

PeaceTeamsNEWS

Fall 2005 Volume 10 Issue 3

By David Zarembka, AGLI Coordinator

AGLI's Unique Approach to Peace Teams Work

Today there are many different types of peace teams evolving. I am most familiar with Christian Peacemaker Teams, Peace Brigades International, and the Nonviolent Peaceforce. The Mennonite Central Committee also shares aspects of peace teams work. Each of these is different and the African Great Lakes Initiative (AGLI) of the Friends Peace Teams (FPT) is different again from all these. I think these differences are healthy and hope that as time goes on hundreds of other models of peace team work will develop. This article covers the differences between AGLI and the others.

In 1996, when black churches in the South were being destroyed by arsonists, I spent one month in Alabama with the Washington Quaker Workcamps rebuilding three churches in Alabama and a week in South Carolina the next year rebuilding another. After you have spent months helping a congregation rebuild their church, you develop a close relationship with those people. I found it strange that at soon as these relationships had become strong and the church was finished, the various rebuilding groups involved moved on to another community, terminating off the relationship.

In my mind, building a relationship was much more important than rebuilding a church. So in AGLI work, the primary focus has been on building relationships as we partner together to fulfill joint

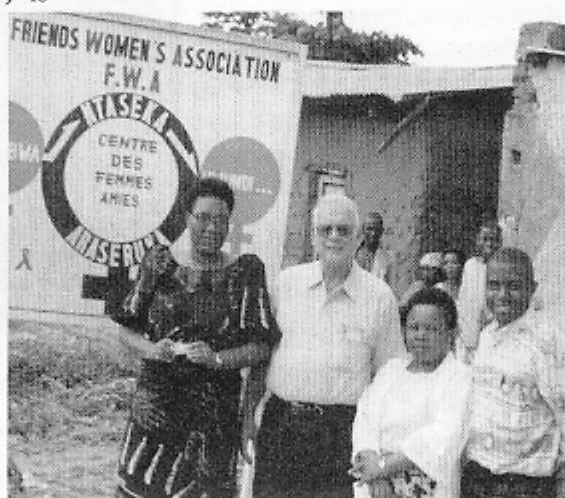
objectives. Thus, AGLI stays in the same area and connects with the same people over a long period of time. As an outgrowth, our work will naturally change over time as the countries we work in change and develop.

Our goal is to build solid relationships between the in-ternational team members and the Africans we work with. For better or for worse, we plan on continuing until the relationships are so strong and numerous that we no longer need to be the intermediary. It is possible that this will never happen. For this to work we have to keep our area of interest small: the Great Lakes region of Africa. To expand our area to encompass a very different culture and situation (for example, Darfur in Sudan) would dilute our focus. We do not leave just because a new hot spot has hit the media headlines. Peacemaking is not

done in a short time, but really may take decades—in the U.S., aren't we still working on the Civil War and its aftermath?

Sometimes my ideas have foundered on the school of hard knocks. I thought it would be best if people went to work on a peace team for two years or even three as the Mennonite Central Committee requires. But I realized that AGLI would have very few team members if we demanded such a commitment. So we now do short trips with

See AGLI Peace Teams, page 6. . .



David Zarembka, 2nd from left, with Burundian partners, (L-R) Cassilde Ntamamiro, Marcelline Girukwishaka, Adrien Niyongabo



Friends Peace Teams

workcamps and Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) trainings, as well as longer terms set by the needs and interest of the team member. Rather than have a model into which people must fit, we fit the work to the needs of the person. This has created some difficulty because it is so unusual—we cannot have a job description with qualifications and find the best person to meet them. Rather we find people who wish to serve and then see if there are places where our partners in Africa can use their skills.

Every country in the world is different. Even Rwanda and Burundi, which many consider sister sister countries, have many differences. What a peace team might do in any one country, or even a locale within a country, needs to vary from what has been done elsewhere. No cookie-cutter methods are possible.

Africa has lots of conflicts for many different peace teams to deal with. When we first started AGLI, many people criticized our plans by listing all the other groups doing work in the region. I do not subscribe to this criticism at all: all the groups together are covering less than one percent of the need in the Great Lakes region. I welcome any other group that wishes to start a constructive program.

Even so, until lately, no other peace teams groups have worked in Africa. Recently, I have worked with the Nonviolent Peaceforce on placing a team in Northern Uganda and with Christian Peacemaker Teams, who may place a team in North Kivu in the Congo. In these cases, both would follow their strategies rather than AGLI's, but I have advised them on certain aspects that they may need to modify.

