

# Searching for Truth in Reports of the Sabbath Massacre

*By Alita Byrd*

## Editor's Note:

**T**he hundred days of killing that took place in Rwanda in 1994 began on April 6 when the airplane of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down, killing him and Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira, who was also on board. The best estimate is that 800,000 people were killed afterward by the Hutu-led militia that took control of the country.

As one author has written, "That's three hundred and thirty-three and a third murders an hour—or five and a half lives terminated every minute. . . . [M]ost of these killings actually occurred in the first three or four weeks." In addition, uncounted legions were maimed but did not die of their wounds, and there was systematic and serial rape of Tutsi women—altogether an atrocity that in the end has frequently been compared to the Holocaust. While it was unfolding, however, the international community was hard-pressed to call it genocide.

The United States made the decision to withdraw its personnel and nationals the day after the assassination of President Habyarimana, and it never considered military intervention. Approximately three hundred Rwandans gathered at the U.S. ambassador's residence seeking refuge. The chief steward reportedly called Ambassador David Rawson and pleaded for help. "Rawson says, 'I had to tell him. We can't move. We can't come.'" The steward and his wife were killed, according to Samantha Powers, who wrote about the incident in her book "A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide.

On April 12, 1994, two thousand Tutsi refugees converged on the Adventist hospital in Mugonero, and more were already in the church. Among the Tutsis in the church were seven pastors who wrote letters to their boss, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, and to the local mayor pleading for help. American writer Phillip Gourevitch made these pastors internationally famous when he used words from their letter as the title for his book of Rwandan stories: *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*. And on Sabbath April 16, they were killed.

Adventists were on both sides of this story. There were some among the attackers, and some among the victims. For the Adventist community this aspect of the story in particular seems unbelievable. How could this have occurred?

Pastor Ntakirutimana and his son were later taken into captivity to stand



*trial for their alleged involvement in the massacres. In 2002, Spectrum received a grant from Versacare Foundation to report on the proceedings. As reporter Alita Byrd discovered, there are no easy answers to the many questions that the story generates. But perhaps it is not answers that are needed, but simply a telling of the story so that healing can take place in the community.*

The Mugonero SDA church sanctuary where the massacre took place is now a memorial to the dead; it is not used for church services.



Photo: Alita Byrd

**F**ive coffins rest in a solemn row at the front of the Seventh-day Adventist church at Mugonero, a silent testimony to the terrible slaughter that took place here on Sabbath, April 16, 1994. White cloths with black crosses cover the unvarnished wood, while inside lie the clothed skeletons of just a few of the massacre's victims—several skeletons in each coffin.

Once the church was filled with the colorful skirts of women holding happy babies and with the resounding voices of a choir singing hymns from the Adventist hymnal. Then, when a genocide began to sweep the hilly Rwandan countryside, the church was crowded with sweating masses of churchgoers and their neighbors seeking safety from the horror outside. When machete-wielding attackers forced their way in, blood spattered the church's concrete walls and bodies lay in heaps among the pews.

Everyone agrees that a shocking massacre took place here on Sabbath, April 16, 1994. But who were the ruthless attackers and their accomplices? Who brought them to a church overflowing with frightened and unarmed refugees? And who was the mastermind behind the horrific murders?

According to the International Criminal Tribunal

for Rwanda (ICTR), Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, president of the Seventh-day Adventist West Rwanda Association (similar to a conference), played a major role in the killings. Three judges unanimously convicted him of genocide on February 19, 2003, after a drawn-out trial during which Pastor Ntakirutimana staunchly protested his innocence.

The judges found, however, that he not only carried attackers to the church in his truck on Sabbath morning, but that he also then abandoned his pastors and parishioners to their fate when he could have stepped in and done something to aid the helpless victims huddled in God's sanctuary. "A person with [Pastor Ntakirutimana's] authority and responsibility would be expected to visit his flock in such a time of distress," the chamber said.

There was standing-room only in the tribunal's small courtroom in Arusha, Tanzania, to hear the three judges deliver their verdict. As I listened to Judge Erik Møse read the twelve-page summary of the much longer judgment in a documentary-narrator voice, I found myself holding my breath in anticipation of the verdict and sentencing. The two accused men kept looking in my direction through the glass that divided the

courtroom from the observers' gallery. I wondered if they were looking at me until I realized that Jerome, Elizaphan's son and Gerard's brother, was standing right in front of me in the packed gallery.

