

## In the Shadow - Burundi

Now that I'm back "home" in Rwanda, I have the time to write a bit more about all the great things I got to see and experience in Burundi.

On Tuesday, after four fantastic days with "Bishop" Expert Bukene, I was handed over to Dr. David Niyonzima, a longtime partner with the Church of the Brethren. Dr. David is the founder of Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS). Our connection with his organization is to support their trauma healing/peace teaching and agricultural development. A natural fit for the Brethren!



THARS has done great work throughout Burundi. Of particular interest to me is the agriculture training we have supported through Global Food Initiative. It is based on a teaching program called "Farming God's Way" which is essentially no-till agriculture for smallholder farmers with no machinery. Jeff Boshart and I visited in 2019 and were able to see several locations where the principles were being used. David took me along with his colleague Ellie to see how much more extensively FGW is practiced three years later .

It really is amazing to see the difference. Now, in the month of March, they are finishing up their rainy season by harvesting maize. Beans have been or are being planted to take advantage of any available moisture during dry season, lasting over the next few months. Underneath the layer of compost and mulch, referred to as God's Blanket, there is cool, moist soil. Without it, the soil is hot and dry.

For many of these people, the improvement in yields has been life changing. I'll talk more about this in a future post. For now I simply want to say that Dr. David Niyonzima and THARS are doing a great work.

That evening I accompanied David to an elite high school in Gitega and heard him deliver an inspirational speech. Not only does he oversee the work of THARS, but he is the chancellor of the International Leadership University. In the photo Dr. David is seated on the left. He is highly respected throughout Burundi and beyond.

Earlier in the day as David and I were driving up into the mountains towards Gitega, he mentioned about needing to get a hotel room for me once we got to town. Now, I have to tell you that my best friend in the whole world, other than Jesus and my wife, is Jon Cassel. We've know each other since our teens when we met at a district youth event. We both studied agriculture at Delaware Valley College. Jon has been in



and out of Africa for over 40 years working for Mennonite Central Committee, Operation Blessing, Christian Broadcasting Network and now, in his “retirement” is teaching farming to pygmies in Cameroon. Jon had just texted me that morning to remind me to look up his friend Charles when I got to Gitega. Charles is a Burundian pastor and businessman who runs a hotel. So I told David that I would be happy to explore the possibility. Not surprisingly, David



said he knows Charles well (Burundi is a small country and David “knows everyone”).

We pulled into town and drove through the gate of a very large and beautiful hotel. Certainly not the simple guest house I was expecting. We walked to the kiosk to speak with the receptionist, who told us that all but a couple of the most expensive rooms were all that were left. Brethren man that I am, I suggested we check elsewhere. David said, “Let me call Charles.” I gave him his number and he called, explaining who I was and that I was Jon’s friend. Charles told the receptionist over the phone, “Give him the best room!” It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.

That evening Charles and I ate supper together and talked for hours about farming and

ministry, which is, as I would describe it, a holistic view of the believer’s life in Africa. In the morning Charles drove me back into the bush to show off his pig project. Very similar to the one we have in Rwanda, his goal is to help poor families to each have an animal. As you probably know, pigs are very good at multiplication.

Along with our longtime partnership with THARS and the new contacts that are developing, I think we can look forward to ongoing projects that share the Good News of the Savior, feeding the hungry and caring for God’s creation.

For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Burundi.

