

## REPORT ON A VISIT TO THE KAMENGE AIDS CLINIC

By David Zaremka

For about five hours on January 19 I visited the Friends Womens Association's Clinic in Kamenge, Bujumbura with Elie Nahimana, the General Secretary of Burundi Yearly Meeting, and Adrien Niyongabo, the Coordinator of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities program.

This day was set aside for the once per month communal meal (Cassilde would like to do this once per week if the funds were available). The Clinic has registered about 70 people who are HIV positive in their program--and according to their meticulous records, five of these have already died. Approximately 30 of the HIV positive clients attended the gathering--most were young women, four had small children with them, and five men, four of whom were older (40's+). When we arrived the women were preparing the substantial meal. Cassilde showed us around the Clinic--the large waiting room, the consultation room, the small shop for selling items to the public, the hair cutting business on the side, and the store room and medicine room. She also showed me three unfinished rooms on the side which she would like to complete. She had a bed in one of the rooms for patients who needed to be under care.

As people were gathering, the first activity was a public meeting that was part educational, part organizational, and part advice. On the educational side the topic was mostly about the importance of good nutrition--the topic of vitamin pills came up and the various varieties (including the one for children) were displayed to the clients. The organizational part consisted in discussing a method so that all the clients--who come from a rather large catchment area of Bujumbura—could be notified of the clinic's gatherings. Almost half did not attend, but if they had I don't know where they would have sat since the room was filled almost to capacity. There was also discussion of electing a committee for the group. It was decided to postpone this until everyone could be informed. Those who are able are asked to pay 200 francs (less than 20 US cents) per month to the association. These funds would be used for taking someone to the hospital and for their funeral costs. Cassilde wanted them to "buy in" to their organization so that it didn't seem like complete charity. As to advice, one man said that he was afraid to go up-country to tell his wife that he was HIV positive. So the group counseled him to bring his wife to Bujumbura where he would tell her, bring her to the clinic to be tested, and they would help advise her according to the results of the test. I don't know if this happened or not, but it demonstrates the kind of help that such a clinic can provide.

The most shocking thing for me was the story of one of the women clients who had brought her husband to the clinic. His first wife had died of AIDS, his second wife had died of AIDS, his third wife had died of AIDS, and now his fourth wife was HIV positive!!! From other data I had received it seemed that men lived much longer than women when they became HIV positive. Cassilde explained that the reason for this is that the men had more access to meat, milk, and medicine so that with the better nutrition they lived longer.

A student at the Great Lakes School of Theology, named Fidele, had died a few days before. Cassilde knew he had died of AIDS but he did not admit it and had postponed going for testing until it was clearly too late. The previous year his wife Bernadine, who was also a student at the Great Lakes School of Theology, had died of AIDS. Burundi Yearly Meeting has a little over 15,000 adult members. Probably 1500 to 2000 of these are HIV positive. Cassilde lamented the fact that she did not have one of these people who was willing to publicly stand up in church and tell people that she/he was HIV positive. So denial of AIDS runs very deep in Burundian society.

The clinic also sees regular patients who are sick with malaria, intestinal problems, etc. Their log showed that they had received about 1500 visits in less than a year and a half. During the time we were there about ten people came with these types of conditions. They go into the consulting room to meet with the nurse who prescribes the appropriate medicines as necessary.

It was moving to be in a room full of people who under the current conditions are destined for an early death--many so young, including teenagers. I had read that people in Africa died much more quickly than those in the US, for example, but it became clear to me that the reason for this was the lack of proper care and nutrition. Even if one is HIV positive, if one follows healthy living habits--and I heard a very good explanation of this in Kenya by an HIV positive woman who was still healthy after seven years--one can continue with a normal life for many years. But with neglect and poor nutrition and living habits, the HIV positive person dies quickly. This is why the kind of work that the clinic is doing is so important.

Cassilde asked me if I would stay for lunch and eat with the clients. She seemed delighted when I answered in the positive. Everyone was served with lots of rice, beans, greens, and a piece of meat. While we at the head table were given our own plates of food, the clients were served in large platters in groups of 5 or 6. No doubt everyone had enough to eat for that meal. The clients were then given a kilogram of rice and a half kilogram of beans to take home with them.

Later Elie, Adrien and I went up-country to Gitega. Here a woman named Felicite Niyonzima (no relation to David Niyonzima) told Elie that she was HIV positive and would be willing to speak publicly about this. When we asked if we could take her picture, she declined. We then had a meeting with her and she spilled out her story--as those who have had a traumatic experience tend to do the first few times they tell their story. She was married with two children and her husband died of AIDS in 1998. It took her a year to be tested--she found out she was HIV positive. She is assistant to the Gitega Provincial educational inspector. She quietly told her family and her employer. Clearly she had the means to continue with healthy living and so, although seven years had gone by, her viral load level was still too low to require medicines. When I asked her what she expected would happen when she spoke out publicly in the church, she replied that she expected many people who were HIV positive to come to her for advice and support. I thought that she would quickly be overwhelmed by the number of people approaching

her. Elie immediately invited her to come to speak at the next Burundi Yearly Meeting pastor's meeting in April. When we finished, she agreed to have her picture taken with us. Elie asked Adrien to arrange a meeting quickly between Felicite, Cassilde, and the person responsible for AIDS awareness in the yearly meeting, to discuss how to support and help Felicite in her witness.

Two days later on Saturday, as we drove back into Bujumbura from Gitega, we saw two pick-up trucks full of people--the first one was carrying a decorated cross in front. Elie honked and waved to the people in the trucks--this was the funeral for the Great Lakes School of Theology student who had just died of AIDS. Later in the day when we were leaving the church compound in Bujumbura, Adrien pointed out seven children, dressed in their Sunday best, walking down the street. Their ages were approximately five to seventeen. These were the orphans of the two Great Lakes School of Theology students who had died of AIDS.