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Overflowing with Hope: Refugees on the Move

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“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13 NIV

Abstract: The refugee camps of Rwanda provide an excellent example of the way God uses great movements of people for His mission. This is the story of six young men—Jean Paul, Claude, Eric, Kamali, Benson, and Iranzi—whose families fled ethnic violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo only to spend more than twenty years in a refugee camp. Their faith in Jesus sustained their hope even in the midst of hopelessness. Finally, the Lord answered their prayers, moving them from Gihembe to Portland, Oregon, to begin a new life in the United States. Bringing their faith and hope with them, God has used them to share the love of Jesus in ways they never could have imagined years ago in Gihembe.

Rwanda is a tiny country in the heart of East Africa, roughly the size of Oregon. To the north is Uganda. To the east is Tanzania. To the south is Burundi. And to the west is the Democratic Republic of Congo. All of Rwanda’s neighbors are significantly larger. Yet what happened in Rwanda in the spring of 1994 is anything but small or insignificant. On April 7, the genocide against the Tutsi erupted in all its horror. In just one hundred days, over a million people were brutally slaughtered.¹ This genocide against the Tutsi is second only to the Nazi holocaust.² Twenty-six years later, the bodies are still being found.

Although Paul Kagame, now Rwanda’s president, and his Rwandan Patriotic Front were able to stop the violence, those committing the genocide fled into the



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Democratic Republic of Congo, where they continued murdering the Tutsi citizens of that country. People fled by the thousands into Rwanda, where they were settled into five refugee camps. Because the violence continues in their home country, this is where they continue to live more than twenty years later.

In addition to the violence that continues in the Democratic Republic of Congo, there has been and continues to be political insecurity and unrest in Burundi, just south of Rwanda. Over the past two

decades, thousands of Burundians have fled into Rwanda, the majority of whom live in the Mahama refugee camp, Rwanda's largest camp.

Rwanda is now home to more than 145,000 refugees.³ The vast majority have lived in camps for more than twenty years. Children have been born. Children have grown up. Most have known no other life than life in the camp. Here is just one story of many.



Rwanda Map - Wikipedia - Public Domain

These Numbers . . .

70.8 million people

The number of individuals who, by the end of 2018, have been forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations.

We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. The number of displaced persons in 2018 grew by 2.3 million people over the previous year, and the world's forcibly displaced population remains at a record high. This includes 25.9 million refugees in the world—the highest ever seen; 41.3 million internally displaced people; and 3.5 million asylum-seekers. New displacement remains very high. One person becomes displaced every two seconds—less than the time it takes to read this sentence. That's thirty people who are newly displaced

every minute. One in every 108 people globally is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee.⁴

145,740 people

The number of refugees living in Rwanda.

Of this total 75,740 are people who fled the ethnic violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. All but about 1,200 of these Congolese refugees live in five camps scattered across Rwanda. More than 70,000 refugees from Burundi have fled into Rwanda, with 58,552 living in a single camp—Mahama. The remaining 12,000 Burundians live in Rwanda’s urban centers.⁵

5 years

The median stay in a refugee camp worldwide.⁶

20 years

*The median stay in a refugee camp
for those who have been in camps longer than 5 years.⁷*

25 cents per person per day

*The daily living allowance provided to refugees
by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.⁸*

... Have Faces

Meet “the boys”—Jean Paul, Claude, Eric, Kamali, Benson, and Iranzi. All of them are faith-filled Christ-followers. All of them arrived at the Gihembe refugee camp in northern Rwanda as toddlers. All of them grew up there. Life was not easy. The camp, with more than twelve thousand residents, was overcrowded. The homes were small—two rooms—a tiny sitting room and an even smaller bedroom, where whole families of five or eight or ten slept on a single mattress. Cooking was done outside on a small charcoal stove and toilets were a community latrine.

There was a school in the camp, but it only went through the ninth grade, making it virtually impossible as a refugee to graduate from high school. All six of “the boys” were extremely bright. They excelled at school; and through their common passion for learning, “the boys” quickly became the best of friends and inseparable. All too soon they completed their nine years of schooling, the only education available within the camp. All of them finished at the very top of their class. How they yearned to graduate from high school, even though it seemed way beyond reach! Inside each of them also

grew a dream even more impossible than graduating from high school—the dream of someday also graduating from university. But it all seemed so utterly impossible.

Then one day, out of the blue, news came that the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which has a large presence in Rwanda, had learned about these six very bright boys and was offering to provide scholarships for them to attend the Adventist high school outside the camp. And attend they did! All six graduated at the very top of their class, and all six scored very well on Rwanda’s national high school graduation exam.

In fact, Jean Paul had the highest score of anyone on the national exam, which earned him a full-ride scholarship to an American or European university. Jean Paul was overcome with excitement and joy! His impossible dream of attending university had just become a reality. But when Jean Paul went to the capital city of Kigali to receive his award and scholarship, the officials from the Ministry of Education told him they didn’t realize he was a refugee; and since the scholarship was intended for Rwandan citizens only, he was ineligible to receive the scholarship. Excitement and joy quickly gave way to hopelessness and despair.