Pastor Elizaphan is the first clergyman ever to be convicted of genocide in an international court of justice. He was sentenced to ten years in prison, with credit for the more than five years he has already served, for aiding and abetting in the genocide. His son, Dr. Gérard, was found guilty of both genocide and crimes against humanity (murder). He was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison, with credit for the more than six years he has already spent in prison.

The first few pages of the summary dealt mostly with accusations of which the court found the Ntakirutimanas not guilty. The judges noted that there was insufficient evidence to convict the two men



on many of the allegations against them. They were found not guilty of complicity in genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, crimes against humanity (extermination), crimes against humanity (other inhumane acts), and serious violation of the Geneva Conventions. I began to think that they might go free.

Then Judge Møse began to read out crimes of which the men had been found guilty. When he said: "The Chamber finds beyond a reasonable doubt that Gérard Ntakirutimana killed Charles Ukobizaba by shooting him from a short distance in the chest," Dr. Gérard pursed his lips, shook his head, and visibly worked to restrain his emotion.

The elder Ntakirutimana, on the other hand, sat unmoving, head down, hands folded in his lap. He wore a camel-colored coat over his suit, despite the Tanzanian heat. When the judge asked the accused to rise, a guard had to motion the request to him and then physically help him up. He had not put on the provided headphones so that he could have simultaneous translation of the English verdict into Kinyarwanda.

estimate was that somewhere between 800,000 and one million people had been murdered in a country about the size of Maryland—and Seventh-day Adventists were involved?

At that time I was in college and working part-time for *Spectrum*. Then-editor Roy Branson asked me to do some research and write a piece about the tragedy and the involvement of Adventists. For a long time after the 1994 genocide real information was sparse, and my



Photo: Internews

Elizaphan and Gerard Ntakirutimana listen at their trial in Tanzania.

**[H]e then abandoned his pastors and parishioners to their fate  
when he could have stepped in and done something to aid the helpless  
victims huddled in God's sanctuary.**

He seemed to be totally unaware of the proceedings. When he was asked to sit down, the guard pushed gently on his shoulder until he realized he was supposed to be seated. Then the elderly pastor had to grab onto the guard's waist as he lowered himself back into his chair.

After the sentencing, the court adjourned and the convicted men were given hugs by their lawyers, then led away by their guards.

There was no lack of handshaking as the prosecution lawyers walked together through the hallways of the ICTR afterward, black robes flapping.

"Congratulations," one friend called.

"Justice has triumphed," replied one of the lawyers.

"I thought since he was a pastor his prayers would save him," the friend joked.

"His prayers were soiled with blood," the lawyer answered, without a smile.

I first learned about Pastor Ntakirutimana in 1995, when a small news item appeared in *Newsweek* naming an Adventist pastor as taking part in the genocide in faraway Rwanda. The United Nations

attempts to contact the Ntakirutimanas were in vain. After my story appeared, however, *Spectrum* received letters from former missionaries and from Dr. Gérard, who asserted vehemently that he and his father were innocent of any wrongdoing.

The case became much more widely recognized when *New Yorker* writer Philip Gourevitch interviewed Pastor Ntakirutimana in Texas and used a startling sentence from a letter the pastor had shown him as the title of a book of stories from Rwanda: *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*. The letter begging Ntakirutimana to intervene had been written on April 15, 1994, by Adventist pastors sheltered in the Mugonero church.

During the next few years, Pastor Ntakirutimana was taken into custody in Laredo, Texas, and eventually lost an extradition fight with the U.S. State Department when the Supreme Court refused to hear his case. He was sent to the UN prison in Arusha, Tanzania. Dr. Gérard was arrested in the Ivory Coast and sent to Arusha to await trial at the ICTR. The trial







Photo: Alita Byrd

The Ntakirutimanas' defense team (left to right): Cindy Hernandez, Ramsey Clark, David Jacobs, and Phil Taylor.

opened on September 18, 2001, and evidence was heard for 59 days. The closing arguments were scheduled for August 21 and 22, 2002.

