

**REPORT ON
FACT FINDING TRIP
TO
RWANDA
JUNE 4-24, 2019**

I was invited to Rwanda by Pastor Jean-Claude Maniragaba, the founder of the Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda. It came as a bit of a "God-incidence." Just before this invitation came, I had been visited by a man who lives here in Medicine Hat who is an immigrant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He showed me pictures of a friend in the DRC who is a Lutheran pastor as well as pictures of his ministry. I communicated via email to the friend and was considering a visit to the DRC when the email from Jean-Claude arrived. I thought they knew each other as Rwanda and the DRC are neighbouring countries. It turned out that they weren't. Jean-Claude had emailed me because he was interested in becoming part of LCMC and saw our church listed and liked its name (Victory).

The Country and its People

Genocide

Rwanda is best known for the horrific genocidal actions that took place here 25 years ago. It is well known in Canada because a Canadian general Romeo Dallaire, Force Commander for UNAMIR, the United Nations peacekeeping force, wrote "Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda." The genocide was well-planned and grounded in Hutu resentment towards the more privileged Tutsi minority. The reality is, however, that they speak the same language and share the same culture. 800,000 people died in the course of that event which lasted 100 days. There were priests and nuns who were involved in the killing and churches were the scenes of many massacres. Today the visible signs of this horrible period are not on buildings but on the people themselves, both physically and emotionally.

Subsequently the country has made remarkable progress. In 2017, Rwanda was listed as the 9th safest country in the world and the safest in Africa. While security is present, I felt perfectly safe walking the streets by myself at night. I was only approached by one beggar during my entire stay. Volkswagen is currently building a factory in the country. Ethnicity has been removed from identity cards and it is a crime for one ethnic group to speak against another. While the government of Paul Kagame has been described as "autocratic," this has helped preserve peace and promote prosperity. A new national "myth" is being created to

build the sense of unity among the people. We passed numerous genocide memorials throughout the country.



The People

I found the Rwandans to be a little reticent and tentative at first meeting. This may be part of the national character and culture but certainly the events of the past have re-enforced this trait. However, once you get to know them, they are warm and friendly, and extremely concerned for the welfare of their guests.



This is Simeon, a powerful worshiper of the Lord

Religious Composition

The country is 49.5% Roman Catholic, 39.4% Protestant, 1.8% Islam, 0.1% Indigenous, 3.6% none, and other 0.6%. The major Protestant denominations are the Anglican Church and the Seventh-day Adventist church. I also saw many Jehovah Witness kingdom halls. The Muslims are busy building mosques funded by wealthy oil-rich Arab countries. There is another Lutheran denomination present. The Lutheran Church of Rwanda was founded in 1994 by Rwandan refugees in Tanzania and has about 6000 members.

The Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda

The Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda (Lutheran.church.weebly.com) was formed in 2011 by Pastor Jean-Claude Maniragaba. He had come to learn of Martin Luther while a student at the Westminster Theological College in Kampala, Uganda (today known as Africa Reformation Theological Seminary, ARTS, arts.ac.ug). The "Reformed" in its name may seem contradictory but should be understood in a sense more like "reorganized" rather than "Calvinist." He began this church rather than joining the existing denomination because of its affiliation with the Lutheran World Federation and the ELCA. There is a history in Africa of supporting churches imposing Western practices on African churches regardless of

cultural norms. As the Western Church continues to veer from Biblical standards there is a concern what this might mean in the future. Pastor Maniragaba is a young man (36) with much ambition (in a good sense). He is driven to fulfill the mandate the Lord has given him and has the respect of his pastors.



Pastor Maniragaba and Family

Composition of the RLCR

The RLCR consists of 10 churches. I visited 6 of the 10 during my time there and 10 pastors (I met all of them). The church is concentrated in the Nyagatare District of the Eastern Province in the far northeast of the country where Uganda and Tanzania meet Rwanda. I also met all of the pastors' wives as well as many deacons and deaconesses of the church.

My Trip

In order to better understand the Rwandan context, I was taken to visit the Kigali Genocide Memorial and the Campaign Against Genocide Museum. 250,000

are buried at the Kigali memorial alone. Similar memorials are found throughout the country.

