

A large, spreading tree with a thick trunk and dense green foliage stands in a field of tall, dry grass. The sky is a clear, bright blue, and a small crescent moon is visible in the upper left quadrant. The text is centered over the sky and the top of the tree.

**Risking our Lives  
so that  
We May Save Others**

The story of a peace-maker in the  
Central African country of Burundi



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I remember in 1994 the day in Burundi when the bus carrying fifty-three young Burundian volunteers and myself, Prosper Ndabishuriye, was stopped by government soldiers during the height of the ethnic wars between Hutu and Tutsi which had engulfed the region, including Rwanda, Burundi and even Congo. We knew we were in great danger when the soldiers—who were mostly Tutsi—came onto the bus and pointed out the Hutu, telling them to go outside—most likely to be killed, as this was a time of horrible killing between Hutu and Tutsi. We had recently made a decision to work as a team in Burundi, starting in Ruyigi province to help make peace by bringing Hutu and Tutsi refugees in their own country together to rebuild their homes. Each of the 53 young men knew they would need to put their lives on the line and stand up for one another in any moment.



Prosper with a widow who is a refugee from the ethnic wars, standing in front of her new home built with the help of Prosper's organization - Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction.

This is the commitment we had made to one another as a team to help our people. It is this compassion, this solidarity to serve others and a purpose beyond ourselves that has carried the work of our organization (Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction) from

then to this day.

But let me give some background. My name is Prosper Ndabishuriye and my name means “I paid for others.” I was born in 1957 in the small country of Burundi which is located in Central Africa, between Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania. About the size of Maryland, Burundi was colonized first by Germany and then by Belgium, which many know was an extremely oppressive regime.

The seeds of conflict were sown during that time as the colonial regime discriminated among the three ethnic groups—the Twa (the first ethnic group to live in Burundi) the Hutu and the Tutsi--by favoring the Tutsi. This took the form of excluding Hutu and Twa from higher education,

which also limited their economic opportunities. This racism reflected the European bias at that time—which still persists today—that the more western-looking African—like the Tutsi and peoples of northern Africa—were superior to the Bantu-type African common to Central and South Africa. So while all the three ethnic groups speak one language, Kirundi, and had lived in peace before colonial times, envy, pride, fear and animosity grew among these groups and was used to the advantage by the colonial powers. And it was as a result of this inequity, that the Tutsi, which is a minority at 14% of the population, came to dominate the government, military and economy, excluding the majority Hutu and the lesser numbers of Twa from freedom and opportunity.



This great social injustice became a festering wound which erupted in Burundi in the years following Burundi's independence in 1962. Conflict and killings started in 1965, and continued in 1972, 1988, and 1993, driven by the Tutsi-dominated government who feared for their position of control to be shared.

During all of these periods of killings, the ones of 1972 and 1993 were the worst. In 1972, more than 300,000 Hutu, mainly educated people, students and businessmen were killed by the Tutsi-dominated army. Many Hutu fled the country; in fact, I just recently met a Burundian woman refugee in Seattle who barely escaped death at that time, and has been afraid to return—all her family having been killed during the 1972 killings. But later in 1993, instead of just Tutsi killing Hutu, there was rampant, mass killings by both groups in the wake of the Army's assassination of a democratically elected Hutu President Melchior Ndadaye—not only of the Hutu president but many high level Hutu cabinet ministers were killed. In the three months following Ndadaye's assassination, around a half million Hutu and Tutsi were slaughtered, including women, and children. Around 60% of homes—as well as schools and hospitals—were completely destroyed. The country became a veritable wasteland as people took up machetes, guns, grenades, swords, bamboo sticks or used tires to burn people in.

*In 1972, more than 300,000 Hutu, mainly educated people, students and businessmen were killed by the Tutsi-dominated army.*

And similar to what happened in Rwanda, as many have seen in the movie Hotel Rwanda, we saw no effective intervention from the international community to intercede in all this bloodshed. In fact, when I mentioned this to a man in Seattle recently, he asked “Do

you have oil?” Where, then, is the moral foundation for global relations, and the moral foundation for a peaceful society?

These were questions that were troubling me greatly at that time and continue not only to disturb me, but guide the work we are now doing which begun at the most horrific time in 1994.

You see at that time, I had been working for Campus Crusade for Christ International—as National Director—and my ministry was to train church leaders in evangelism, discipleship and in church leadership. Our focus was in matters of spiritual development, but seeing the terrible plight of my people, I felt an urgent need to minister to their physical needs. In my work I was privileged to know and work with many youth from churches, colleges and secondary schools, and I was well known by church leaders from many denominations. Seeing the killing and destruction that was taking place during that period—with hundreds of thousands of Hutu, Tusti and Twa fleeing without knowing where to go and others in displacements camps—I asked myself,

*“What can I do in order to save the lives of those innocent people who are being killed by their fellow countrymen?”*

Then, because of my work with youth, the idea came to me to invite young people from both Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups for a workshop to discuss this matter and come up with a solution. This workshop, called a Mission of Hope, came at a time when Hutu and Tutsi could not meet or live together, and so the very act of bringing Hutu and Tutsi youth together like this was the first step toward the peace and reconciliation work we have done ever since. But we needed \$500, so I called a friend of mine, Gary Labadie in Michigan, USA, who kindly responded to my request.

When the Hutu and Tutsi youth we invited came and saw those from another ethnic group, they were quite frankly surprised, as the situation was so bad that Hutu and Tutsi simply could not meet like this. But these young people trusted me, and were willing to put aside their fears for the sake of their people and to make peace— 153 in total from all ethnic groups including the Twa.

