

Love Has Replaced Hatred: A Visit to Gitega (Burundi) Prison **By Adrien Niyongabo**

Agnes Ndayishimiye is a Tutsi woman living in the Mutaho IDP (internally displaced persons) camp. On October 21, 2004 on the last day of a Healing and Rebuilding Our Community workshop she was attending, she said

I am happy that I leave this workshop with a new dream that there will be a special day. That day, I see myself going to the Gitega prison where our former administrator is kept. I will ask to see him. I will be bringing him food {a sign of reconciliation in Burundian culture}. I will hug him. He will not, maybe, recognize me. I will tell him that I come from Mutaho IDP camp. I will show him that love has replaced hatred. I will be happy that day.

Agnes' husband and many family members were killed in late 1993 when violence swept through Burundi after the assassination Melchior Ndadaye, the first democratically elected Hutu president in Burundi. She fled with most of the remaining Tutsi in the area to the Mutaho IDP camp where she has been living for more than a decade.

Mutaho is about 25 miles north of Gitega which is right in the center of Burundi. The Mutaho area was one of the regions most destroyed by the fighting in Burundi. The commercial center of Mutaho—once a large square with two story buildings on all sides and a market place in the center—has been completely destroyed. During the 1993 conflict many Hutu and Tutsi killed each other in this area. The two groups became separated as the Tutsi moved to IDP camps, while the more numerous Hutu stayed on their plots in the countryside. The former neighbors and friends became enemies. For the last ten years there has been little communication between the two groups.

Andre Ndereyimana, the man Agnes was referring to, was the Hutu administrator of Mutaho District in 1993. Along with many other men from Mutaho, he has been jailed since that time, accused of leading and participating in the killing of Tutsi in the area.

During a follow-up Healing and Rebuilding Our Community workshop (**when?**) a number of women from the Mutaho IDP camp agreed with Agnes. They too wanted to meet with the former administrator and others accused of killing and destruction in Mutaho.

The Healing and Rebuilding Our Community program invites ten Tutsi from Burundian IDP camps and ten Hutu from the surrounding community to come together to try and re-establish normal relationships which have been mostly non-existent for the last decade. The three-day workshops describe psycho-social trauma and its symptoms, deal with the stages of grief, and distinguish between negative and positive anger. On the last day, attempts are made to restore trust between the two groups. One particularly effective exercise is to draw a tree of mistrust and then a tree of trust allowing the participants to envision how they may move from a place of distrust to one of trust.

Why would Agnes and the other women want to meet with the person who is accused of organizing the deaths of their loved ones? The testimonies in the workshops indicate that there is a very heavy burden when someone keeps the trauma, grief, anger, and hatred inside him/herself for years on end, it becomes a very heavy burden. Workshop participants frequently report that they are “lightened” when the heavy burden is lifted from them. Women in particular see the effects of this burden on their children. Do they want them to grow up in this divided society feeling such hatred of the enemy? Will not the division bring another round of violence in ten, twenty, or thirty years which, most participants think, will be worse than the last cycle in 1993?

Sebastien Kambayeko, is a pastor of the Friends Church in Mutaho, a Tutsi living in the Mutaho IDP camp, and was one of the facilitators in the workshop that Agnes attended. He reported the following:

A group of Tutsi widows living in the IDP came to me and told me how the two trees: Trust tree and Mistrust tree have impacted them. They emphasized that in order to give a place to the Trust tree, as single parents, they need to prepare the way for their children and grandchildren by forgiving their wrongdoers. Thus, one of the ways to do that would be to support the idea expressed by one of them during their last workshop. This idea was to go to Gitega prison and meet the Mutaho Hutu former officials, and tell them that love has replace their hatred, ‘Maybe, they would doubt about our act of love because what they did to our families is woeful, but we will not give up. We would go there for a second time, sit with them and talk. We need peace for our next generation.’