And what was true for Jean Paul was true for all these boys. As refugees, they had no legal status. They had no access to scholarships to attend university in Rwanda. They had no chance to find good jobs. They had no ability to change their circumstances at all. From their perspective, all of their dreams had been shattered. Life for them would never be more than this refugee camp!

So, what should six hopeless boys do with their lives in this refugee camp? Together, they talked about trusting God’s mercy and grace, even in the midst of their hopelessness. As they looked around them, they talked about the need for a good primary school within the camp to serve their refugee community. These six hopeless boys decided they wanted to give their refugee community a hope and a dream. So, in the midst of their own hopelessness, they founded Hope Primary School. They divided up the teaching responsibilities according to each of their strengths. This is how Hope School began.

About this time, *These Numbers Have Faces* learned about “the boys” and what they were doing. We visited them at Gihembe. We saw their school and how excited the children were to have them as teachers. We saw their heart and passion. We heard their dreams, even in the midst of their hopelessness. And we invited them to become part of our University Leadership Program.⁹ At first, they thought we were lying, that none of this could be real. But it was indeed very real. Through *These Numbers Have Faces*, all six boys were able to attend university in Rwanda. Through our monthly Leadership Development Workshops¹⁰, these six boys learned what it means to be an effective Christ-following servant leader who makes a transformative difference within their communities. Hopelessness soon gave way to renewed hope and revived dreams.

But the Lord had even more in store for these six boys than what even they could ever dream or imagine. Over time, five of these six boys and their families were resettled to the United States by the United Nations. In fact, all five were resettled in Portland. Unfortunately, because of a technicality, Benson was unable to be resettled with the rest of his family. He hopes one day to be able to rejoin his family.

Jean Paul and Eric were the first to arrive. Their resettlement came before they were able to graduate from university in Rwanda, which meant they would have to start their university education all over again in the United States. One of These Numbers Have Faces' board members became their advocate with the University of Portland, a Roman Catholic school. The university president agreed to provide a full-ride scholarship for Jean Paul—and Jean Paul thrived. In June 2018, Jean Paul graduated summa cum laude with a degree in electrical engineering. He now works for Intel. His job has opened up a whole new world for him, taking him to Mexico and China. He never could have imagined this when he was teaching math in Gihembe's Hope School! The University of Portland's experience with Jean Paul was so positive that they decided to create a full scholarship just for resettled refugees. Eric is now attending the University of Portland. He will graduate in June 2021 also with an engineering degree.

Claude and Iranzi were the next to arrive in the United States, Claude with his mother and Iranzi with his family. Both Claude and Iranzi had graduated from university in Rwanda before being resettled. Iranzi had graduated with a degree in finance. He is now working in the finance department of a Portland lumber company. Claude was hired as a social worker with Lutheran Community Services Northwest, helping newly resettled refugees make the transition to life in the US.



JEAN PAUL



ERIC



CLAUDE

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Unfortunately, Claude's mother became seriously ill and he had to quit his job to be her caretaker. But as she recovers, he very much hopes to return to his job working with newly arrived refugees.

Kamali was the last to arrive. He came with his father, mother, and nine younger siblings. Kamali had also graduated from university in Rwanda with a degree in finance. He currently is working as an intern with an accounting firm in Portland, which more than likely will turn into a full-time job at the end of the internship.

All five of these boys and their families have been welcomed into a very strong Rwandan community in Portland. All of them have found worshipping communities they call home. To be sure, it is much more difficult for the parents of these resettled families to integrate fully into American life. Often, they come not knowing any English. Typically, their circle of friends is limited to other Rwandans and Congolese. The children, however, arrive speaking at least a little English. Those who go to school quickly become proficient and quickly develop a broader circle of friends. Those who are out of school now work in jobs that also help them to integrate well into American society.

Resettled refugees are people on the move. They are people whom God has moved away from their countries of origin as part of His plan and purpose—not only for these refugee families, but also for the new communities these families will now call home. In a very real way, the Lord is calling us to keep our eyes wide open to what He is doing through these massive migration movements of refugee families. Then, with eyes wide open, the Lord is calling us to join Him in mission and ministry as He works through and among these refugee families.

How to Participate in God's Refugee Mission and Ministry

There are abundant opportunities for congregations and individuals to participate meaningfully and wonderfully in God's mission and ministry with and through refugee families. The first opportunity is to be part of God's work "over there." Congregations and individuals can partner and support nonprofit organizations working with refugees

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IRANZI



KAMALI

living in camps, whose time in the camp seems open-ended and unending. Refugees typically are not told they are being resettled until just days before they leave. And typically, they are not told where they are being resettled until just hours before they leave. So, life in the camp is the only sure thing they know.

