

BEAUTY FROM ASHES IN BURUNDI

Simon Guillebaud

SIMON GUILLEBAUD INTRODUCES INSPIRATIONAL FRIENDS WHO ARE TRANSFORMING THOUSANDS IN THE WORLD'S POOREST NATION

According to the World Bank, Burundi is both the poorest and the hungriest country in the world. Sitting in the very heart of Africa, it is a small country the size of Wales, with a huge neighbour to the west in the form of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and another big one to the south and east in Tanzania. Having been part of Ruanda-Urundi until 1962, the two nations split into Rwanda and Burundi when they gained their independence from their Belgian colonial rulers. Sadly, since that time, there have been repeated genocides and a huge amount of suffering as the two main ethnic groups - the majority Hutus (85%) and minority Tutsis - experienced power tussles and reversals of fortunes.

Bosco is one of Burundi's most influential Christian leaders, and his story helps to understand the depths of darkness that have to be overcome in the country to see genuine lasting reconciliation and transformation. His smile is genuine and his manner relaxed, but they belie what has happened to him in his life ...

It was 29 October 1993, a week after the President of Burundi had been assassinated. The whole country was experiencing bloodshed, and Bosco's region was no exception. Bosco was a timid 7-year-old, sheltering in a house with a number of his extended family. His father and elder sister fled into the swamp at 4 am, having heard that the killers would shortly arrive. His mother had swollen legs and couldn't flee, and in any case they all thought that women and children would be left alone.

But no.

At 5 am, the killers arrived and tried to break down the front door. In the ensuing panic, everyone inside fled out of the back door, but people with bows and arrows were waiting there for them. Of the fifteen children, only three escaped. All five adults were killed. Bosco was one of the three to break through the cordon and make it to the bush.

After an hour, in the quiet, he crept back with his sister to try to find his mother. There she lay, still alive, with both arms and legs hacked off. He hugged her and wept, and then begrudgingly left her to die as the killers were still nearby and she was beyond hope. He was her last born, and didn't want to leave her side, but there was no choice. They had to try to get to the nearest church to

relative safety. Meantime (and he only discovered it two weeks later), his father had also been killed.

They went to the house of a friend from the other tribe - even in the darkest moments, goodness was to be found. This man was willing to put himself in danger by trying to rescue them. He told them that the following morning the killers would burn down the forest to flush out those still hiding, so he told them to return to the bush and be ready before dawn, when he would guide them to safety.

Early the next morning, he led Bosco and Bosco's sister through the mist. She thought he was going to betray them, so at one stage she refused to follow. Bosco had to obey her and it was a mistake, because they soon came across a gang of killers, who were resting on the veranda of a house. When the killers saw Bosco, they rushed into the house to pick up their machetes, and then chased them. Bosco and his sister literally ran for their lives, reaching the Catholic church just fifty yards in front of the fastest-running killer. Belgian priests took them in and nursed them until safe passage to the capital could be arranged.

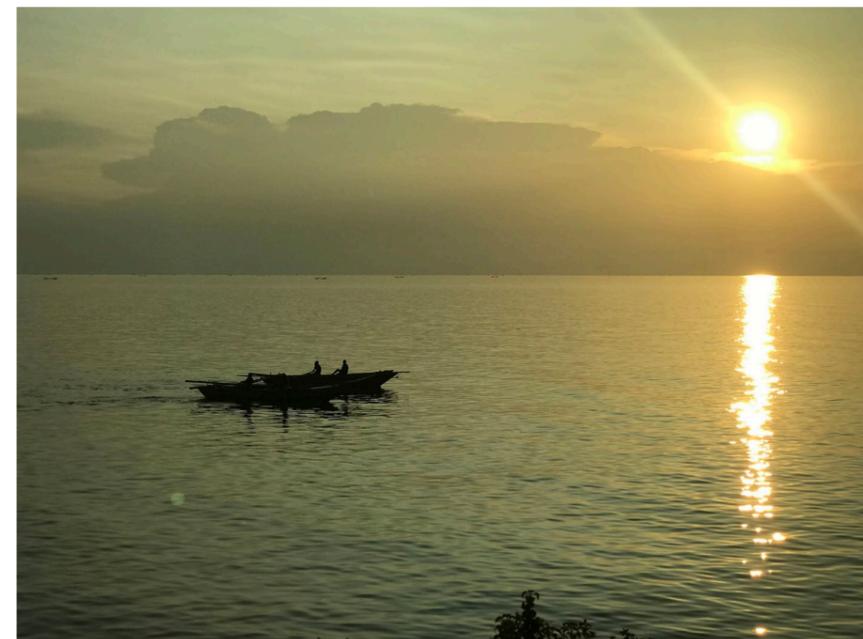
Fast-forward to today and now Bosco runs Igniting Communities for Jesus (ICJ). Only he and his three sisters



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survived that dreadful period. But he doesn't dwell on the past, and is instead, through ICJ, discipling many widows and orphans out of poverty, teaching them improved farming methodologies, and seeing significant numbers drawn to Jesus.

I arrived in 1999 in what was recognised as the most dangerous country in the world. I had left a marketing job after a very dramatic call to Burundi. A man had approached me saying he had a message from God for me: 'I believe God wants you to go to Burundi!' I went back to my job and prayed in front of the computer: 'Lord, if that wasn't a madman but was indeed sent by you, give me a radical 'ign right now!' I took a phone call at my desk and the voice at the end of the line out of the blue said: 'Do you know anyone who wants to work in Burundi?' Extraordinary! I was off!

