With Christ’s Disciples in the Africa Great Lakes Region
(Just.Equipping in Post-Genocide Rwanda)

Rev. John de Vries,
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_Just.Equipping_ is a registered, not-for-profit organization which seeks to offer training in Restorative Justice practices, especially in developing countries. It is geared primarily to prison chaplains and justice and correctional workers. It offers courses in partnership with Queen’s School of Religion, Kingston, Ontario. It attempts to equip people to discover how to listen to others, practice truth telling and repair harm that has been done. It looks for alternatives to punishment while holding the perpetrator accountable, supporting the victim and involving the community. Just.Equipping believes that Restorative Justice is Biblical justice and tries to demonstrate this through word and deed.

Just.Equipping knows that once equipped and encouraged, people will go forward in faith to build or rebuild their own communities successfully.

Rev. Dr. Pierre Allard, President
Judith Allard, Executive Director

allard@justequipping.org

Spending the month of March in Rwanda, ‘the country of a thousand hills’, and the African Great Lakes Region, with Rev. Dr. Pierre Allard and Judith Allard was a life transformation experience. The beauty of the country is reminiscent of Biblical paradise. Nature is rich and wonderful – the luscious green vegetation, the gardens on the ranges of hills and mountains, the beaches and islands in Lake Kivu, and the many trails into the bush. Rwanda has a most pleasant and welcoming equatorial climate – between 18 degrees C and 28 degrees C. People enjoy the weather rather than talk about it as we do. For the locals it was a cool March. Not having sweaty hot weather made my visit so much more enjoyable.
To me Rwanda was more than the resort town, Gisenyi, Lake Kivu, lush nature, the bush and the hills. It was about the people and the transformation of broken lives. Not all is well in paradise. Judy and Pierre Allard chose to focus the Just.Equipping ministries in the African Great Lakes Region because there is much pain, poverty and brokenness. The 1994 genocide survivors are scarred by memories of lost loved ones and not knowing their whereabouts, how they died or where the bodies are.

The 100 day 1994 Rwanda genocide killed over 800,000 persons. More were killed earlier and again later. The roots of the problem go back to the 1885 Berlin Conference when Rwanda was given to Germany. Later it was transferred to Belgium. Persons who had cattle and property were favoured by the Belgium. The Tutsis received government positions in contrast to the greater number of Hutus who were poorer and considered less competent. In 1926 the Belgium government made identity cards to distinguish Tutsis and Hutus. Tensions and conflicts between the Tutsis and Hutus grew leading to millions of deaths even before the 1994 genocide.

Today thousands of genocide perpetrators are found in Rwandan and Congolese prisons. In today’s news reports, Rwandan genocide perpetrators, in hiding around the world, are still being found and prosecuted. For each perpetrator in prison there are multiple numbers of relatives and loved ones still aching as genocide-related victims.

After four years of teaching, this year Just.Equipping decided to gather the chaplains to share their stories and plans in a mutually supportive and equipping context. On my third day in the newly acquired rental home on Lake Kivu near the Congo border, I joined chaplains from Burundi, RD Congo and Rwanda who shared their breathtaking stories. At least two translations were happening as one or two of four languages – Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi and French – were used by the chaplains.

With the country of Rwanda’s language changing abruptly and officially from French to English, I taught English three times each week to a group of chaplains. By month’s end, seven chaplains had gained the confidence and ability to read Scriptures in English while standing up before a class audience.

Not knowing any of the African languages, I was able to give a restorative practice session, Circles of Support and Accountability, in French with a translator to Kinyarwanda at hand.

One highlight of the month was our sessions with chaplains from three countries – Burundi, RD Congo, Rwanda. During the first session it felt, with thirteen of us in the room, that I was privileged to hear the reports of the twelve disciples reporting back to Jesus after their first days of discipleship ministry. The stories were exciting, horrific and inspiring. Every chaplain had at least one and most often many more stories about family deaths, about horrific prison experiences and about close escapes from deadly torture. The personal stories were about God happenings. And there were added ministry stories about trauma and healing and steps toward
the reconciliation of victims living in the bush and offenders living in prison. Amazing stories of healing and forgiveness!

Early Just.Equipping sessions (2007-2010) had prepared the chaplains to teach inmates how to take steps to reconcile with their victims (II Corinthians 5:19). Last year a chaplain had encouraged inmates to write letters of apology to their victims. The response was over 400 letters of apology given to chaplains for delivery to the victims. How? A core group of five unpaid Rwanda chaplains committed themselves to search the bush and the hills to deliver these letters from prisoners seeking reconciliation.

