

# Couple from Olds work for Rwandan reconciliation

Anastaisie's parents, two brothers and a sister were all slaughtered in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Now, the man who killed them, after serving 14 years in jail, is building three chicken sheds for Anastaisie.

The woman agreed to a mediation process on condition the killer told her every detail about how each of her family members was killed.



Joan and John Palardy of Olds hope to return to Rwanda to work for reconciliation. Ramon Gonzalez, Western Catholic Reporter

"What a courageous woman!" said Joan Palardy, a retired chaplain at Bowden Institution who spent six weeks in Rwanda with her husband John teaching techniques of restorative justice. "And she told him what she went through for all these years."

The Palardys hope to return to Rwanda for at least six months to do more work with prison chaplains.

In just 100 days in 1994, 800,000 Tutsi people were slaughtered, many chopped to pieces by their Hutu neighbours in one of the world's worst genocides.

Over the years, many of the offenders have been caught, convicted and jailed. Many of the survivors sport wounds – both physical and psychological.

Can reconciliation ever be achieved? Difficult as it seems, Joan and John believe it is possible.

In March and April the Catholic couple visited Rwanda, Burundi and Congo to

teach prison chaplains a transformative vision of justice.

Joan's specialty is grief recovery. John is a retired social worker and counsellor. He used to be manager for children services in the Red Deer area.

Both are members of Just.Equipping, a Canadian registered charity committed to educating, training and equipping in the area of restorative justice, an approach that engages victims, offenders and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.

Joan did grief recovery work with the chaplains to prepare them for their role as mediators.

"In order for them to work with the victims of the genocide and the offenders responsible for the killings of so many of their family members, they have to understand their own victimization," Joan said.

"The victimization that they have experienced is huge.



Human skulls discovered in a mass grave in Rwanda. More than 400 inmates in one prison wrote letters to survivors of their crimes asking for forgiveness.

"We taught them the grieving process and what the victims experience and what the offenders also experience later."

Since 2006, Just.Equipping has conducted training missions in Africa, mainly Rwanda, Burundi and Congo. The Palardys were part of a team of six Canadians that visited the area this year.

During its six-week teaching mission, the team offered sessions on basic restorative justice, biblical justice, grief recovery and counselling to prison chaplains, pastors, teachers, local authorities, and representatives of the police and military.

In Rwanda, the team stayed at Gisenyi, a city some 250 km northwest of the capital city of Kigali. There the Palardys, both active members of St. Stephen Parish in Olds, worked with about a dozen prison chaplains, themselves survivors of the genocide.

"Our role was to teach the chaplains how to work with mediation as well as to work through their own losses because that way they realize it is possible to do this," Joan said.

Many of the Hutu offenders were young kids when they were abducted by the army and forced to kill their own neighbours and classmates, she said.

"This really goes back to the Gospel of Jesus, having compassion for these people," John said. "That's really what needs to happen."

If the chaplains are able to look past the offence, then reconciliation can take place. "That's what we are taught and that's what I believe, that we have to see Jesus within them because there is good in everyone.

"It's not an easy thing to do but that's what Jesus did. He looked past the offence to the person and he saw goodness within them.

#### **ACCEPTANCE GRANTED**

"That's what turns people around often because they are still accepted for who they are in spite of what they've done."

Chaplains often carry letters of apology from genocide offenders to victims and then help in the mediation process.

"They give this letter to the victim or the victim's family," Joan explained. "The victim reads it and if they wish to meet at some point with this offender then the chaplain will arrange that. It's a huge job that these chaplains have."

About 400 inmates from Gisenyi Prison wrote letters asking forgiveness of their victims for genocide crimes. These letters resulted in the development of a Victim-Offender Mediation Protocol, often resulting in a victim-offender meeting inside the prison.

"So you have the offender reaching out to the victim and then the victim has to be prepared to meet with the offender and of course that takes a long time too because both have to be prepared for that mediation, and so a chaplain is always present for that."

Chaplains don't try to persuade survivors to accept mediation. "It's the victim who makes the decision. Some of them have been very willing; some of them have said no."

Visiting with the victims is a tough thing for prison chaplains because they often don't have money for transportation. Prison chaplaincy is a volunteer position in Rwanda. An Ontario parish is currently paying \$10-a-month to each prison chaplain working in Gisenyi.

#### **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

Restorative justice is a new concept in Rwanda but it's slowly expanding. "Some of these offenders who have met with their victims have been released because they realize that this offender is serious and is taking responsibility for his offence," Joan explained.

"So what's happening is some of these offenders are moving back into the community where this victim is and they are doing things for this victim to help pay back some of what they stole. They are contributing financially or helping (the survivor) to build a house."

In Burundi, the team was able to visit four prisons and bring in food and soap for some of the prisoners. They also gave a weeklong course in restorative justice to more than 30 chaplains.

In Goma, Congo, the team met with young women who had been raped in prison and visited a sewing workshop local chaplains had built for the women.

The Palardys would like to return to Rwanda and stay for at least six months to do in-depth grief recovery work with the prison chaplains. "We just want to go there and equip local people in their work in justice issues, John said.