many times that my life is something that happened on the way to someplace else. In the case of Burundi, I NEVER in my wildest imagination could have cooked up being involved in Africa, going to what the State Department calls a high-risk area and being involved with a Christian evangelical organization (Prosper is an Evangelist)—having evolved from my early Christian “born again” experience to a more contemplative form of Christianity and then, quite naturally, onto to becoming a Buddhist in the Vipassana tradition. But of course, I felt totally at home with all of this—not the least of which was the spirit-rousing church service Prosper brought me to that first Sunday at which I was asked to share my testimony of how I came to Christ. So, there I was passionately telling this story from 26 years ago—and Prosper keeps telling me throughout my stay that people come up to him and say they think I must be an evangelist. And here I had my heart set on becoming more monk-like and spending time in a monastery in Burma. Go figure!!

Throughout, this journey has been marked by these improbable turning points at which I said “Yes” when the natural thing to do—what a big part of me wanted to do—was to say “No.” Perhaps this is how God works—we are led down of path not completely of our own conscious choosing, only to see, once we’ve gotten there, how perfect it is for us to be there. This started with the Practice of peace Conference where it was the Bayview school students who wanted to go to Africa (having met Prosper) and then they asked me if I would go—and I couldn’t easily say “No” as I had donated the money for them to attend. Then the kids dropped out since Burundi is rated unsafe by the State Dept., so I had to decide “Will I go,” and again I said yes, after asking Heather Ogilvy if she would go also. Then Prosper asks if I will be a conduit for funds people want to donate—easy enough to do, only then shortly after he sends me a letter saying he has appointed me the US representative for JRMD. At this I really balked, as I am way too busy and this entails, if I take it seriously, fund-raising I don’t want to or feel qualified to do. But after sitting on his e-mail for two days, I think of the situation there and say to myself “I can’t not do this.” But all the time I feel this pressure from the desperate situation in Burundi, and have this sinking feeling (which I confirm once in Burundi) that there is in fact nobody else but me which has volunteered to raise money for this organization which is slated to build 800 homes for refugees. This is a bit like being in a dream in which you’re moving but not under your own power—something else much bigger is drawing you along. This can feel a bit scary, until I realized that I not only am I not in control, but don’t have to be—that there are forces (history, justice, God, people’s prayers, the vacuum of need which is Central Africa) which are shaping events way beyond my ability or need to see the whole picture—only to play whatever small part is mine to play--and be happy about that.

The Outer Work-Opening a Space for Peace

As I allowed myself more and more to be “given” to this work, it became clear that Prosper and JRMD/YRWD (Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction) with myself and The Heritage Institute were forming a partnership, and that my contribution of ideas, values, energy and presence are in the long run as important as the funds we are able to bring in. The great enthusiasm that my presence generated everywhere we went convinced my once and for all it was right for me to have spent the \$1,800 on

airfare—a sum I worried about as I felt it might be better to simply donate that amount. You see, since the ethnic conflicts erupted in 1993, foreigners simply don't make many visits to Burundi, except in some kind of official capacity like the UN (which has a big presence and a 5000 man peace-keeping force) or the foreign embassy people. Otherwise, the outside world is absent, and there can be this sense of hopelessness, of nobody in the larger world noticing or caring much. So, it is a REALLY BIG DEAL when a foreigner, especially a person with white skin from America, comes to Burundi. And this is magnified by the fact that people in Burundi realize their government is a bit of a joke, strapped for cash and not able to really help them; and the same goes for many foreign NGO's whose overhead soaks up most of the budget so that precious little effects anything on the ground.

So, knowing all this, and driving around seeing soldiers in uniform everywhere--many of whom wouldn't know if you asked what their mission is—I realized the tremendous potential of an organization like Youth in Reconstruction which--being a low-overhead, local, grass-roots organization which counts on many committed volunteers—can get so much done. Case in point: Habitat for Humanity came and left Burundi because of the political situation—they managed to build only 30 homes and a much higher cost than JRMD. JRMD has already built 1,500 since 1993. In the Carama district we visited the next project where 800 homes will be built using the JRMD team of volunteers and with help from many donors. We'll do this for half the cost of a NW mini-mansion. A budget Prosper recently developed indicates that these homes will only need an additional \$315/home to be built, since an agreement with a local government agency for refugee resettlement is picking up the roofing costs which comes out to over 36% of the home cost.

The JRMD/THI partnership involves an integrated effort for peace-building, including home building for refugees; promoting awareness of Burundi and the Central African situation through citizen diplomacy and public speaking; peace-building through conferences and youth leadership development and educational initiatives linking American and Burundian schools. Please refer to the Appendix where the partnership agreement is spelled out in detail. Here I'll relate what portions of it we actually did while I was in Burundi.