Once victims are found, not all are interested. One victim was told that a house was being built by the victim for him. But the trauma and fear of more trouble led him to say, ‘How can I believe this, this is a trick’. In one isolated region, a surviving chaplain, Pascal, with no less than three firing squad escapes, a wife murdered by the militia, and a life change through an unwanted Hutu worship service conversion to Jesus Christ, was led to his ministry of reconciliation. In Bugesera region, Rwanda, Chaplain Pascal facilitates the organisation of the Unity and Reconciliation Association. Houses for victims, survivors and offenders were built cooperatively. When people work together, hate and violence are transformed. In the eighteen cooperatives, restorative principles enable members to work at settling their differences and build community – a living taste of shalom.

Today there are eighteen groups of houses. Pascal’s need for a motorbike to serve as chaplain has been realised. Just.Equipping, thanks to the generosity of a former Canadian federal cabinet minister, supplied a motorbike to facilitate pastoral care, supervision and reconciliation among the reconciliation villages.

The agony and victory of one chaplaincy team’s delivery of five apology letters cannot be left untold. Two chaplains, male and female, set off to find the victims. One author of the five letters had died but the letter was delivered after several hours of travel by motorbike taxi and on foot. What a relief for the victims to learn what had happened to their parents and siblings, how they had died and where the bodies could be found! Now healing could begin.

The victim for the second letter had moved and could not be found. The rain grew more intense. After new directions from bush residents, the third victim was found. The woman chaplain had been previously told about how the family’s young child had been crushed on rocks, how the mother had been burned and how the father was killed with a machete after digging his own grave. The chaplain was distraught. Was this how her own father had died? She would never know but the stories reminded her too much of her father’s death. On her mother’s death bed, she asked her daughter to forgive her father’s killer. Her mother’s wish subsequently shaped her chaplaincy ministry to facilitate reconciliation and forgiveness for other perpetrators of violence and death.
The house where Judy and Pierre Allard and I lived, along with Jean-Claude our driver and helper, was strategically placed in the Rwanda resort town of Gisenyi, on Lake Kivu – three houses from the RD Congo border. This made it easy for the Congolese chaplains to meet with us and escape the heat and crowdedness of the RD Congo city of Goma. The unpaid Congo chaplains were poor and hungry. The hospitality offered by Just.Equipping facilitated ministry support and storytelling.

Our visits into the RD Congo opened up another world – Goma was a large city that had experienced more than six feet of lava flow through the centre of the city during 2002 volcano eruptions. It was a ‘hot’ city of black lava rock and dust. It is reported to be the most dangerous city in the world for women. The chaplains struggle to make ends meet. Simeon, the lead chaplain, who had invited me to the RD Congo, had once been vice regent of the university. But someone was after the position and Simeon had to run for his life until it was safe to return. His passion is to listen to prisoners who lack food and the basic needs of life – everything from the need for reconciliation to kerosene lamps for security reasons after darkness falls at 6 pm. A lamp ministry is now being initiated. In North America, historically, prison libraries and hospitals exist because of chaplaincy advocacy. In these developing situations, people still die in jail due to hunger. Despite the chaplains’ meagre resources, they are making a difference.

In Gisenyi, every Thursday, Louise, a friend of the chaplains, supplies potatoes, rice, carrots, peas and a local basic food called foo foo for more than 50 hospital patients to eat. And Fine, the chaplain with a golden heart and unflagging energy, supplies milk for the sicker patients. If you have no relatives to bring you food, you have nothing to eat in the hospital. While serving food at the hospital, we visited with the 12-15 sick inmates. This will encourage a Just.Equipping initiative – the chaplains’ ministry to the hospitalized inmates.

One special moment during my stay in Rwanda was when school children and adults spontaneously ran with me for short stretches during my early morning marathon training. At 6 a.m. the sun rises, and in the community everyone is walking to school or work for 7 a.m. classes or employment. Each training run was followed by a swim in Lake Kivu with friend Jean-Claude. By the last week of my runs, I was no longer called the ‘muzungu’ – a term for non Africans. Instead, I heard many expressions of support, like, ‘courage’ and children with their newly learned English, saying ‘good morning’.