When I arrived in the Nyagatare District, I first visited 6 local churches of the RLCR. These were scattered all the way up to the Uganda/Tanzania/Rwanda border. On the Sunday I preached at the church at Mukama and baptized 25 children and youth during the service. The following week was spent teaching pastors, deacons and evangelists, as well as the pastor's wives. The topics covered included these:

- A brief introduction to Lutheran history
- The Sacraments
- The "Solas" (Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Word Alone, and Christ Alone)
- Law/Gospel dichotomy
- The Lutheran Church throughout the world
- The Lutheran liturgy
- An introduction to the Augsburg Confession
- Character, Calling, Anointing, and Spiritual Formation of Pastors

The second Sunday I was pleased to ordain 6 pastors in the Office of Holy Ministry. One of the messages which was well received is the Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda is indeed a church. Even the chief of the village of Mukama commented on this.



Ordination of Pastors



Church at Mukama

Challenges of the Church

1. Church Buildings

This is the story as report by "Christian Today:"

In Rwanda, though, where this story comes from, it's not quite that simple. It's true that the government has closed 8,000 churches – but why, and what do the Christians who live there think about it?



The government of President Paul Kagame has closed 8,000 churches on health and safety grounds. [Reuters](#)

Forever shadowed by the 1994 genocide in which around 800,000 Tutsis were murdered by their neighbours after a years-long media campaign to demonise them, Rwanda is seen today as an African success story. Its economy has rebounded, and a process of healing and reconciliation has been held up as a model for others. All this has been under the leadership of its president, Paul Kagame, whose achievements have caused outside observers to be tolerant of his tendency to disregard democracy when it suits him. The government is in a position of enormous power in what's effectively a one-party state, and it's determined to continue progress towards its 'Vision 2020' goals, ambitious targets for improvements in education, infrastructure, healthcare, agriculture and governance.

Part of Rwanda's vision for the future involves a reform of the churches. Around 95 per cent of Rwandans are believers, many of them Roman Catholics. But churches suffer from untrained leadership and poor accountability, while many buildings are in a poor state of repair. At the other end of the scale, pastors are accused of enriching themselves and living lifestyles far beyond the reach of their congregations, who ultimately pay for them.

Kagame himself has declared the high number of congregations – 700 in the capital Kigali – to be 'a mess' and said he wants to reduce them. His government has used its powers to enforce a draconian buildings code, closing down churches accused of failing to comply with health, safety and noise regulations. Of the 8,000 churches that have been closed, four in 10 belong to the country's 3,300-strong network of Pentecostal churches.

On July 27, Rwanda's parliament passed a further law requiring pastors to have a theological degree from an accredited school. It also prohibits church leaders from ordering lengthy periods of fasting, and requires churches to disclose their sources of funding – a key weapon against corruption.

A government statement said: 'These closures do not infringe on freedom to worship, but rather address the alarming proliferation of places of worship in dilapidated and unhygienic conditions, as well as troubling behaviour by unscrupulous individuals masquerading as religious leaders.'

'The latter have, among other abuses, defrauded innocent followers, broadcast insults against women and other religions, and forced followers to fast to the point of death from starvation.'

There has been some pushback. After 700 churches were closed earlier this year, six pastors were [arrested](#) for allegedly planning a campaign of resistance. But on the whole, the leaders of Rwanda's major denominations are surprisingly sympathetic. Rwanda's Anglican primate, Archbishop Laurent Mbanda, a member of the Interfaith Council that represents all the major traditions, said that 'no religion freedom was infringed at all. On the contrary the new development bringing a crucial element that was missing order and harmony.' He said faith-based organisations were consulted the passage of the legislation and that requiring pastors to be educated – with a five-year transition period – was a positive move. 'From many religious leaders' perspective, the new law is a step forward, not a step backward in exercising the freedom of worship and the religion,' he said.

The Anglican Bishop of Kigali, Louis Muvunyi, told Christian Today the churches that had been closed were those 'found to be lacking basic infrastructure such as poor hygiene, lack of lavatories, lack of water harvesting system, poor building safety standards'.

He said many churches were operating without licences and were functioning in residential areas of Kigali without soundproofing or parking space.