On the last day of July 2002, I opened an e-mail from current *Spectrum* editor Bonnie Dwyer: "We just received a grant that would make coverage of this story possible. Would you be interested in going to Africa for several weeks to get this story for us?" I immediately began the process of obtaining plane tickets, visas, and yellow fever shots. I started contacting lawyers and press people to line up interviews for my time in Arusha.

Several months later, I talked to Ruth Brown, a feisty former missionary in Mugonero, who now lives alone in England. I said I wanted to talk to her about Pastor Ntakirutimana.

"Have you lived in Africa?" she demanded. "No? Then how can you know anything? People here in the West are saying: 'They're killing each other. They shouldn't do that—they're Christians.' But they haven't lived there. They don't know how it is. If you were given a machete and told, 'You kill this person or we'll kill your child,' then what would you do?"

Through the months I have been working on this story, people ask out of politeness or curiosity: "So, are they guilty?" What can I say? I have been swayed both ways. But as I have put that very question to people around the world—people who seem to think they know what really happened—I have become more and more convinced that there are no easy answers and there is no perfect truth.

Although many of the people with whom I talked are earnest and sincere, I found motivations behind their words that go deeper than the mere discovery

of truth. Any possibility of a perfect truth—of reconstructing what really happened on that Sabbath day—died along with the thousands of victims in the Adventist church and hospital at Mugonero. Yet it is those victims, those mothers and fathers and teachers and pastors and ordinary people, who must not be forgotten in the endless legal and political bickering that this case has brought.

Just two weeks after Bonnie asked if I wanted to go to Africa, I was seated in the window seat about halfway back KLM flight 567, the only commercial flight from Europe into the Kilimanjaro Airport, near Arusha. I was wondering how I would ever manage to snag an interview with the pastor's lawyer, former U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark. I had tried several times to reach him at his New York office, but an efficient secretary gave me the impression that it was impossible.

Then I noticed an older man sitting directly behind me, skimming through a file of papers where the name "Ntakirutimana" was prominent. Unfortunately, the plane was just putting down its landing gear after a seven-hour flight. I kicked myself for not noticing earlier. As soon as the seatbelt sign blinked off and everyone stood up to collect their carry-ons, I turned around and asked whether he might be Ramsey Clark. He nodded that he was, and promised to save some time to talk to me while in Arusha.

Ramsey Clark is something of a legend among lawyers. Now in his mid-seventies, Clark has not been idle since serving in the administration of U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson. As one of the prosecuting lawyers told me, he "has made defending some of the worst criminals in the world an art form."

Clark has served as attorney for Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslav dictator on trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia. And for Radovan Karadzic, a Bosnian Serb general indicted on genocide charges. And for the Branch Davidians who sued the federal government over the Waco raid. And for Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, convicted of seditious conspiracy for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center truck bomb. And for Leonard Peltier, the Sioux Indian activist convicted of killing two FBI agents. And for Yasser Arafat and



the Palestine Liberation Organization. And for several former Nazi concentration camp guards.

The list goes on. Clark has also been very busy in Iraq, working to convince people that war is not a good thing—or even legal. He is an active antiwar protestor, even developing a Web site called [www.votetoimpeach.org](http://www.votetoimpeach.org).

"Lawyers defend people," Clark has told the *Washington Post*.<sup>1</sup> "That's what they're supposed to do." In another interview he said: "Any human rights lawyer will necessarily be involved with people who have been demonised in the press and hated. You have to ask the authors of such complaints if what they are saying is that there should be no legal defence for those people. Ask them if they care about legal defense for those you have decided are evil."<sup>2</sup>

Clark has a particularly strong interest in defending people being tried by ad hoc war crimes tribunals because he believes they are inherently illegal and unfair. In Ntakirutimana's case, he firmly says he believes the old pastor is innocent.

**"My friends, my neighbors are dead, they were killed and yet they were innocent people."**

I found out that Clark doesn't believe in the ICTR. He says its establishment is inconsistent with the UN Charter and the power of the Security Council. "We filed a motion explaining how the Security Council doesn't even have the power to create such a court," he said. He feels a permanent court could be useful, but temporary tribunals like the one for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia are only political instruments used by the United States to dispose of its enemies.