Carama District-Kinama Zone Helping 800 Refugee Families to Rebuild their Homes

Prosper and I visited the Carama district at least 3-4 times during my two week stay. Here, all the houses were completely destroyed in the fighting over the past years—especially in 2000, and virtually nobody lives here at this time. However, under the guidance and with hope from JRMD and their field team of 21 volunteers, families who used to live in this area are slowly being encouraged to return and rebuild their homes with JRMD help. Orphans, widows and others with limited ability are encouraged to join together and work as a community to help build homes. Rivulets bringing water on site from a nearby water system enable earth to be softened to a muddy texture, and packed into wooden forms then dried into bricks about 18 inches in length by 8 inches on either side. The JRMD team uses string lines and levels to get the bricks into even rows high enough for door and window lintels, then another few layers of brick are put on before the roofing is done—consisting of beams (local trees) and metals sheeting nailed in place. This is sustainable development in action. The families themselves do the work and all materials are local—even the trees for the beams could be replanted—a project we are interested in. Homes here go up for between \$600 total. But, due to The Burundian government Commission on Refugee Rehabilitation donation of metal roofing, costs for the 800 homes for JRMD will only be about \$252,000, or about \$315/home. Imagine being able to house almost 5,000 people for less than the cost of an average Puget Sound house!!!

I met many old men, old women and children working side by side. They were tired...many hadn't eaten for a day or more, since they were not earning money when they worked on their own homes. But I could clearly see the happiness and glow in their faces. I have never failed to notice and be stirred by the presence of spiritual wealth in the face of material poverty; and then, coming back to the states, as I have many times from overseas, seeing spiritual poverty amidst material wealth. This spirit/matter relationship is the subject of much religious discourse and admonition. One man joked with Prosper that he hadn't gone to the bathroom for two days, because he hadn't eaten in that time. We all laughed. The following week, as the funds

Prosper and I were living from also dwindled, and we were taking less food, I had a chance to say that I too had not gone to the bathroom in a while since I had taken in so little food. In fact, I found myself wanting less food...it just seemed natural to me to be in harmony with what the average person experiences here.

Shortly after I arrived, Prosper ordered enough wooden beams for about 50 houses, and this caused a big stir. We can now envision as many as 240+ homes being able to have a roof on before the rainy season next year, with funds we expect to raise as Prosper comes to the Northwest this October.

Open Space Conference-Bujumbura

Prosper had mentioned wanting to hold an open space conference for youth during my stay, but by the time I arrived we had only received only about \$250 toward the estimated \$2,500 to put on a quality event—including food, transportation funds (as many don't have even enough bus money), facility rental, musicians, translators, photocopying etc. We were both in a buoyant mood, sensing that the visit was going well and there was a lot of spirit behind the work. So, I ventured an offer to put up \$1000 for a more limited event if no money came in. The next day Prosper told me that would not be necessary as a person neither one of us knew had already e-mailed Prosper the night before that she would donate \$2,500 for the Open space event. We want to express our gratitude to Ellie Kierson for her faith and generosity, and knew beyond any doubt that higher powers were on our side in this mission.

The Open Space took place over Friday and Saturday morning, and we had a truly wonderful, spirit-filled event with 71 people attending. Most were students or young working people, including many from the JRMD field team, JRMD staff and other volunteers. It was really a blessing that we had 2-3 young people from the Congo and as many, also, from Kenya-several of whom turned out to be very inspiring and promising leaders.

During this two days, a model for peace-building clearly emerged which we could train young people to do. There was a vision put forth to approach the churches in Burundi as a resource for this kind of peace-building model, as 86% of the country is Christian—most of that Catholic, with most of the rest being protestant, evangelical.

There is a great advantage to being able to work at a deep spiritual level and based on a common language and values when most of the people in the room believe in the same things. And so, when we laid a foundation of teaching about peace based on Christian precepts, using both biblical as well as indigenous metaphors, a powerful common sacred ground emerged for this work which brought everyone together. All our meetings were begun and ended in prayer, music and dancing which brought such great joy to everyone. It became clear to me if leaders of any opposing forces would only gather together in song, prayer and eating of food, that killing one another afterward would be so much harder to do. This became clear to everyone present—how simple peace can be when the heart is in the right place.

On Saturday, many people continued to hang around for hours—relishing the time together and not wanting to go home. We look forward to the next time.

AfricaAmericaExchange- Schools Project NW & Burundi

Ever since The Heritage Institute launched its distance education program in 1995, we have had a vision (expressed in our logo) of forming a global, internet exchange connecting young people and their teachers from around the world--each classroom working on projects of their own choosing that benefit their communities. At last we are able to realize that vision with AfricaAmericaExchange. Here six secondary schools from Bujumbura and six schools from Washington state will all work on projects that will benefit their own or the larger world community, and then they will communicate with each other about their projects and progress using Yahoo Groups as a discussion space, for posting files and pictures etc.

We met with a group of 25 or so students and teachers for an afternoon workshop and orientation and then had training sessions at the Tropicana CyberCafe, as only one of the schools there had computers with an internet connection. The schools represented are: Ceste School, Saint Esprit-Ceebu, Lycee Kinama, Lycee du Lac, Lycee Municipal Ruziba, Lycee Municipal Rohero.