'In Rwanda the government is not persecuting churches as some media might suggest,' he said. 'The situation in Rwanda is not hostile to the church as some might think. The freedom of worship is still here. What is being done is in the interest of our people.'

'The underlying purpose is understandable and we are in constant dialogue with our local authorities to ensure that the implementation is carried out well.'

Those who have done the required improvements their church buildings have been reopened.'

He also welcomed the stress on theological education, saying: 'Churches in Rwanda have always been training ministers to be theologically educated so that they are well equipped to do the work well in our every day changing society. So, this is not something new.'

However, in spite of the positive spin put on the new rules by many church leaders, they have also been criticised by those at the sharp end. Rev Elson Mageza is director of the Bible school in Byumba diocese supported by Church Mission Society (CMS). He [told CMS](#) in June that not all church leaders could afford to study for a degree, adding that the government church buildings legislation was forcing congregations to close while they upgraded their buildings – and 'The churches being closed are led by those we are training here in our Bible school.'

The bishop of Byumba diocese, Rt Rev Emmanuel Ngendahayo, said: 'It is a catastrophic situation: 199 churches have been closed down. We now have a big number of Christians who do not go to church. We try to visit them at home as much as we can to encourage them.'

And the Rwandan Catholic Bishops' Conference has criticised the speed of the actions against churches and what they say is poor communication by the government. Secretary-general Father Martin Nizeyimana told Catholic News Service: 'Most Catholics are shocked and disappointed; they don't understand what's happening and why there's been no explanation.'

'If measures are taken to protect the safety of people, this is good, but they should be explained, so people don't just arrive and find their church closed.'

'It was all very badly handled.'

He told CNS: 'Certainly, religious freedom is proclaimed under our constitution. But if they start closing churches without any warning, we quickly see a gap between law and reality. What's most important now is to ensure our church's mission can continue here.'

Whatever the long-term future, there is clearly short-term pain for many Rwandan Christians – and to Western eyes, any government interference in religion is suspect. However, most Rwandan church leaders appear to take a more nuanced view. While they may be troubled by the scale and speed of

the crackdown, they also recognise reforms are needed. Perhaps the government – on the whole – is on the side of the angels.

In summary, in North American terms, it is a building code problem. The church is in desperate need of buildings. This is difficult for them as most congregants are subsistence farmers and there are many widows and orphans.



This picture and the two following on the next page illustrate what the government of Rwanda wants from churches in the country. The outside of the building as well as the floor must be cemented. There must be a tank to collect water as well as proper sanitary facilities with doors for men and women.



2. Training of Pastors

As noted in the above article, the training of pastors is also an issue which needs to be addressed.

3. Transport

The need for transport for the pastors is acute. One pastor bicycles 2 hours one way to his church on Sundays...even longer if his wife accompanies him. The best way to address this is through motorcycles.

4. Materials

There is a dearth of materials available in Kinyarwanda. Swahili is not widely understood except by those who may have learned it in refugee camps in places like Tanzania. English is replacing French as the main second language but this is more common among young people than among the older.

Responses

I am proposing that LCMC receive the RLCR into membership and that CALC recognize the RLCR as a sister church.

Also:

1. That we invite Pastor Jean Claude to the USA and Canada in October for our conventions, and that he spends time with us in Medicine Hat to observe Canadian church life.
2. Following that: I propose that we support the church financially to meet the critical and crucial needs that the government is imposing.
3. I propose mission trips from the USA and Canada to further develop relationships and build the Lutheran identity of the church.
4. I will contact ILT to see if there is some way we can further theological education of pastors.

Visit with Pastors from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

My visit to East Africa was really precipitated by an invitation from Pastor Achibaya Alaki. A friend of his lives here in Medicine Hat. The pastor is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Congo. Because of warnings from the Canadian government (and Pastor Maniragaba) I was not able to visit the DRC. The eastern areas of the country are still a war zone with killings as well as rape of women common. The roads are in total disrepair and ebola has been reported in the region in the last 6 months. I, however, met with him and his translator along with Pastor Maniragaba at an Anglican retreat centre on the shores of Lake Kivu in Kamembe, Rwanda within sight of the DRC. I hope to build on this relationship in the future.