The tribunal in Arusha is particularly unfair, he believes: "To have a fair trial you have to be able to obtain evidence. If only one side can obtain evidence, they control everything."<sup>3</sup>

## The Trial

I sat in the public gallery of the ICTR's small courtroom listening to the closing arguments of the defense and prosecution in the Ntakirutimanas' case. The prosecution went first. Lead counsel Charles Adeogun-Phillips spoke in a deep preacher's voice graced with a British accent. His microphone glowed a red circle. A tall and powerful black man, he punctuated his sentences with hand motions. When

he raised his arms to make a point, it set his long robe sleeves swinging.

Phillips argued that 6,000 to 7,000 people died at Mugonero. "This was almost twice the amount killed on 9-11," he said. "It was organized. The accused provided an enabling environment for killers to strike April 16. Then they went to great lengths to cover their blood-stained tracks."

As Phillips's voice moved up and down, I wondered whether the pastor was asleep. His eyes were closed behind his big gold-rimmed glasses and he sat so still. When he opened his eyes, they were red-rimmed above his thick nose and very thin, shortly-cropped gray and white mustache. Every forty-five minutes or so he had to leave to use the bathroom.

When it was Ramsey Clark's turn, he spoke

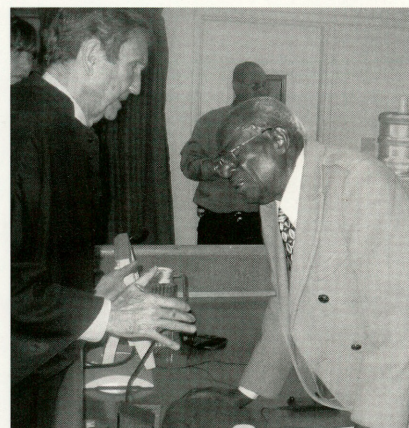


Photo: ICTR

Ramsey Clark explains the proceedings to Pastor Ntakirutimana.

in a folksy way with a slow Texas drawl, despite his years as a high-powered lawyer in New York and Washington, D.C. Though he tended to ramble, Clark was assertive and logical. The arguments were convincing. Dr. Gérard kept nodding, head tipped to one side, looking like he was listening to a good sermon he agreed with. Only instead of leaning forward in a church pew, he was leaning among broad-shouldered guards with guns strapped to their sides.

When both sides had presented their arguments, the two accused men were permitted to speak briefly. Their words were poignant. "I'm very sad and I was quite afflicted by the events which took place in Mugonero and throughout the country," Pastor Ntakirutimana said in Kinyarwanda. "My friends, my neighbors are dead, they were killed and yet they were innocent people. . . I'm a very old man as you can see, but I beseech you Mr. President, Your Honors, to acquit me. On the twenty-sixth of September of this year I will have spent six years in detention. And I'm about seventy-eight years old; you therefore





understand that I'm an aged person. . . Kindly study carefully my case and please ensure that Rwanda doesn't fall into the same tragedy that it knew. May God find his place in Rwanda and throughout this planet and that I, Ntakirutimana and my wife Royisi be able to go back to our country, the land of our ancestors, in order to die there."

When Dr. Gérard stood up, he spoke in French of how hard it had been to lose friends and loved ones in Mugonero. He said it made it even harder to be accused of having a part in their deaths, when he had dedicated his life to helping people. "It's difficult to suffer injustice, but it's even more difficult to suffer injustice because you're accused of having committed genocide, the crime of crimes," he said.

"I studied medicine. I am a doctor by profession and by training. I think I can certainly be of use and service. I do beseech you, give me that opportunity. You have heard the two parties. You have heard our defense. I have not done what the prosecution says I did. I am innocent of all the allegations leveled against me by them. I kindly ask you to consider our case and

to allow me the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of humanity."

After the court was dismissed, I managed to get invited down to the defense offices in another wing of the sprawling ICTR. The team was in good spirits and shared mini chocolate bars with me. As I chewed their candy, they complained that the journalistic coverage of most trials at the ICTR was one-sided and unfairly biased toward the prosecution.

