

## **Rwanda Report**

From July 27 to August 13, 2008 Fr. Ruben Guenter, Fr. Joshua Beecham and myself were in Kigali, Rwanda to visit Denis Mugabo, the school conducted by the Mugabo family, and the people who were desirous to form an Evangelical Orthodox Church.

### **Background**

Denis Mugabo, a Tutsi Rwandan in a refugee camp, was selected by the United Nations to be sent to Canada for education. It was this fortuitous event that caused Denis to escape the genocide that engulfed the Rwandan people in 1994. After obtaining his Master's degree in Social Work, Denis returned to Rwanda to look for his family. After several years he found his mother and sisters, and also countless orphaned people for whom he developed a big heart and started to help – some to this day. He soon purchased a property in the poor part of Kigali that was suitable for living and school accommodations. He married Dativa, who shared his love for the impoverished, and together they established a school. They undertook to hire teachers, 7 in total, and to this day over 120 orphaned and poor children attend this Primary to Grade 5 program. Annually, Denis has traveled to Canada for up to six months to earn what was needed to support his household of 12 (4 daughters, 3 orphans, his wife's younger brother, and more) - \$500/month and to pay the salaries of 7 teachers at a sum of \$100/month. The classrooms are an extension of their two-bedroom home, with two out-houses and no electricity.

In April Denis traveled to Indianapolis where he stayed with the Beechams and St. Paul the Apostle Church. From there he attended the EOC music conference in Sioux City and then from May to July came to Saskatoon and stayed with the Glieges and endeared himself to many from Holy Covenant Evangelical Orthodox Church and others while he worked as a night security person. We already had a wonderful report on Denis and his ministry from our nun, Mother Pilar who had been in Kigali for a month in the early part of the year. His sojourn with us

increased our conviction that God had caused our paths to intersect and that we should continue our plans to travel to Kigali and view his work and vision.

### **Denis – the man**

As we walked to many of our destinations in Kigali, a city of a million people, (walking being the chief mode of getting around), the three of us agreed that we have never met a man who was greeted and seemingly respected and appreciated by so many people as was Denis. As he would introduce them to us, many had been past students or persons he has helped in the past or continues to help if he has a dollar to spare.

He took us to a village where, one summer after tree planting in northern British Columbia, he had earned enough money to purchase two buildings, both of which he has offered to widows and poor people for their living quarters at no charge. Presently, his plan is to start a sewing school in one of the buildings. This school is enabled by a special \$1,000 gift he received. Two sewing machines and an instructor will help a number of women learn to sew and give them the opportunity to make a living. As of this writing fourteen young women enrolled in the class beginning in October.

Denis is a kind and caring humanitarian who exemplifies forgiveness and love wherever he goes and to whomever he meets. He is generous, perhaps to a fault, and at times, at the expense of his own family shares with everyone as though they were his own. Some of Denis' friends expressed to us concern that Denis no longer have to be away so much to earn money – they want him with his family and doing the work he does so well in Africa – taking food to widows or the hospital and helping in such practical ways those who are in need.

### **The School**

We were able to attend classes the opening day of school prior to our leaving. The behavior and composure of the children was exemplary. The teachers were enthusiastic and commanded the

attention of the children. These teachers work for \$100/month and do not get paid for the three months they are not teaching.

It was clear to see that Dativa is the effective administrator of the school. This is truly a woman of grace, strength, love and vision. Her parents were both killed in the genocide and her brother lives with her and Denis. While the school is Denis' vision and he has kept it in funding by his ability to travel to Canada and work, Dativa keeps it functioning and alive by her daily presence and hard work. She is on her busy street at 6 a.m. to make sure the children coming to school arrive safely. Prior to that, she has already gone to the community well to secure water for the day's needs.

The school/house is in an area that is scheduled to be demolished early in 2010. It is entirely possible that a capital project will be needed in order to provide for relocation of the school to an area that will continue to reach the impoverished children.

The school offers a high quality of education. Of the 120 children attending presently, two walk 10 km one way to attend and others wait for hours in the afternoon to catch a bus to their foster homes. Only a handful can afford to pay the fees which cover the meager school supplies and uniforms.

School is in session January 1 – March 31, April 15 – June 30, August 12 – October 31. The major holiday time is November and December.

### **St. John's Evangelical Orthodox Church**

Since 1994 Denis has nurtured 4 house gatherings that are together desirous of being an Orthodox Church. On August 10<sup>th</sup> we ordained Fr. Denis and one of his principle peers as priests, baptized over 20 people and constituted St. John's Church. This group has now rented facilities for a permanent altar and worship space. The assistant priest we ordained is a 53 year old high school teacher who earns \$ 200/month and in order to attend Church walks many miles for each service. It is our

desire and recommendation that we offer Fr. John a stipend so he can take taxi travel in order to give more time for his ministry in the Church. We believe Fr. John to be a key link in the development of the Church as he appears to be the administrator type while Fr. Denis is much more evangelistic and apostolic. Fr. John is the pastor who took care of the house churches during Fr. Denis' many trips to Canada. In addition we set aside three potential deacons. One is a man from the Congo who will stay with the Church for a year but then will go back to find his flock which has been scattered due to the unrest and warfare within that country.

Fr. Denis has two friends, Philbert and Fidele, who work in an organization called REACH (Reconciliation, Evangelism and Christian Healing). These men are articulate, both ordained priests, who are very interested in Orthodoxy and the work of the EOC. They have offered their services in any way they can help and with their administrative skills they will be a great asset to Fr. Denis in any future building project and ongoing administrative work. As a side, REACH has been instrumental in the reconciliation of thousands of perpetrators and victims of the Rwandan genocide.

### **Recommendations to the EOC**

Because of a gracious offer from a member of the EOC we already have raised funds to enable Fr. Denis to support his extended household. From our observations we know that much we give him will go beyond support for his family to helping the poor.

We are recommending that our communion of Churches undertake the salaries of the teachers and extend the pay they get per month to cover all the months of the year.

We also wish to help the Church with the rental of the worship facility and assist Fr. John with a stipend to enable him to better minister to the congregation.

Together we want to be open to fund raise for capital projects such as building a school/worship center, and to create projects that will employ Rwandan people. For such projects we will appeal to a broader base beyond our Churches.

It seems very important to the people in Kigali that they have contact with people from a first world country. While peace and reconciliation are very much on the march in Rwanda, it was also apparent to us that the fear of lapse lies close to the surface in the minds of the people. Over and over we were thanked for being there and just as many times were asked when we were coming back. We feel compelled to offer a stream of loving support and communion. Mother Pilar and several others will return in January for three weeks assisting in the school and in April one of our Bishops will return to visit.

We heartily offer these recommendations. If “true religion” is to feed the orphans and widows then we should put our hands to this plough and carry forward with all our strength!

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To the internet reader: We welcome your prayer and support. Specific details of this report pertinent to EOC members have not been published here but if you are moved to help us in this worthy cause we would welcome your contact.