The kids and teachers were all so excited to receive the internet training as well as training in how to use the digital camera I brought which was given to JRMD to be loaned out as each school needs. There were many questions about how to choose a project which we answered as best we could—saying basically that we did not have money to fund any project beyond a small budget for internet fees and for student transportation to-and-from the CyberCafe. Each school will survey its own community, doing an informal needs assessment, and then determine where they can be effective. We gave many examples of short-term projects (community-building workshops, environmental clean-up, education about HIV/AIDS) that bear no cost and can do some good.

As of now, Langley Middle School (Susie Richards) and Eagle Harbor High School in Bainbridge Island are on board in the NW. I will find four more schools before Prosper comes in October, and then he and I will visit each school for an orientation session.

The project begins formally on October 15 and lasts 5 months, through the end of February, 2005. Already, the Burundian schools have signed up for Yahoo e-mail accounts and have prepared a digital photo album for each school. We are all excited about the possibilities that will emerge from this first experiment which, if successful, can be offered to more schools.

Opening a Space for Peace

**A partnership between
Jeunesse en Reconstruction du Monde en Destruction (JRMD)
Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction (YRWD) in English and
The Heritage Institute (THI), USA**

Prosper Ndabishuriye, General Coordinator of JRMD and Mike Seymour, President of The Heritage Institute, USA (THI) are happy to announce the formation of a partnership between their two organizations for the purposes of opening a space for peace for the people of Burundi as well as those of other Central African countries in the Great Lakes region who have suffered through war and its tragic consequences.

This dynamic partnership will enable many intergrated levels of peace-building to occur for the people of Burundi and the region. This will include refugee resettlement through home- building; promoting awareness and compassion among Americans and Europeans of the situation and needs in Central Africa through international citizen diplomacy and cross-cultural dialogue; educating for peace through Burundi/America school partnerships, conferences and literature that offer hope in teaching about the skills and attitudes for peace.

First, the JRMD/THI partnership will assist in the resettlement of refugees displaced by over ten years of ethnic wars by helping them to build homes for themselves. JRMD has successfully assisted in the building over 1,500 homes since 1993 through a sustainable, grass-roots development model that uses inexpensive local materials and the willing involvement of future homeowners who, working together, find support and a new sense of community. The JRMD/THI partnership will enable another 800 homes to be built in the Carama district of Kinama zone in the capital city of Bujumbura. Since June 2004, this latest initiative already has sufficient progress so that by November, 2004 as many as 200+ homes will have walls and roof-enough for families to begin moving in, even though the homes will not be fully complete.

Second, this partnership will build awareness and compassion for the needs of Burundians and others in the region among people in America and Europe. With the help of The Heritage Institute in the USA and others in Holland, JRMD/THI will be able to speak before many business associations, chambers of commerce, schools, churches and at the homes of enthusiastic supporters. Video and other presentations of the suffering in Burundi, and how the JRMD/THI partnership brings hope and homes to deserving people is expected to touch many hearts—building a strong donor foundation to support the partnership work.

From this group of committed supporters will come a delegation of Americans and Europeans who, in 2006 or 2007, will form a mission that comes to Burundi to further advance the peace-building process. Under the name Global Citizen Journey, as many as 25 people from the USA or Europe will journey to Burundi to work along side equal numbers of Burundians to build homes, plant trees and to also deepen their relationship through workshops and conversations on peace-building themes.

As part of this 2-3 week mission, the JRMD/THI partnership will extend an invitation to the governments of Burundi and other countries in the Great Lakes region to participate in a Pan-African conference on peace. Government leaders, NGO's, the UN and many volunteers working at the grass roots level will be invited to attend, share their successes and failures, coordinate policies and explore how partnerships may enhance individual organization's mission.

Finally, and very important, the JRMD/THI partnership will promote the development of leadership among youth in both in Africa as well as America and Europe. This will be done through an educational initiative that involves students and teachers in community improvement projects and cross-cultural dialogue, using the Internet as the medium of communication. Named the AfricaAmericaExchange, this initiative will begin for the first time in Fall 2004 between four schools in Burundi and a comparable number in the state of Washington in the USA. Each group of students and teachers will discuss and decide on what kind of activity they will undertake under the criteria that the project will "...make the world a better place." A sense of global community will develop as students in the AfricaAmericaExchange send emails to one another and post file and pictures of their work on a specially selected Internet site. As stories are shared, cultural understanding and friendships will grow.

The JRMD/THI partnership is founded on the belief that peace starts from within—that we must be peaceful within ourselves as a condition to make peace between ourselves and others. This is seen as a work of relationship, reconciliation and mutual grieving together for past losses to free the heart from its burdens—relating deeply to ourselves and who we are, to others in the human community, to earth and to spirit. Only as we know and relate to our own hearts can we truly know and relate to others. As we thus build community with one another we can then in peace engage in a most important reconciliation of people with Earth our home, working to preserve the health and integrity of the natural world on which we are all vitally dependent. Through this process of relationship to self, community and Earth, we may discover a heart and spirit common to all humanity, and thus grow in our ability to celebrate the rich diversity of cultural and religious expression which is our great human inheritance.

Bujumbura, August 17, 2004

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