The women decided to go to Gitega to ask the Provincial Administration for permission to visit the prisoners. On Saturday, August 20, 2005, eighteen people from the Mutaho IDP camp including some men went to Gitega to visit the prison. Before they went to the prison, the group gathered at the Mi-PAREC (Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross) conference center in Gitega. They waited for Pastor Elie Nahimana, the General Secretary of Burundi Yearly Meeting of Friends, Levy Ndikumana, the Director of Mi-PAREC, and me, the Coordinator of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Community program. When Levy arrived, he told the group that the Gitega prison Director was very happy and excited to receive us as promised. However, he mentioned that due to the overwhelming schedule, the prison officials did not have time to gather prisoners from Mutaho to get ready for the visit. That is why he suggested that we might postpone the real visit for the following Tuesday. In spite of that, he allowed us to meet with a delegation of the prisoners from Mutaho for a short time. Nevertheless, many of the folks remained with the same enthusiasm as before and we went to the prison. The gate was opened and a few seconds later, five men came up including the former Mutaho Administrator, the former President-Judge of Mutaho tribunal court, two former teachers and one farmer.

They started hugging each other—a very touching and emotional scene!!! Unbelievable! Watching them hugging each other with such open smiles and nostalgia, I could not believe that the horrible killings had happened between these people. I could hear some

saying, “Yes, he is the one. Let me hug him!” “Oh, yes I do recognize you! You were my neighbor. How is your family doing? Good to see you!” “*Amahoro, Amahoro!* [Peace, peace] Praise God for we can meet here after so long a time!” “This one looks like the ones that I know. Are you the daughter of...?” “Yes, I am.” Ohh! *Amahoro, Amahoro!* Thanks to God for you are still alive

After the greetings, I can remember Andre Ndereyimana, the former Mutaho Administrator, saying, “I am Andre Ndereyimana. You would understand that, as a head of the administration in those times and knowing what happened in our area, I can have a lot on my back.”

Pastor Sebastien shared with the prisoners their motivation for coming. “We know that many of you who have come here have held us in your hands on the day of our birth—others of you are our brothers and sisters. We remember that we used to be living in harmony. That is why we have been missing you so much for these last ten years. We came here to testify how we love you. This would look contradictory, but that is real! You are still important to us. We still hope that one day, you will be back home with us again. God’s will is always good. We had wished to sit and chat with you today but the prison authorities have said that it would better to have such a gathering next Tuesday. We will come! This idea of coming to visit you was started by one of us here after an HROC workshop we attended in Mutaho. And since then, many in the Mutaho IDP have supported it. Only eighteen could get a room in the van, if not there are still so many others who would wish to visit with you today. For sure, God will give us that day of Tuesday for us to share what is in our hearts.” Then he asked one of his colleagues to hand over the envelope of money that the group had been collecting for their “friends” in prison. The delegation of prisoners was very touched and surprised by the loving heart showed by their former neighbors. They were also very thankful for their initiative in supporting them morally and financially, as life is not easy in prison.

The group would have preferred to stay longer but as the time allowed was over, they gave each other a goodbye hug hoping to meet again the following Tuesday. “One never knows. We asked God for a one-day visit and then here we have been given one more. We are looking forward for next Tuesday.” Mi-PAREC volunteered to cover transportation cost for the group from Mutaho on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, 23rd of August 2005, eighteen people from Mutaho, mainly from the Mutaho IDP camp, came for their second visit to their former neighbors who are in the Gitega Prison. If more transportation would have been available, many more other people would have joined in the visit. Nevertheless, those who were able to come were representing all the others with such willingness. As in the first visit, the group was joined by Pastor Elie Nahimana, Levy Ndikumana, and myself.

After we entered the prison, we were welcomed by one of the prison officials along with the prisoners native to Mutaho. I remember this scene when folks were greeting each other. It was moving! Around twenty prisoners were hugging with those who came to visit them. And, Louis from Mutaho IDP camp said: “Is that old man my former neighbor? Oh, no, that one is too old!” And when he came closer, they hugged and

laughed. “Do you know my friend, I could not recognize you.” And the prisoner answered, “Don’t you see that I have become old! It is not a joke, my brother. This place would have taken me half of my life, I tell you! The conditions are too bad! Tell me, how are my wife and children? I heard that some died from malaria. How are the remaining doing?” And Louis said, “Fine! But you would know that poverty is shaking every one there. But they are doing fine--they can manage.” After the greeting time, individuals introduced themselves. It struck me that among the twenty prisoners there was no woman. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to ask if no woman would have been suspected or accused of killings.

