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Learning Peace and Reconciliation in Congo

by Lon Fendall

The high point for me was watching the impromptu skits. The low point was waiting endlessly at the border, hoping and praying we would all get to cross to participate in the Congo Young Friends Peace and Justice Conference in Uvira, Congo. In between were some rewarding and stretching experiences in a part of the world where people have much more experience with violence and injustice than they would like.

Mkoko Boseka, Legal Representative (Superintendent) of Congo Yearly Meeting, had been urging me for a number of years to organize a team to come to participate in a seminar for Young Friends (in Congo meaning those under 50) on Christian approaches to peace and justice. I had retired from my position as director of the Center for Peace and Justice at George Fox University, but my successor in the position, Clint Baldwin, agreed to put together a team of current and former George Fox students to become presenters and fellow learners with the Congolese participants. The result was an inspiring time of learning together about what it means to be a follower of Christ in peacemaking.



All photos courtesy of Lon Fendall.

Back to the skits. When I've taught in Congo previously, the students had shown remarkable creativity and energy in putting together and presenting dramatic sketches that demonstrated and applied the points being taught. The peace and justice participants didn't disappoint. Three different groups came up with well-focused and humorous skits applying what they had learned at the seminar about achieving reconciliation in various conflict situations. I'll never forget the two men who kept moving a rock back and forth, representing their conflicting ideas of where the boundary to their farmland belonged.

I always look forward to spending time with Friends in Congo, even though the State Department tells me it's not safe for an American to be there. They're right about it not being a safe place, but Americans are probably the least likely to be in danger, especially in Uvira, the site of our seminar. Uvira is only a 40-minute drive from the Burundi border and it is home to a very large unit of UN Peace-



-keeping forces. The only scary part of getting to the Friends Peace Center, where our seminar was held, is the astoundingly rough road up the hill. But on arriving at the center one is rewarded with a beautiful view of Lake Tanganyika and a surrounding panorama of Congolese daily life – kids headed to school in the morning, the faithful being called to worship at 5:00 a.m., men transporting large stones down the hills to be used in building projects, and women collecting firewood.

Participants in the seminar were eager to learn. They knew a lot about violent conflict, but wanted help with finding reconciliation in their communities and their nation. The accounts of frequent clashes between the many armed groups, the unbelievably large numbers of

women who have been raped and harassed, the seemingly impossible challenge of carving out a secure future for one's self and family were immediate and vivid. For the US visitors, these were experiences they had only known from the news media and textbooks. As Amy McDonald, one of the GFU student presenters said as she got ready to leave, "One cannot deny the grief felt in entering a country where the land – where the people – continue to be, murdered, raped, and marginalized. You only have to open your eyes." Along with making several presentations, Amy's special gift was playing with the kids from the Peace Center neighborhood and teaching them such peaceful games as "Duck, Duck, Goose."

David Niyonzima, director of Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services in Burundi and a pastor in Burundi Yearly Meeting, opened the seminar with a challenge to the participants to begin planting the seeds of peace and preparing for a bountiful harvest of reconciliation in their communities, churches, and their broader society. Tyler Olson, a GFU graduate and now a graduate student in peace and conflict studies at Portland State University introduced the concept of "restorative justice" and told about his work with incarcerated persons in the prison system in Portland, Oregon. Sara Eccleston drew on her experiences in learning and service while in Zimbabwe. Clint Baldwin was the one who got turned away at the Congo border without the proper visa, but devoted himself to praying for the group and learning about reconciliation work in Burundi.

As they returned home, team members remembered the gracious hospitality extended to them by the Congo Friends leaders. They remembered the excellent questions seminar participants asked throughout the sessions. They remembered the energetic worship and dancing in the concluding worship session and thoughtful words of appreciation for their coming. They noted the participants' frequent requests that the team come again for another time of training and inspiration.

Without the generous help of the Peace and Justice Sub-Committee of Northwest Yearly Meeting, grants from the student government at George Fox, and help from family and friends, the team of six could not have made the costly journey to Congo for the peace conference. One thing they agreed on in their evaluations was that something like this needed to be done again and if way opened for them to be personally involved they would be delighted to join.

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