When I arrived, Burundi was in the thick of a 13-year war which eventually ended in 2005. I lived expecting to die, and had many close shaves. They were very dark times. Yet the darkness has not overcome the light, and some of God's best troops are in Burundi. In due course, I set up Great Lakes Outreach (GLO), whose stated mission is to identify, empower and equip the best local leaders of passion, integrity, gifting and vision, for the transformation of the nation bottom up and top down. So amongst the 25 partner organisations, there are some wonderful brothers and sisters, like Bosco, having a powerful impact on society. Let me introduce you to just a few more of them:

Dieudonne Nahimana lost his father the same month as Bosco, buried alive in a pit. Years later when he saw street kids wallowing in the filth, he had to do something about it. He started an organisation called New Generation, and has mentored hundreds of young lives into productive jobs and vibrant faith. Years later, he went back to the site of his father's murder, meeting with the murderer himself, to preach reconciliation together. The murderer has now passed away, but Dieudonne sponsors his two children - yes, the children of the man who killed his



father - through schooling. How do you do that? And the story's not finished, because Dieudonne stood as an independent candidate in the 2020 Presidential elections, playing a huge role in stabilising the country at a highly volatile time.

Onesphore started an organisation called Harvest Initiatives (HI). He was born four days after the 1972 genocide began. As his family fled their burning village, his mother wanted to discard him into the bush as they ran because she thought he was already dead. However the father refused, and Onesphore actually survived. When he was told what happened years later, he felt God telling him to surrender all, including his promising career as a lawyer, to mobilise a mission movement in the nation and beyond.

For the last 16 years, HI has sent out hundreds of evangelists each year (except in 2020 because of Covid restrictions) for two weeks of apostolic outreach. During those times, God's Spirit has been poured out in power, with an estimated 170,000+ people giving their lives to Jesus. The blind have seen, deaf have heard, mute have spoken, lame have walked - their accounts of multiple miracles over the years reads like a 29th chapter of the book of Acts!

Macaire contracted polio as a child, which left him unable to walk. He always said he didn't want to resort to begging, and he ended up training as a tailor. What he soon discovered, however, was that running a bar was more lucrative. He'd hire young females to draw in men, and business was thriving. He was so charming that, in spite of his disability, one of those young ladies called Dallia agreed to marry him - even though it could have meant she would bear no children. As it happens, though, they now have six children together, and another six grandchildren so far!

Dallia came to faith first and prayed for Macaire. When he too was radically converted, he knew he had to leave his drunken ways behind, close the bar, and lose his main source of income. He started praying for people and many were healed. Word got around, and people flocked to his house. This was during the war when there were rebel movements and any unusual gatherings were treated with suspicion. So many people came to his house that he started planning morning and afternoon sessions.

One day, the authorities came and arrested him. He was put in prison with three other pastors. The latter were released when they signed a document saying they'd stop those meetings. But Macaire refused: 'I'm doing God's work.

Whilst others are killing, I'm praying with people and being used to heal the sick. I cannot sign!' So they kept him in prison. Then the Governor came and ordered him to stop those meetings. He replied: 'Sir, I will sign that paper on condition you agree that when you die and you come before God, you will tell him that you were the one who stopped Macaire's work!'

At that, the Governor balked! Instead, he encouraged Macaire to register a new church and helped him in the process. A couple of decades later, Macaire has planted 23 churches! He graduated recently from Nation to Nation Christian University, having set up a rural theological training satellite in his own house! He's getting older now, and having walked on his hands for the last five decades, someone recently provided funding for him to buy a car, so his grandson now ferries him around in it!

Another key emerging leader is Innocent, who started an organisation called Purpose Discovery. He realised as a young man that he had the gift of healing. On one occasion, he prayed for a hunchback who had been bent over for 18 years. The man immediately straightened up, and piled him high with avocados in gratitude!

Another time, he was leading an outreach team, and they were taking a lunch break after the Sunday service. Two mute girls asked him to pray for their healing. He left his team members eating, led the two girls into a room, and said to God: 'Lord, even if I have to stay here three days, I won't give up praying until you heal them!' Actually, within ten minutes they'd started crying audibly, and were indeed completely healed. He took them to the choir practice, and said: 'Hey, I've got you two new choir members!' The head chorister said: 'Don't mess us around, we know those girls are mute!' Innocent turned to the girls and said: 'Anything you want to tell him?' They opened their mouths and started singing a worship song! Three of the choir members fell to their knees whilst others gasped and burst into tears! The girls hadn't said a word in over a decade.

These are just a selection of the many men and women of faith who are passionately engaged in gospel ministry in Burundi, supported by Great Lakes Outreach. Ministry is contested, challenging and costly. However, lives are being transformed across the nation, and God is answering the prayers of many. GLO is involved in evangelism, discipleship, theological training, education, micro-finance, street children, orphanages, refugees, prostitutes, business creation, agriculture - the list goes on. It is very strategic, and very fruitful.

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Dangerously Alive. Also, I do a weekly podcast called 'Inspired...with Simon Guillebaud' where I interview people around the world with amazing stories of triumphant faith in whatever challenging circumstances. Well worth subscribing to!

Author, speaker, social entrepreneur, husband and father, cyclist and charity founder, Simon Guillebaud MBE had a very clear call to Burundi in 1999, when it was regarded as the most dangerous country on earth. He later set up Great Lakes Outreach with the vision to transform Burundi and beyond through holistic mission, working with gifted local leaders of integrity. For more information, visit www.greatlakesoutreach.org and www.simonguillebaud.com.



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