Levy helped by being the master of ceremonies. In his introduction, Levy Ndikumana expressed joy at seeing the visit actually happening and indicated it was a big step towards reconciliation after what happened in the Mutaho community. He then wished a very enjoyable time to all gathered there.

Andre Ndereyimana, the former Administrator of Mutaho Commune in 1993, now kept in the Gitega prison, thanked the people from Mutaho IDP for their visit. It showed a real caring heart for those in prison. It is then that he said, “I am very touched to see you again. Last time, when we met for a short time and you said that you were going to come back, I could not believe it. Because, I said to myself that Mutaho is too far from here and I do not see how these people would get this energy and courage. And today, you accomplished what you had promised. It brings a big relief to us. You know, since we entered here in this prison, we do not know how the moon is like, neither the stars because before the night comes, we all are obliged to enter our rooms until the morning. It is too painful being here. From one morning to the next one, we are locked inside. It is during that time that one remembers all of what happened, and what follows--the bad emotions, regrets, images of what we saw and so on. It is too heavy for us. So, to see your coming to visit us is like a miracle. The heavens are open for us and we rejoice. This gives us hope that another day, God will give us an opportunity to meet in the community.”

As it is a custom for all Christian gatherings, Pastor Sebastien Kambayeko led us in worship using the passage in Ephesians 4:25-27: *“Therefore, each one of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. In your anger, do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold.”*

It would have been our preference to stay longer, but when the worship was done, we had only five minutes to say good-bye to one another. It was then that the participants started sending little messages to their families. “It is too bad that we did not get time for testimonies. It would have been a very wonderful way to put out in the open what this day has brought to us,” said one of the prisoners. However, during that tiny time for a good-bye hug, we got to question two prisoners who shared how they were feeling.

“How did you feel when you saw the people [Tutsi] from Mutaho here?”

“Beyond the belief, beyond my belief! Sitting with them here, I just forgot the sentence pronounced against me. They brought me a new light. It is a new birthday for me!”

When we asked Athanase Barajingitwa, a Hutu and former primary school teacher, how he finds his stay in the prison, he said, “I would say that there are three categories of prisoners who are communally accused of what happened in 1993. 1) Those who really did kill, 2) those who are suspected of having collaborated with the killers or other wrongdoers, and 3) those innocently accused of genocide though they did nothing harmful. The last category is for people who were only disliked by their neighbors because of their ethnicity. In order to have them pay for the ‘broken pots,’ bad things were put on their backs so that they would be jailed.”

“The people who came to visit you acknowledged having been helped by the HROC and conflicts resolution workshops they have attended. What do you think about having such an opportunity here in the prison?”

“It is really powerful and impressive! I would want to attend them”.

“Would you be willing to be trained as a facilitator and afterwards volunteer to facilitate such workshops here in the prison?”

“That would be super. It would be much more impressive if we can go around the country with you conducting those workshops. I am sure that soon I will be released!”

We wished all good things to Athanase and may all his wishes be done.

Outside the prison, I was able to question some of the Mutaho IDP people. I was impatient to hear from Agnes Ndayishimiye, the woman who first suggested the idea. I asked her, “How do you feel after this visit in the prison?”

“Great joy, enthusiasm, proud--I am very excited because I have been able to unfold the love, forgiveness that I have been holding for a long time. I miss words to express my feelings. It is a special day for me and for us!”

“Did you get a sense of having achieved something by going to the Gitega prison today?”

“Oh, yes! I have shown my loving heart to those in prison. I am sure that it has been a good surprise for those in the prison to see so many people with such caring hearts coming from our IDP camp. They would never have imagined that! Well, I am certain that I have planted a tree of trust (*big smile!!*).”

Another handsome man we talked to is Marius Nzeyimana, a Tutsi from Mutaho. Many of his relatives were badly slaughtered. Marius is now staying in the IDP camp with many of his in-laws orphans and widows.

“Marius, could you tell me what you are feeling after this visit?”