Meeting with the Congolese Pastors

Please feel free to contact me:

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ADDENDUM 1

WISCONSIN SYNOD REPORT

NOVEMBER 15, 2017 BY SHEPHERDROEBKE@GMAIL.COM

Rwanda's Open Door



The children of

Karbore Lutheran Church, Rwanda

In November of 2016, Rev. Daniel Finn, an Evangelical Lutheran Synod pastor with a congregation in Brisbane Australia, was contacted by Rev. Jean Claude Maniragaba from the Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda (RLCR) through Pastor Finn's church website. They began an email conversation that led to a recent mission exploration trip by WELS representatives.

The RLCR has been a legally registered church body since 2014. Six pastors and eleven evangelists serve 400 members. Although their church is very young, the RLCR wants to be a confessional Lutheran body.



Rwanda is

located in East Central Africa, near Zambia and Malawi

Pastor Finn dovetailed a planned visit to the USA to attend the ELS yearly General Pastor Conference with a visit to Rwanda. His close relationship with Rev. Maniragaba was indispensable for this trip. He prepared two carefully put together presentations to the RLCR on the history of the Lutheran Church and on church fellowship.

Joining Pastor Finn on this trip was Rev. Forward Shamachona, a Zambian national pastor. In addition to serving four congregations in the Mwembezi District, he is also the chairman of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa – Zambia (LCCA-Z) Mission Board. I also accompanied Pastor Finn as the WELS representative.

Rev. Shamachona and I arrived in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda early in the morning on Friday, the 22nd of September. As we exited the immigration/customs area of the airport we saw a man holding up a sign with the name “Philip” on it. We greeted each other, got into their waiting car and were taken to the Hillview Hotel. Rev. Shamachona and I went to our rooms, showered and then got some needed catch up sleep having taken the overnight flight from Lusaka to Rwanda. Around 10:30 a.m. we took a leisurely lunch at the hotel restaurant when suddenly my cell phone rang. The anxious voice on the other end was Rev. Maniragaba asking where I was. He had been to the airport and could not find us! An hour and a half later, we met up with Rev. Maniragaba at our hotel. It was then we learned from the hotel that there was another “Philip” who had not gotten his ride to the Hillview hotel. We, on the other hand, were not staying at this hotel. We were going on to Nyagatare some 80 km to the east and north of Kigali after we picked up Rev. Finn at the airport.



Inside the

house church in the city of Nyagatare

Nyagatare was the base from which we visited 7 of the 11 RLCR churches. On Saturday morning, we were driven to a church located in the village of Kabarore, where 50 people are currently meeting in a rented house. Songs were sung by a children's Sunday School choir and an adult choir. A drum at this gathering and every subsequent gathering we attended in Rwanda played a very important part of the singing. Dancing was also integral to every church event we attended in Rwanda. We were read a "prayer request" by this church asking for property and help to put a church on the property. We were impressed by this congregation, which has existed for only 4 months.

On Saturday afternoon we were driven to the village of Karoma. The drumming and dancing in this church was phenomenal with both adult and children's choirs dancing and singing and then everyone in the church joining in. I was somewhat uncomfortable by the level of "enthusiasm." Several of the woman who were dancing almost appeared to get into a "zone" where their eyes rolled back into their head as they danced away. The drumming then almost became hypnotic. It was not quite rolling in the aisles and there was no speaking in tongues but it was very close to a Pentecostal service. At the end we three visitors were all asked to speak. We used the chance to encourage the leaders to attend our Wednesday, Thursday teaching sessions.



Rice farm just

300 meters from main street in Nyagatare

On Sunday morning we went to church in Rukomo. Pastor Munyondomitza Bernard led the worship service. Pastor Bernard had donated the land to the congregation. This was no small gift as the parcel of land on which the church sat was worth USA \$1,000. The church was really a larger house with its room divisions still intact. They hope to remodel it to serve as a church. They have been a congregation for less than a year. The service structure was very loose. From 9:30 until 11:45 the adult and children's choirs sang and drummed. Rev. Maniragaba gave a short law and gospel sermon.