Friends Peace Teams has Quaker roots in the Religious Society of Friends. Consequently, we try to proceed with methods developed by the Quakers with their Peace Testimony over the centuries. Experience (continuing revelation) makes us change over time, but I would say that the direction has been to make us more Quakerly rather than less. For example, we used to only recommend Clearness and Support Committees for the peace team members, but now we require them—even for

non-Quakers. We have found these committees to be helpful for all participants and non-Quakers understand the concepts without great difficulty.

I find that the best peace team members are not the ones who emphasize in their application how much they wish to help the Africans, but those who stress how much they can expect to receive from the experience. I think that for our international team members, the most important contribution may not be what they do in Africa, but the change in attitude that occurs within them, and the outreach they do at home after returning. Americans, in particular, have become too isolated, so

little aware of the daily lives of most of the people in the world. We do not see how Americans' over-consumption and our war-making throughout the world has divorced us from the realities of so many other people. In addition to

sending Americans to Africa, we also bring Africans to the United States (if visas are granted to those we invite into the country); I call them "missionaries." We need to hear from prophets who will tell us how we have gone astray.

The African Great Lakes region has had cycles of violence beginning in the 1950s before independence. Our focus is not solely on the conflict at hand, but how we can prevent further conflicts from happening. Consequently we promote, for example, the Quaker Consultations for the Peaceful Prevention of Violent Conflicts (Quaker Prevention Network), which has focused on Africa. This is also the rationale for the AVP workshops and the development of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities program. We are doing work in Kenya, a very fragile country that could explode into violence at any time. Does a country have to be in the middle of headline-grabbing violence before we try to put out the fires of violence with too-late buckets of cold water?

Africa has been exploited for at least the last 500 years. First with slavery, then colonialism, then neo-colonialism. Now Africa suffers from "NGOism," when nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) frequently have more money and power than African countries' governments and organizations. NGOs bend these resources to benefit the giving country and its citizens more than the receiving one. To reverse

Our goal is to build solid relationships between the international team members and the Africans we work with. We plan on continuing until the relationships are so strong and numerous that we no longer need to be the intermediary.

Support FRIENDS PEACE TEAMS

FPT needs your contribution to the administrative and communication work that supports our programs. Please fill out and return this coupon with your contribution today. If your mailing label (see reverse) is correct, please add the extra four digits of your zip code, which you will find on almost any junk or bulk mail (U.S. only).

For contributions and corrections, please fill out.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State: _____ Zip+4: _____

Country: _____ Daytime Tel: _____

Enclosed is my gift of:

\$10 _____ \$25 _____ \$50 _____ Other \$ _____

Send me information on how to make a bequest to FPT

**Make subscription or gifts payments payable to FPT and mail coupon to:
Friends Peace Teams, PO Box 141, Hyattsville, MD 20781**

this dynamic, we ask/require that international team members raise their own funds, including a certain amount that will directly benefit the Africans with whom we partner. (\$1,000 for workcampers for materials, \$2,000 or more for AVP facilitators for the workshops they are leading.)

Another example of exploitation is seen in Rwanda. Because of the genocide, there is a certain voyeurism. Some Westerners want to come for a few days or weeks to interview genocide survivors, see the genocide sites, and shake their heads in disbelief. Except for paying hotel bills and buying some curios, they leave nothing behind but their smiles, after taking the time and psychic energy of the Rwandans.

In times past, people have questioned if AGLI's work is effective. When I first suggested that AGLI take AVP to Africa, some people responded that this was not appropriate because AVP is an American program constrained by American culture and it would be "imperialism" to force this on the Africans. But AVP was what we had to offer, and I had confidence that the Africans could decide if they felt the program useful or not—and that, moreover, they would change it to better suit their cultures as time went on.

This is what has occurred. Cecile Nyiramana of Rwanda, one of the African missionaries we have brought to the U.S., states, "Just after attending an AVP workshop, I felt many changes in my heart and my mind

also, and overcame my pain and grief. Since then, I decided to go to others and to recognize the good things which are in others."

She developed a program called "Women in Dialogue," which brings together Tutsi survivors of the genocide with the Hutu wives with imprisoned genocide suspects. This is one example of how AVP made profound changes in a person who, in turn, revised and adapted the program.

In another example, the Rwandans and Burundians together developed the variant of AVP called "Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities." HROC brings ten Hutu and ten Tutsi from one community for a three-day experiential workshop to heal the wounds between the two groups.

Who knows where AGLI will go in the future? Remembering how I thought we would progress when we started in 1998, I am amazed at what we are doing seven years later. The future is beyond prediction. ■

I find that the best peace team members are not the ones who emphasize in their application how much they wish to help the Africans, but those who stress how much they can expect to receive from their experience themselves.