One highlight of this transformative Rwanda experience was my unforgettable involvement in the ministry of the Letters Project. Early one morning, after joining two chaplains for a ride to the bus station, a 30 minute bus ride and a 45 minute ride on a motor-bike taxi on the narrowing bumpy mountain trails, and then a one hour walk, we were told the victim we were looking for was living in another village. When we arrived, there was consternation – what is a ‘muzungu’ doing here? No one in the village had ever seen a white man. Once it was explained that I was not a ‘muzungu’ but a ‘pastor’ things settled down. The children crowded to touch me. Thanks to a heavy rain shower we had time to attend to the letter of apology. Emmanuel, the victim, was
surprised, and said this was a family matter. His brother, who was 6 years old when their father and mother and brother were killed, lived one hour down the road near his younger sister. During the discussions and translations into French, for my sake, his wife brought a meal of beans and food unknown to me. What was I to do? I watched and followed Emmanuel’s cue to eat. That won the confidence of my fellow chaplains and was a story to be retold often in the next few days. On the way to the victim’s brother and sister, we stopped to visit the local authorities. Restorative justice always engages the victim, offender and the community. A mandatory visit to the local authorities went very well. The maize given to the ‘muzungu’ was better used later by the hungrier chaplain and his family. The younger brother, a university student, had lots of questions. While not traumatized by the letter, this family of survivors still needed time to reflect. Can we trust the perpetrator and his apology? Emmanuel promised to call the chaplains when the family is ready for the next steps. The Just.Equipping protocol is strictly adhered to and promotes nurturing good listening and protection of the victim.

Unforgettable was the visit to two genocide memorial sites. At one site, the church walls had holes where grenades had killed men, women and children seeking refuge. Thousands who had fled to the churches for safety were bludgeoned or burned to death. The hundreds of skeletons of skulls, many cracked from physical beatings, are a painful reminder of the evil of genocide.

The depth of reconciliation and forgiveness that I experienced was life transforming. It was both a shattering and a euphoric experience unlike anything I have ever experienced as a penitentiary or hospital chaplain or as a congregational pastor. At several junctures, I felt like I was with the disciples in the presence of Jesus.

Does the poverty not bother you? my wife, Elly, asked. Yes, there is much poverty – I arrived with two suitcases packed full and I returned with one in the other and half empty. I did not experience poverty as a local liability. I experienced the Rwandan people as people with dignity. The land of a thousand hills is also the land with a million smiles. Their culture is not about things and stuff. Jean-Claude, secretary and chauffeur, invited me to his home while we were in Kigali. In his home, a mud brick house, he proudly showed me his shower (no water or tap), his toilet (a hole in the cement) and enthusiastically introduced me to his family and brother whom he is helping through university with his meagre earnings.

The Just.Equipping goal to equip and empower local chaplaincy ministries has been blessed. The Burundi chaplains have established Barnabas Africa to address prison and justice issues. Besides continuing community and prison justice advocacy, the RD Congo chaplains are starting a prison lamp project. In Gisenyi, Rwanda, we had a formal Rwanda chaplaincy organization incorporation celebration. Chaplaincy and ministries of reconciliation in Burundi, RD Congo and Rwanda have become active local ministry realities.

It all reminded me of the six million Jewish deaths during the German genocide. During that time my family was evacuated and as a result I was born on a farm in a barn. It reminds us that
not all is well in the ‘paradise’ of Rwanda. After brokenness and disharmony disrupted the Biblical paradise, God’s Covenant, fulfilled by Jesus Christ, opened the way to new life and reconciliation between God and people. Stigmatization of persons, who are different and who are treated as objects, sows the seeds of genocide.

In the African Great Lakes Region, restorative practices are nurturing God’s healing reconciliation and have seeded beginnings of Shalom among genocide perpetrators, victims and survivors who have all experienced the depths of evil.

The depth of Just.Equipping’s ministry of teaching and equipping in reconciliation in Africa is cause for joy and thanks. It merits our attention and support. Does that make our issues here at home mere middle class issues? I think not, but the transformative effect of my Rwanda experience with Just.Equipping and the African chaplains does challenge me to be engaged at deeper levels of listening, relationships, healing and forgiveness.

After World War 2 we were promised there would be no more genocide. Since then we have had the genocides of Croatia and Rwanda. When we see what is happening in the Africa Great Lakes Region – the depth of evil being overcome by the healing power of God at work through reconciliation, I hear Pierre asking, “What about us? How can we be partners in building a better community, and a better world?”