Do some research on the various nonprofit organizations serving refugee communities abroad. Are their ways to sponsor a refugee child's education in the camp? Can you as a congregation or individual members adopt a university student—awaking hope and helping a dream become a reality? Can you volunteer your heart, time, and energy to participate in a short-term mission trip that serves refugee camps in some way?

The second opportunity is to be part of God's work "right here." Get involved with your local communities of resettled refugees. As a congregation and as individual members, reach out to those agencies in your communities who, like Lutheran Social Services across the country, work with resettled refugees. Can your congregation host and staff classes for resettled refugees to learn English? Can you come alongside a resettled family, serving as a resource and advocate as they transition into life in America? This is sometimes challenging, but always rewarding. Critical for a successful relationship is managing expectations.

As Americans, we often see our role as connecting resettled refugees to various social service agencies who will help them with their needs. But typically, resettled refugees come from countries that have no social service agencies. Needs are met through personal relationships, an intimate circle of family and friends. If you are my friend, you will, as you are able, give me what I need; and when you are in need, I will, as I am able, give you what you need. So, it is easy for these differing expectations to create conflict and frustration. But if we manage these differing expectations openly and honestly, then deep, meaningful relationships can develop that bless all involved in ways that are truly wonderful.

It is also important for congregations and individuals to keep their eyes, ears, and hearts open as learners when serving communities of resettled refugees. Be careful with your assumptions. For example, do not simply assume all resettled refugees need to be evangelized. Rwanda is 95 percent Christian, more Christian than we are here in the US. On Sunday morning, the churches are full. In fact, the Anglican bishop in Oregon, an American, was consecrated and commissioned for ministry by the Archbishop of Rwanda, an African!¹¹ They know Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is absolutely impossible for Rwandans, and other Africans, to separate sacred and secular. All of life is sacred. All of life is spiritual. All of life is to be lived spiritually aware. Life simply cannot be compartmentalized. As Christ-followers here in America, there is much we can learn from our resettled refugee brothers and sisters about living the Christian life together.

Conclusion

There is a Kinyarwandan word I have come to love deeply. The word is *ubumuntu*. Loosely translated, it means “I am because you are, and you are because I am.” This word is sometimes translated as “humanity.” But it really means so much more. It is a word that emphasizes our *shared* humanity. It affirms a very biblical reality that we are most fully human, most fully reflecting the image of God, when we are connected to each other through deep, holistic, and meaningful relationships. In the words of St. Paul,

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all of its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body. . . . God has put the body together . . . so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it. (1 Cor 12:12–14, 24–27 NIV)

This is God’s heart, God’s design for our life together as Christ-followers, including our life together with those newer members of our communities who have come to us as resettled refugees. God is indeed on the move—in their lives and ours. Without a doubt, the Lord uses the great movements of people for His mission. As we welcome and integrate refugees into our faith communities, we learn from each other in ways that enrich our faith and deepen our commitment to God’s mission among us.

Our eyes see mission opportunities we never saw before. Our hearts are eager to participate in God’s mission in new ways never before possible until we join hand in hand—African and American and others too. He brings us together to accomplish His mission, both here and abroad, expanding our networks and our reach exponentially. Together, hand in hand, we lift high the name of Jesus in all the neighborhoods of our communities around the world, proclaiming the One who turns our despair into joy and transforms our hopelessness into sure and certain hope. This is good news for those of us here long and for those of us newly arrived. Indeed, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13 NIV).

Endnotes

¹ Ted Dagne, *Rwanda: Background and Current Developments* (Congressional Research Service: June 1, 2011), 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40115.pdf>.

² A display at the National Genocide Museum and Memorial in Kigali, <https://www.visitrwanda.com/interests/kigali-genocide-memorial/>.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refugee Statistics,” accessed on January 20, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>.

⁴ UNHCR, “Statistics.”

⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Rwanda Country Refugee Response Plan 2019-2020,” May 23, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/rwanda/rwanda-country-refugee-response-plan-2019-2020>.

⁶ Xavier Devictor, “2019 update: How long do refugees stay in exile?” December 9, 2019, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/2019-update-how-long-do-refugees-stay-exile-find-out-beware-averages>.

⁷ Devictor, “2019 update.”

⁸ First-hand testimony of Claude, Jean Paul, Eric, and others.

⁹ We recruit very bright students from poor, rural, and post-conflict communities who otherwise would not have opportunity to attend university. We provide tuition, room and board, books, and school fees—whatever is necessary for our students to access a university education in Rwanda. In fact, 94 percent of our students will graduate successfully. Indeed, 58 percent of our 2019 graduates graduated in the top 10 percent of their classes!

¹⁰ We facilitate monthly Leadership Development Workshops, all through a Christian lens, to grow the professional skills of our students so that they can be successful, Christ-following servant leaders who make a transformational difference in their communities. In Rwanda, only 41 percent of university graduates get paying jobs within two years. However, 94 percent of our graduates get paying jobs within two years. In fact, 70 percent of our 2019 graduates had jobs within six months!

¹¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Diocese_of_the_Rocky_Mountains and <http://rockymountainanglican.org>.