Ramsey Clark and David Jacobs, Dr. Gérard's lawyer—as well as the legal assistants—all took time to talk to me in the bare offices they occupied. The lawyers explained to me the flaws in the prosecution's case, the inconsistency of their witnesses, and the unfairness of a trial where—for safety reasons—they were not able to bring in the witnesses they wanted. They all seemed to believe earnestly in the innocence of the two men for whom they were fighting.

Phil Taylor, investigator for the defense, pointed out inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the prosecution's case and shared endless anecdotes that all led to one conclusion: the pastor and Dr. Gérard must be innocent.

## The Rwandan government has begun its own push to clear its clogged prisons of the more than 115,000 people accused or participating in the genocide.



Mount Meru rises behind the conference center turned into the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Photo: ICTR

I asked him if there were people in Rwanda I should talk to. I was worried about being able to find anyone who would speak up for the Ntakirutimanas. He told me about several Adventist pastors who were in prison and wrote their names in my notebook. "People in those prisons would have been wonderful witnesses," he told me. "But it is too dangerous for them to come and testify."<sup>4</sup>

The defense spent a lot of time talking to me—obviously hoping I would tell the story from their viewpoint. I appreciated the time and effort. It was very helpful to hear the arguments and I felt many of them were completely valid. But sometime around the time Ramsey Clark said to me, referring to my previous *Spectrum* article, "I mean, don't get me wrong, I think you're a very attractive girl and I like you—but your article really hurt," I felt I was just getting a lot of slick lawyer-speak.



## The Court

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was set up at the end of 1994, but dogged by inefficiency and beset by obstacles it took two years to become fully operational and another two years until it pronounced a verdict in its first case. A sprawling conference center and office complex below Arusha's looming Mount Meru has been transformed into the ICTR headquarters, which houses three courtrooms, judges, legal teams, administration, and the press.

Bit by bit, the ICTR has improved and many of the early complaints about it are no longer valid. The trolley of random books parked in a hallway has turned into a cozy library on the ground floor, with aisles between the shelves of books, some computers and desks for research. There are still frequent power outages, but the lights usually flicker and come right back on.

Each case being tried now usually involves several accused persons involved in the same geographical area, so more people are standing trial at any given time. Three more judges will be arriving in June, so the pace of trials should pick up.<sup>5</sup> Six trials are at an advanced stage, with many decisions expected this year, thus freeing up trial chambers for more trials to begin. In general, the operations of the ICTR, once bungling along like a clumsy machine, have become much more modernized and streamlined.

Meanwhile, the Rwandan government has begun its own push to clear its clogged prisons of the more than 115,000 people accused of participating in the genocide. The ICTR was set up only to deal with leaders and planners behind the country-wide killings—the “big fish.” Most of the machete-wielders themselves are behind bars in Rwanda, and the country simply doesn't have the trained judges or courts to deal with the number of trials required.

The court system was virtually demolished in 1994, so now another plan has been devised to deal with the people—many of whom have never even been formally indicted—in crowded prisons across Rwanda. A system of village courts, or *gacaca*, is being implemented, where local people from the community are given some rudimentary training and asked to pass judgment on their neighbors. The general consensus is that the *gacaca* may not be an ideal system of justice, but what other options are there?

The *gacaca* can hand down decisions much more quickly than the ICTR. In its more than eight years of existence, the ICTR has given judgments in ten cases, convicting ten people and acquitting one. The

Photo: Alita Byrd



The newest addition to the tourist attractions of Tanzania—the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

latest verdict, in the case of Pastor Ntakirutimana and Dr. Gérard, was seen as a victory for the judicial body, as each case completed and each conviction brings validation to its existence.

But it can also be argued that, as with other convictions, the Ntakirutimanas are middle-level figures who knew nothing about any national plot to exterminate the Tutsis. They are not military or political figures and, although they were convicted of having some connection with the horrendous slaughter in their immediate neighborhood, they were found innocent of any conspiracy to commit genocide.

Are they simply symbolic scapegoats whose conviction is a Band-Aid to some survivors, so they can feel that at least something has been done and they have not been forgotten?

## In Rwanda

Traveling from Tanzania to Rwanda is leaving the Africa of *National Geographic* and mission stories, with stubby flat-topped acacia trees dotting the flat plains, and entering a landscape unlike any other. As I looked down from my window seat to catch my first look at Rwanda, I saw undulating ridges and valleys stretching every direction—“the land of a thousand hills.”

