



## Central Africa Mediation

By *George Brose*

What began almost three years ago as a pilot project – started by Judy Friesem and Kim Bush – has developed into a coordinated effort to train community mediators for the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. Judy's groundbreaking training was followed up by George Brose during two six-week intervals in the summers of 2007 and 2008. George conducted mediation classes with Judy's students and many others. In 2008, between George's two trips, Bridget Butt conducted transformative mediation training in Rwanda,

Burundi, North Kivu and South Kivu.

In total about two-hundred people received basic mediation training and transformative mediation training. The new trainees were expected to look for opportunities to mediate disputes in their neighborhoods, schools and churches. When George came, six months after Judy had completed her courses, he found that the mediators had been very active already mediating over 100 cases in the three countries. Many of the trainees had been active in other AGLI programs; e.g. Alternatives

to Violence Project (AVP) and Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC). Thus they had previous training and had conducted group animation and reconciliation projects. Mediation was a new application to some of the problems that they had been confronting in these other projects. However mediation differs in that it focuses more frequently on conflicts between two individuals rather than between larger groups. The disputes may or may not have been ethnically motivated. This is not to say that mediation cannot be applied to larger group conflicts.

## **North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Recent contact with one of the mediators currently living in Goma, DRC indicates that a number of those trained have continued to go to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps to mediate. It has been widely publicized that the ongoing conflict between the government

forces and numerous armed militias has caused those in the combat zones around Goma to flee, moving constantly to seek a safe place to sleep and survive. Even some of the residents of Goma are fleeing across the border into Rwanda on a daily basis. Nevertheless, community

life goes on in the camps and in the city. People have neighborhood conflict as well as domestic violence and disputes. The mediators are going into the camps to help people resolve the community conflict which would be happening whether there was a war going on or not.

“ *An adult addressed several youth who were present at the mediation saying that they should learn from this experience that there were better ways to resolve conflict than the violence they were so used to promoting.* ”

## **Burundi**

In Burundi mediators from the capital, Bujumbura, and some outlying areas were trained. Their practicum was done in a remote village where several conflicts had been going on for years. The conflicts were within families. In dispute in both cases were traditional rights of partitioning land after the death of the head of household in one case and after a divorce in the other case. The disputes had produced some very serious domestic violence. Because the families lived in small communities, the conflict was closely linked to daily village life and activities. The mediators were able to adapt the formal training they had received from Westerners and apply it using a more traditional African method. Two mediators were used instead of a single mediator. There was gender balance as well. Instead of mediating solely between the two

disputants, members of the village, the village Peace Committee, and extended family members sat and observed the mediations. This would be much less likely to happen in the West. These sessions resembled a conciliation technique called Restorative Justice. Both cases settled after close to 4 hours.

In one case the dispute was between a mother and daughter and two women served as mediators. In the dispute between a widow and her brother-in-law, one woman and one man served as mediators. At the end of one of the mediations several remarkable things happened. The disputing parties and their observing families and village members rose together and prayed and sang. Impassioned speeches were given asking why they had not been able for three

years to resolve the mediated dispute. An adult addressed several youth who were present at the mediation, saying that they should learn from this experience that there were better ways to resolve conflict than the violence they were so used to promoting. These were people who over the years had frequently been the victims of violence from many directions.

Not far from this village a group of Tutsi children had been burned alive in retribution for the assassination of the country's Hutu president Ndadaye in 1993. Reprisals against the Hutu population were frequent in the area. It is this history of violence that can make it difficult for even relatively small issues to be reconciled.

As we prepared to leave the president of the local peace committee pleaded for us to stay. He said there were thirty more cases to mediate. Time didn't permit. Here we were, mediators from the big city visiting in the countryside and then going home. In most cases the mediators were pastors, church employees, or civil servants who had taken time off from their jobs to be trained and then had to return home. Their future mediation work would be near where they lived. There was still an unmet need for mediation in this rural area. **In looking at the future of mediation work it is clear that there is a huge need to train mediators from rural areas. Truly it cannot be more grassroots than this.**

