



The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship
www.lawcf.org

FREEDOM, TRUTH AND RWANDA

Claire Wilkinson (2011)

When you say that you have worked in Rwanda, people most often think of the genocide that ravaged the country in 1994 when nearly 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed by those who promoted “Hutu power.” Like the Holocaust before it, the 1994 genocide impacts every aspect of life for Rwandans. Where you were, what you saw, what happened to your family, what you did or failed to do – these things run through the psyche of the country inexorably and will for many generations. Sitting in Kigali watching the sun set on the hills, I often wondered what the land beneath my feet had witnessed – and what God thought, as the world watched and did nothing. I hope that I fight with all my being to stop that happening anywhere again, that I am not the type of person to close my eyes when the freedom of my fellow man is threatened – and yet I know that comfortable at home, it is often easy to forget and not see.

However, the remarkable thing about Rwanda is that when you know the country today, you do not think first of genocide. I do think of the challenges Rwanda faces – land locked, the second most populated country in the world after Bangladesh, and 17 years ago quite literally devastated: no money, no professional people, no crops or clean water, thousands of bodies left to rot in the sun, and not a pen or piece of paper to be found in any government building. And I reflect with pride and awe that today Rwanda is nearly food secure, the least corrupt country in Africa, with clean streets, safe and secure, and an economy that is actually growing. Rwanda is not perfect – it is after all populated and run by human beings, and we are all both light and dark – but its transformation is remarkable.

I spent the last 3 years working as the Program Coordinator for Lawyers of Hope in Rwanda, and returned at the end of June to the UK. The ministry of Lawyers of Hope is focused on sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ through our work of securing justice and freedom for the next generation of Rwandans – equipping, training, advising and representing the poor and vulnerable on their rights. Over 95% of the Rwandan population cannot afford a lawyer and have little knowledge of their rights. The genocide, huge population growth and intensive agriculture all put massive pressure on land, leading to property grabbing and inheritance disputes. Despite moves to outlaw gender based violence and heavy penalties for rape, many women remain vulnerable, and the destruction of families and social structures has left children open to abuse.

When I arrived in Rwanda in October 2008, I was coming for 9 months to help a group of local lawyers start operational legal aid services and Christian fellowship among lawyers and law students. The organisation – Lawyers of Hope – had already been established by Rwandan lawyers and the vision was clear. The reality, however, was proving hard to implement - challenged by an absence of funds, the lack of an office or full time staff, and hampered by a weak civil society movement, meaning limited information on what was being done in the field of legal aid and what needed to be done. After 3 months in country, I felt that God had put it on my heart to stay – and so it was that I stayed for nearly 3 years!

Seek Justice • Love Mercy • Walk humbly with God

Company limited guarantee, registered in England & Wales: No 7422674

Registered Office: 8 Marshalsea Road, London SE1 1HL Registered Charity Number: 1139281

What God has done in these past 3 years with Lawyers of Hope has been truly awesome to see and be part of. The initial 12 – 18 months were very challenging. Once an initial budget, member of staff and small office had been secured, myself and our office manager David Furaha (now our Vice President) had to set up structures, increase membership, sell the vision, secure a new Board and train them on their responsibilities, as well as reach out to other NGOs (non-governmental organisations), churches and government departments. Many an evening I would find myself poring over a funding bid or budget proposal – both of which were completely new to me – and wondering what on earth I was doing!

I struggled with language (apparently Scots English is hard to understand – really! - and my limited Scottish French equally so!) and at times felt lonely and totally spiritually inadequate: after all, who was I to even consider doing this? I'm not some 'super Christian' but a routinely failing, often grumpy and tired, and frequently forgetting to pray first rather than last, type person. But that is just who God uses – because this is about His glory. I am so thankful that He stuck with me so that I could learn that and be part of His purposes!

One of the best things I did was an online course with All Nations on mission in 2009. It reminded me time and again that God is the one whose work is being done. Lawyers of Hope is His, and will be His long after I am gone. It was also really encouraging to read throughout the Bible how God calls ordinary failing people, just like me and just like you, to do his work. About 18 months into my time in Rwanda my prayers, the prayers of my supporters and friends, and the prayers of LOH members started to bear fruit – or I guess, more accurately, we saw the fruit that had been germinating and growing away unseen. And by the 2-year mark, God was just showing off quite frankly - and it has been wonderful to stand in awe and watch!

Our Board of Directors really kicked into gear – no more sitting on my own with no one turning up for meetings, or relying on just 1 or 2 people to reply to emails or calls. Now the entire Board were turning up (and on time, which is quite something in Africa) and meetings would be marked by big discussions and debates on our plans and programs. After nearly a year of frustration with our child rights project - struggling to find partners in the field who wanted to work, people who would help us and funds that arrived on time - we started training local communities, receiving child abuse case referrals and giving legal advice sessions. And suddenly it seemed that people knew about Lawyers of Hope, so the number of walk-in clients coming through the door increased dramatically by the end of 2010. In addition, we are seeing our student groups coming to maturity: we have several students on the Board, the group at the National University are planning their own legal education project for the next academic year, and the team at the Independent University of Kigali have just organised our 3rd annual student conference, complete with TV coverage!

I am always a bit suspicious of statistics because I know that numbers can be made to say anything but these are really encouraging – and they are true! In May 2009, Lawyers of Hope had no project funding, only 5 legal aid cases had been dealt with in the previous year, and there were 141 members and only 1 staff member. In May 2011, LOH was delivering a 3 year child rights advocacy program funded by World Vision and was finalising a second project with World Vision and Save the Children to expand child protection systems in the northern province, and a third project to provide legal aid to minors in prisons. In addition, in the year leading up to May 2011, 22 clients had been provided with legal representation, 88 clients and 266 prisoners had been given legal advice and over 400 people had been sensitised on child rights. LOH had 3 members of full time staff and 498 members.

As I reflect on the past 3 years in Rwanda I have been thinking about Paul's words to the church in Corinth. Considering the divisions emerging in the young church which he helped to establish, he said *"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plans nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"* (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). It has been such a privilege to be part of God's work in Rwanda and I have great memories to take home with me as I watch God continue to grow this ministry.

I have so many favourite moments- here are just a few: getting our first prisoner released in 2009 following the annual Legal Aid Week (he had been detained on a charge of infanticide for 14 years without trial); watching our President sign our first donor agreement for project funding; listening to our students debate with the LCF summer team at the annual conference; watching a legal education session and feeling great pride at my colleagues' good work; and sitting at my final Board meeting in May 2011 and realising that I was not needed any more.....

I will miss many things about Rwanda: the people; the sun; the amazing fruits; the mad driving (well.....maybe not); daily devotions as we bring our work together before the Lord; teaching Sunday School to a big and very international group of 10-12 year olds; and the view of Kigali and the hills beyond from the terrace of my house, where I have spent many hours resting, praying and relaxing with friends.

When I think about freedom and truth I realise that one of the reasons I am passionate about them is that their absence means injustice – I have seen that first hand in Rwanda. In Isaiah we read *"So justice is driven back and righteousness stands at distance; truth has stumbled in the streets"* (59:14-15) and *"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners..."* (61:1). The second passage was written about the Messiah and outlines the mission of Jesus. The Great Commission makes it our mission too – particularly for those of us called to work in the law. As Christian lawyers, the call to secure freedom and truth is about more than earthly justice though: it is about delivering justice in such a way that the greatest truth of life – that Jesus Christ is our Saviour and Lord – is proclaimed, and so that our clients come into a relationship with Him. Truth and freedom come through a relationship with Christ and that is what the world – Rwanda, the UK and beyond – need to see from us: *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:32)