

Faith answers need for peace and serenity in a troubled world, says Roméo Dallaire



Dallaire temporarily lost his faith after witnessing the 1994 Rwandan genocide of nearly a million people. Dallaire now says "There is a God fighting evil, and sometimes he wins and sometimes he loses, but that belief in God is going to sustain you. That is absolutely essential to be able to survive and sustain in these incredible challenges." Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

In military terms, 'covering your 6 o'clock' means watching someone's back while they're in combat. For retired lieutenant-general Roméo Dallaire, his Catholic faith is how he covers his 6 o'clock.

And it is faith, says Dallaire, that is sorely needed in society today.

"I think that our societies are hurting, because there's no spiritual depth to them," said Dallaire, 72, a former military commander and senator now serving as a humanitarian and author.

"All the other factors are there, from our values, from our moral references, from our laws, our social norms. When you fall into crisis, or fall into difficulties, you find that they're there, but they don't cover all the bases."

Dallaire spoke to more than 150 people at First Presbyterian Church on August 2 at the annual North American Interfaith Network conference, where he shared how faith can relate to crisis and conflicts.

Faith in God, said Dallaire, answers his need for peace and serenity in an increasingly troubled world, and also serves as "a backdrop to cover my 6 o'clock when I'm in crisis, with my injury of PTSD."

But this wasn't always true for Dallaire, who spoke of how his faith had been affected – and at one point, even destroyed – by his experiences in Rwanda, as well as his struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and his ongoing work to end the recruitment of child soldiers.

Dallaire grew up attending Catholic schools in Montreal and was an altar server for six years. He admits his faith fluctuated as he went through military college and later grew as he climbed the ranks.

"God had abandoned 800,000 Rwandans, my force, myself, and did absolutely nothing to stop it."

It was while serving as the force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda in 1994 that Dallaire lost his faith, after witnessing the genocide of nearly a million people.

"(Faith) was something that I, in fact, fought against in the post-Rwanda genocide period," said Dallaire, adding: "God had abandoned 800,000 Rwandans, my force, myself, and did absolutely nothing to stop it."

Dallaire struggled with PTSD after returning from Rwanda in 1994, and has spent more than 20 years healing through therapy and mental health treatment.

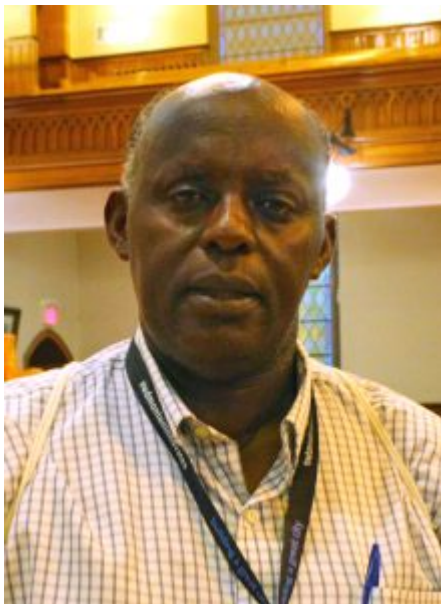
His faith began to recover three years ago, after he received letters from senior United Nations officials who took responsibility for not listening to Dallaire's requests for military support and aid during the genocide.

After receiving the letters, Dallaire said he felt a lifelong burden of guilt dissolve.

"I wasn't feeling the guilt of having carried the whole of the catastrophe," said Dallaire, founder of the Halifax-based Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers

Initiative, which works to end the use of child soldiers.

“That started to reopen the door to going back to church.”



Emmanuel Gatera Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Emmanuel Gatera, a conference attendee from Rwanda, said he was struck both by Dallaire’s commitment to save lives during the genocide – to the point where Dallaire refused to leave Rwanda and the thousands of people under his care – and how his recovered faith relates to conflict today.

“Maybe he is the right person to express that. I think as a soldier, as a general, and a commander of the UN, disobeying his superiors to save lives, it had surely been motivated by his faith deep, deep inside himself,” said Gatera.

“In the end, if you have to turn to something, you can turn to your faith.”

Faith also plays a pivotal role in how senior military officers respond to complex moral dilemmas on the battlefield, said Dallaire, arguing that the moral and legal standards in society simply aren’t enough.

He pointed to examples that he and his fellow officers faced, such as the 1970 October Crisis in Quebec, when the Canadian military was deployed for the first time on Canadian soil and faced the possibility of killing fellow citizens.

“When you’re caught up in such dilemmas, the question is: What do you turn to? What references can you use in order to make the right decisions? In the end, if you have to turn to something, you can turn to your faith.”



Jen Waters Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Jen Waters, who lives in Edmonton, said she had seen the retired lieutenant-general speak on Rwanda and military intervention before, but had never heard him speak on those topics from a faith perspective.

“Obviously, this is a man who has experienced so much and has seen so much. That he used that as a perspective point to everything that he saw, to a person that’s an atheist, that’s a powerful thing to hear,” said Waters.

It’s this same faith perspective that Dallaire says is essential to handle the challenges of today.

“We need that depth, of something grander, something far stronger, that belief in a God,” said Dallaire.

“There is a God fighting evil, and sometimes he wins and sometimes he loses, but that belief in God is going to sustain you. That is absolutely essential to be able to survive and sustain in these incredible challenges.”