Burundi faces another problem: the return of refugees to their homes. When violence became widespread in the early 1970's, many Burundians fled to Tanzania where they remained in refugee camps for over thirty years. By Burundi law they lost the right to reclaim their abandoned property after thirty years. Recently Tanzania has begun expelling these refugees and sending them back to Burundi. (This problem is so serious that even the US has recently agreed to accept emigration of 14,000 Burundians.) Where to locate these long absent citizens in this overpopulated country is a major question. Many were born outside of Burundi while in the camps. They have lost much of the culture and language

of Burundi. They have no land rights. An offshoot of the Friends community, the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation Under the Cross (MIPAREC) has been organizing Peace Committees and, in fact, hosted our Mediation trainings and regional meeting in their visitors' center. They have worked with returning refugees and sponsored some mediations about reclaiming some of the land that was lost by the refugees. **Training of additional mediators could help promote the resolution of this problem of land distribution. Imagine someone who has been living on a property and who has legal rights to the property being willing take part in mediation to discuss sharing this land with the original owner.**

### ***Opportunities in South Kivu, DRC***

In 2008 two trainings were held in Uvira, North Kivu Province of the DRC. Bridget Butt of Change Agents for Peace International (CAPI) conducted the first training followed by George Brose a few weeks later. During that time participants living on the Haut Plateau above Uvira expressed interest – in fact they pleaded with us – to lead trainings up there in 2009. The Haut Plateau is an area above the Rift Valley that has a substantial population of ethnic Tutsi people known locally as Banyamulenge. They are not recent immigrants; they have been living there many generations. There is much conflict between the Banyamulenge and their neighbors. It will be a long bus ride and a long walk into the area where they live but the need for mediators is great.

## **Please Support Our Work**

Mediator trainers will be able to carry the Mediation process further, to areas that have not yet been touched by conflict resolution or where the traditional methods of resolution have been lost or destroyed by war.

Those who have already been trained and are practicing Mediation will be able to hone their skills and to learn to be trainers, making this a more self-sustaining tool for peace in their communities. Training manuals in local languages will be made and printed with your gifts.

We will be going back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and perhaps to Tanzania.

*“What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.”* Barack Obama, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

## **Rwanda**

Rwanda has received the most publicity because of its genocide of 1994. As a result it has been the recipient of significant international aid for the reconstruction of the country unlike the DRC and Burundi. The reconciliation process is institutionalized to a greater extent than in neighboring countries. How well reconciliation is being accomplished might be the subject of a lot of research without generating consensus. It appears that AGLI plays an

important role in the reconciliation that does go on in Rwanda, perhaps without due recognition for their efforts. Recognition indeed is probably at the bottom of AGLI's list of priorities. I'm somewhat at a loss to evaluate the needs of the country that AGLI can address at this time. My experience in the rural areas is almost non-existent; Byumba is the lone exception. I have heard stories that during the April mourning period that commemorates the genocide,

Tutsi children at boarding schools receive threats that the genocide is not over. Notes are left on their beds while they are absent. There may be an opportunity to meet and train some of the children at a boarding school where I have a small contact. The headmaster of the school is a Marist brother who has a close liaison with the village of Yellow Springs, Ohio. From this it may be possible to get an invitation to do some mediation training with children.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, if I am able to return to Africa this summer, I would like to continue trainings in the Goma area, perhaps in the IDP camp/s where Friends currently support the population. If the camps ever close and people are able to return to their homes mediation skills will go home with them. Uvira and the Haut Plateau in the Eastern Congo and village mediators in Burundi all need further training. By developing mediators in several villages we can observe whether and how the process takes effect in those areas. According to reports from Burundi there are currently people mediating land disputes, but they have little or no training. In Rwanda there are lots of institutions doing reconciliation, but there may be rural areas and possibly schools where mediation can be developed. An additional place that may benefit from having trained mediators, not mentioned above, is the Island of Pemba off the Tanzanian coast where Friends hope to recover lost property.

If mediation can be introduced by well-trained mediators, it has a better chance of succeeding and being maintained. Any mediation program needs continued support in its early years to achieve an established place in society. Should we fail to maintain and support what has been initiated we will diminish the chances of mediation thriving in places where it is truly needed.

**The African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams** promotes grassroots peacemaking in the Great Lakes region of Africa. AGLI programs include Alternatives to Violence (AVP), Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities (HROC), workcamps, mediation, the Friends Women's Association, the Bududa Vocational Institute, student scholarship programs, and speaking tour by AGLI's African partners.

Contact information: Address: AGLI | 1001 Park Avenue | St. Louis, MO 63104  
E-mail: dave@aglionline.org Website: www.aglionline.org  
Phone: (314) 621-7262

If you would like to support AGLI, please send a check to the above address or donate online at our website.