“As my colleagues are, I am also very happy, joyful, overwhelmed! It is a new step we made, an important one towards the recovery of our commune.”

“What would you tell to all those who would hear about your heroic visit?”

“‘The wheel has turned!’ We should not stay stuck in the past. We need to rebuild our country, our communities. Actually, I would not want to interfere with the justice’s job [punishing those found guilty], but it would be my strong wish to see those into prison [Hutu] being released. It is true that I have lost many of my relatives and loved-ones. They are no longer alive. What sense would it make to lose two persons when you can rescue one? Even if the one to be rescued used to be your enemy, one needs to get the necessary strengths to rescue that person. That is where my forgiving power comes from.”

“How did you get to that commitment, Marius? I find it very courageous!”

“We have attended many workshops organized by Mi-PAREC on conflicts resolution. But I was still traumatized though I was not aware of it and for me there was a conflict within myself. After I attended the HROC workshop, I realized how traumatized I was and found how I could heal. Holding all the bad emotions inside of me had kept me a prisoner of hatred. As soon as realized that I could let it go, I found the strength to forgive. HROC has been a real catalyst in all that!”

Pastor Sebastien Kambayeko, the HROC lead-facilitator from Mutaho IDP camp, did not want to hide his pride.

“My heart is full of happiness, joy and excitement. The dream has become reality. Last Saturday, after our short visit with the prisoners’ delegation, I was astonished by the congratulations that we received from those with whom we are staying in the Mutaho IDP camp. Years ago, not many in the IDP camp would have appreciated such a visit to the former Mutaho leaders kept in the prison. Instead, we would have been threatened. Praise God for that! I express my feelings of great gratitude and thankfulness to my teammates here, to HROC and Mi-PAREC for their undeniable support. It is true that I cannot change people, but I am sure that people could learn from what has been achieved.”

Pastor Elie Nahimana and Pastor Levy Ndikumana also took the opportunity to thank all the participants for this big achievement.

Pastor Elie said, “This is a great event for our Friends Church in Burundi. Most of the time, people quickly recognize this or that organization because they see the many houses and roads built or can count how many people have been given food, blankets and so on. It is not often that the community healing and peace building organizations are familiar to those who would not have been in the program. I am fully convinced that the valuable work done by HROC and Mi-PAREC has brought a lot to the Mutaho community and

elsewhere. One of their fruits is this visit that you have made. It is a big testimony that you have shown. We strongly recognize the good collaboration in peace building between the Friends Church in Burundi and local administration. We wish to keep this collaboration with the new government too. As Friends, we will never give up, with our diverse services, to be near the population, especially the vulnerable ones.”

Pastor Levy Ndikumana stated, “We praise your ongoing efforts in spreading the peace building work. I am very excited to realize that among the peace committees that we are working with, the Mutaho one is among the best ones. It would be my great joy to see Mutaho being rebuilt after the massive destructions that occurred there. This would never happen if the Mutaho folks are not involved in peacebuilding, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa together. We congratulate Pastor Sebastien Kambayeko for his leadership. He has been a wonderful contact person in Mutaho. I think that we need to have many like him. We are very enthusiastic to hear you saying that the HROC workshops and Mi-PAREC conflict resolution seminars have enabled you to get to this stage. This shows how complementary these two programs are. Back in your communities, please keep peace with everybody. We are now observing many changes in our country’s leadership. The 1993 conflicts should have been a lesson to all of us. Then, we should not let ourselves be used by anyone who would want to disturb the peace in our community. Instead, resist them and be an instrument of change for the community’s well being.”

I approached Aimé-Claude, the driver from Mi-PAREC, who helped drive the group back and forth from Mutaho, “How do you see this visit?”

“There is no way that you can do such a thing without being led by God’s Spirit! The Spirit led this group! I have a great respect for them.”

“What do you mean by being led by God’s Spirit?”

“Understanding that you are called to do good to the one who did wrong to you. In that way, instead of pushing the person away from you, which will put all of you into isolation, you bring the person back to you, which will put all of you into communion. This group has showed a wonderful way of communion. May all Burundians follow this excellent example.”

After a lunch at Mi-PAREC, we exchanged good-bye hugs, hoping that we would meet again.