It was at Rukomo we learned of the RLCR's charity program to orphans. The community has quite a few orphans. Most all these orphans have some extended family, but little or no opportunities for school. This is where the congregation was trying to help out. The congregation and the pastors try to fund school supplies for the children who cannot afford them. They encourage the orphans' church attendance and act as an additional support group for them.



The church in

Rukomo where Rwandan pastors attended presentations

In Rukomo we held teaching sessions with RLCR leaders for a day and a half. For each topic we were given two hours, but each topic had to be translated from English into Kinyarwanda by Rev. Maniragaba so in effect, there was only an hour to present our content. Rev. Finn started off with a brief Lutheran Church history. I talked about the importance of confessional statements to unite Christians who have the same beliefs.

Pastor Shamachona from Zambia shared an explanation of the structure of the LCCA-Z together with its worker training system. One of the great “AHA” moments of our teaching took place when Rev. Shamachona drew a simple triangle on the blackboard to illustrate how members of the congregations, at the base of the triangle, support their church, their pastors and leadership structure as we go up the triangle to its top. This simple fact was all the more impressed upon the group because it was a Zambian pastor saying this. His presence proved to be invaluable on this trip.

I also made a presentation on the topic of worship. Worship in the RLCR is a mostly one-way course of the people giving to God and very little of God giving His Word to the people. The fifth and last topic was church fellowship. Rev. Finn distilled a difficult subject to a level that his audience could understand. He talked about the importance of joining in fellowship with those who teach God’s word correctly as well as keeping away from those who teach falsely.



L-R: Rev.

Bernard, Rev. Birner, Rev. Maniragaba, Rev. Shamachona, Rev. Finn and Rev. Felicien
We observed lots of interested visitors at the churches we visited. At every church, interested community leaders were in attendance. Rwanda's door is wide open.

Missionary Philip Birner serves as the Acting Principal of the LCCA Seminary in Lusaka, Zambia

Please pray for those working in fields that are ripe for harvest. Share their story, engage with future news and receive updates. Go to this link to learn more about our mission fields in Africa and how the Holy Spirit is working faith in people's hearts <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa>



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ADDENDUM 2
AALC REPORT

Weather-Protected Shelter

The Kongsvinger congregation has an opportunity to provide financial support for two young confessional Lutheran congregations in Rwanda (Africa). The congregations are led by [Pastor Jean Claude Maniragaba](#), President of the newly-formed Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda.



Our Need

Pastor Maniragaba has a very specific request – funds are needed to construct metal roofs under which his congregations can hold worship services out of the rain. Between the two sites, the current attendance of 100 adults and 66 children will benefit from these new structures.

A minimum of **\$2,750 US** is needed to complete the project. One structure is 54 square meters (581 sq. ft) and the other is 78 sq meters (840 sq. ft). The plans and materials are readily available, and the work can be completed in approximately two weeks.

The LCSA (Lutheran Church of South Africa) has long-standing church-fellowship with the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK, Germany) and with the Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa (FELSISA), with which it shares a common liturgy and lectionary, church order, and ways of Christian living. Since 1980, the LCSA has also worked together with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which resulted in church fellowship agreement between these churches. It is also a founding member of the International Lutheran Council (ILC). The American Association of Lutheran Churches (TAALC), of which Kongsvinger is a member, have supportive relationships with several of these same Lutheran groups.

Pastor Maniragaba downloads sermons from the Kongsvinger website for personal encouragement and use within his two congregations. Therefore, we are confident that this young confessional Lutheran church body is of sound doctrine and worthy of our support.

Presently, these two congregations meet in outdoor settings without church buildings. Rwanda has two rainy seasons (February–May and September–December) during which heavy downpours occur almost daily making worship services very difficult.

A minimum of **\$2,750 US** is needed to complete the project. One structure is 54 square meters (581 sq. ft) and the other is 78 sq meters (840 sq. ft). The plans and materials are readily available and the work can be completed in approximately two weeks. Pastor Maniragaba has indicated that photos of the construction will be provided upon completion.

The Kongsvinger Council has allocated \$500 to start a fund-raising drive to provide the necessary \$2,750. You are invited to join with us and contribute toward this worthy

project to enable these young Rwandan Lutherans to meet and worship under a weather-protected shelter.