

Willesden and the World



First Reflection on a trip to Rwanda (28 Sep – 10 Oct 2006)

Ann Peterken (former Kensington WDA) went on a trip organised by the Church Mission Society. She writes 'I gained so much from my two-week visit that it's going to be difficult to capture the essence in a few words.



Why Rwanda? Like most people my awareness of Rwanda started with the terrible genocide that swept the country in 1994. Two years later I read a book by Lesley Bilinda, a young Scottish lady whose Tutsi husband was one of the victims. I felt compelled to write and thank the author for her wonderful book and was delighted when she responded to my letter. We have been in contact ever since and I've kept a very active interest in the country where she had once lived so happily.

Rwanda is about the size of Wales, with a population of 8.3 million. Also

known as the *Land of a Thousand Hills*, its mountainous topography is due to its position on the rim of part of the Great Rift Valley. Western and central Rwanda, where I travelled, are characterised by a seemingly endless vista of steep mountains – a landscape that reminded me of Tuscany, except for all the banana trees!

Some of my first impressions as we were driven to our first guesthouse – The land of a thousand hills! large numbers of people walking along the side of the road, women carrying heavy loads on their heads and babies on their backs, lots of unaccompanied children in their school uniforms, farm workers carrying hoes and machetes, brightly coloured clothes and plastic flip flops, bicycles loaded with more sacks and containers than seems humanly possible, boys running with homemade hoops and many people working in the surrounding fields.

The purpose of the CMS trip was for each of us (eleven in total) to experience Christianity in a culture other than own. We were guests in three of the nine dioceses of the Episcopal Church in Rwanda, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. In each diocese we were greeted warmly by the bishop and diocesan staff, by the Mothers' Union workers and by the people who catered for our needs. I really appreciated the fact that nobody apologised for not being able to give us all the comforts we take for granted, such as hot water for washing. They generously gave us the best that they could, with great dignity. We formed a close bond with our hosts.

The most important message for me to share is the holistic approach the church is taking on evangelism. In each diocese, the bishops and their staff were eager to ensure we understood their vision. Yes they are preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, but side by side with health, educational and agricultural programmes to help people work their way out of poverty and not rely on handouts. They use clergy training programmes to teach about community development, so that each student can be an ambassador for new ideas on return to their home village. Indeed, in our first diocese, the Bible School was called the Bible and Development School. This was hugely encouraging to me, seeing Mission and Development so intricately combined.

The work of the church is doubly impressive when you understand the great needs of the people it serves. They are not only poor, they have also experienced trauma and loss in their families from the genocide, they are having to deal with the impact of HIV/AIDS in addition to malaria and other illnesses. There are so many widows and orphans and child headed families. How easy it would be to throw up ones arms in despair at the enormity of the task, but I saw none of that.

I saw self-help groups where each member pools their meagre income in a common bank account, so that the interest earned over time allows each of them to afford a national medical insurance card. I saw head teachers who have to act as parents to many of their students and spend what meagre funds they have on individuals, rather than the many needs of their schools. I saw people making



Bishop Jérémy Kalimba of the Shyogwe Diocese

beautiful crafts for sale. I saw hospitals and health centres with programmes for HIV testing, treatment (including anti-retroviral drugs) and support. I saw wooden stretchers that are used to carry patients many miles to the hospital. I enjoyed two vibrant and joyous Sunday morning worship services and will long remember the white faces of my fellow travellers amidst a sea of eager parishioners all wanting to shake hands and bid us welcome.

Behind all these activities are inspirational people who simply roll up their sleeves and get on with it –, Angelique, Véréne, Emmanuel, Immaculée, Eve – to name but a few.

If I have to use one word to describe how I feel about my trip it would be uplifting. I found Rwanda to be a country of hope and promise, with much to teach us about personal expression of our Christian faith. I am greatly enriched by having embarked on a travel experience other than the conventional holiday and wish that everyone could do likewise at some point in their lives’.