Our four-day workshop was to prepare these youth for the mission of “Rebuilding Hope and Homes, through sharing the Love of Christ in Action,” ultimately challenging them to take a stand by answering two questions. The first was “Who is willing to join the team as a volunteer, whose mission is to rebuild hope and shelters for the people of Burundi?” All the 153 participants who attended the workshop said yes to this question. But then I had a second and harder question. “Who is willing to risk his life and possibly be killed while he is saving the Burundians from the situation of killing one another?” Fifty-three young people said yes and were, if necessary, ready to die to help their people. We thanked the other 100 and sent them home appreciating their need to make the decision not to join our team. In joining the team, all 53 volunteers knew they were making a commitment to live and work as a family—Hutu protecting Tutsi and Tutsi protecting Hutu, providing a living, tangible and inspiring example to the Burundian people that peace indeed was possible.

Our initial plan was to help Hutu and Tutsi of Burundi, starting in the Burundian eastern province Ruyigi, to rebuild their homes. But we needed \$5,000 for food, building and other materials, seemingly an impossible sum at that time. But we believed God was behind our mission, and two days prior to departure, a man named Otto from the Mennonite Central Committee in eastern Congo came to my office, saying he had heard of our initiative. He then gave me a white envelope in which I found \$5,000 US in cash (not a

check)—just the sum we needed. If there had been any doubt before, at this moment I knew God had confirmed this mission, as He has been doing ever since up to today.

Funds in hand, we rented a bus and truck to transport the team and materials to Kwisomo in Ruyigi Province, but the road to get there was very dangerous for us, guarded as it was by both Tutsi and Hutu militias at different places. In my country Hutu and Tutsi can recognize and tell one another apart, so when the bus arrived at the first checkpoint guarded by government soldiers the soldiers came onto the bus, picked out the Hutu among us and told them to get down. And we all knew that if the team didn't intervene in some way, that these Hutu would be killed by the Tutsi soldiers. As the Hutu got off the bus, Tutsi members of our team did the same, and went up to the soldiers saying "If you are going to kill these brothers of ours, you must kill us first," because this is the commitment we had made with one another to make peace for our people. The Tutsi among us explained that we were one team with a mission to help all Burundian people, Hutu and Tutsi alike, to forgive, reconcile and make peace through rebuilding hope and homes.

I must say that this was a surprise and shock to these soldiers and no doubt threw them into confusion, as they did not want to kill members of their own ethnic group. Who knows, perhaps they were also moved by the goodness of our mission and the high-reaching vision we had for the country. At any rate, they agreed to let us go through, saying that perhaps we would be killed further down the road. We then arrived at another barrier, this time controlled by the Hutu militias, which had formed to fight the government soldiers, and encountered a similar situation when Hutu militias, after inspecting the bus, told the

Tutsi among us to get down. They said ‘You have been killing Hutu since 1965, 1972, 1988 until today, and now it’s your turn to pay.’ But, as before, our Hutu team members also got down and said “You must kill us first if you plan to kill them,” explaining our commitment to work as a family to bring peace to our people. Again, we were miraculously waved on without incident. In fact, in all the years of our work with the organization we started then—Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction—not one member has lost his life, even though we were prepared to make this sacrifice if needed.

Arriving at Kwisumo, our destination, we found that Hutu and Tutsi who used to live there had fled to the hills, Hutu on one side and Tutsi on another, because they were afraid of each other. It was a time of killing and destroying and there was very little reason for these two groups to trust one another or want to live together.

We divided our team into small groups of Hutu and Tutsi which went into the hills to encourage these people to join us in rebuilding their homes. I must say they were surprised and some initially afraid when they saw our multiethnic group. Some asked accusingly “*How can you come here with the people who have been killing us?*” and we explained that we had come in a show of ethnic solidarity to help them rebuild their homes.

*We explained that we are all Burundians, and that the members of our team are not killers, but peacemakers.*

Slowly, Hutu and Tutsi in these two locations began to trust us and one another. With this trust came hope that through rebuilding homes they could live together again.

It was in this way that our work of “Rebuilding Hope and Homes” got started, and that “Youth in Reconstruction of a World in Destruction” was born as one of the first non-governmental peacemaking organizations in Burundi.

We believe there is a critical relationship between homes and peace, because how can people who have no place to live feel secure enough to accept the call to peace. And where there is no peace and stability from having not just homes but communities — and a sense of community — there is no hope for security and further development.



Here our volunteers are attaching a door to a new home.

Since that beginning in 1994, we have been able to assist over 3,000 Hutu and Tutsi families to rebuild their homes. We continue today with wonderful vision to help rebuild Burundi and presently, we are rebuilding an entire village in Kinama Zone, at Carama location, a part of the capital city of Bujumbura, with the help of our USA partner organization called Youth for a New World, headed by Mike Seymour.

In this location, we will be serving 800 Hutu and Tutsi refugee families to rebuild homes and live in peace again. This will be a model

village for the whole region, as we hope to include environmentally sound practices (like tree planting), productive agricultural practices, alternative and clean sources of energy, as well as a school, health center and play fields for children. In time, it is also our plan to develop a Great Lakes Center for Peace to which we can draw youth not only from around Central Africa but also from Europe and the United States for conferences, workshops and semester-long studies on peace, sustainable development and building the world we want.



The children of Carama don't have any place to go and play together. That's why we work to build play fields and recreational locations for the kids.

So, years after this work began in 1994, the work continues, and there is much to be done.

Yes, we need each other; then we need to care for one another.

*For more information, please visit our website at [www.jrmd.org](http://www.jrmd.org).*

If you feel touched by this story, or if you would like to join us in the work of rebuilding hope and homes for the victims of the war that we are doing in Burundi, and the Great Lake Region, through your financial support, please contact us at any of the following addresses:

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