After a few days in Rwanda's capital city, Kigali, I was ready to visit Mugonero, the site of the massacre. Two translators and I caught a bus—really just a minivan, the major mode of transport across much of Africa—from Kigali halfway across the country to Kibuye.

At Kibuye, the largest town close to Mugonero, we discovered that the only way to reach our final destination that day was by taxi—not an inexpensive undertaking, as the trip covered more than thirty miles over very rough roads. It cost more to reach Mugonero





than it did for the three of us to travel by bus halfway across Rwanda.

I found the people at Mugonero friendly and helpful. They knew the drill: Westerner comes with notebook and pencil and we repeat the stories from April 1994. We show them the mass graves and the coffins in the church and exhort them to convince anyone who doesn't believe that the genocide actually happened.

That certainly seemed to be the agenda behind everything. The survivors were terribly worried that they were being forgotten. "How will you write to convince people that the genocide actually happened?" the pastor who appointed himself my tour guide asked. "We must show them that it happened. In the hills of Bisesero, there are mass graves of thirty thousand. So many of the people here lost all of their families—everyone. How can people say it didn't happen?"

Photo: Alita Byrd



The hills of Bisesero were the refuge of Tutsis fleeing the massacre in Mugonero.

Each box held several skeletons.

If only those few bodies now in the front of the church had been murdered on that April day nearly a decade ago, it would have been a terrible tragedy. But they are only a few among thousands. Although nobody knows exactly how many helpless refugees

**Ndagijimana told me it was difficult for him to continue going to church because he sees people in church who he knows killed others during the genocide.**

Their worry is not a ridiculous paranoia. Many people who oppose the current government persist in calling what happened a "war," instead of a genocide. When a reporter tried to pin down Ramsey Clark, he used words to wriggle around but left the distinct impression with a roomful of journalists that the word "genocide" is not appropriate in the context of Rwanda—he doesn't believe it ever happened. "This was a political conflict and a war, not one-sided ethnic violence," he said.

Entering the church where the massacre took place was a sobering experience. The church was dirty and in disrepair. It looked like a big, echoey warehouse with a cement floor and cement benches. There were bird droppings in the corners, and the ceiling was water-stained. Chunks of the cement wall were missing where grenades had been thrown.

The pastor/guide walked to the five coffins covered with white cloths in the front of the church. He lifted the lid of the first one in the line, and with trepidation I peered inside. A faint smell of death hit me. Skeletons, wrapped in thick blue cloth, were tumbled together in the rough wooden box—some were the bodies of the pastors and their families who perished in the church.

were killed that day, my guide said it had been three thousand in the church—a commonly used number.

A plot of ground surrounded by fences at the entrance to the Mugonero complex has been turned into a mass grave. Another mass grave—just a furrow in the earth unmarked by any sign or stone—lies to the side of the hospital, where many more people were killed.

"We hope sometime soon to give those in the mass graves a proper burial," the pastor told me. "And in the near future, we will bury those in the coffins officially. Maybe then this church will become a church again. This killing happened in so many churches. They can't all remain memorials."

In the two days I spent at Mugonero, I talked to lots of people. I told my translators I wanted to talk to people who believed that Pastor Ntakirutimana was guilty of participating in the genocide, as well as those who believed him innocent. It was not easy to find people who would say he was innocent—that was certainly not a popular viewpoint among people who had lost everything and in varying degrees blamed Pastor Ntakirutimana for their loss. But some told me, in private, that they had not seen the pastor do anything wrong.



The people to whom I talked had terrible, heartbreaking stories to tell, stories of escaping only because they hid under dead bodies, stories of watching whole families killed. But I knew that many of these people were the same victims who were trotted out every time some outsider with a notebook made his way up the rutted dirt road.

Many of them had talked to African Rights and other human rights groups when they came to collect stories. They had talked at length to investigators from the ICTR, and some had traveled to Arusha and testified before the court, telling their stories in exhausting detail. One of the first people to whom I talked at Mugonero, Samuel Ndagijimana, was the main narrator that journalist Philip Gourevitch used in his book to tell the story of what happened at the Mugonero complex.

Ndagijimana recited his story to me, sitting on a counter in the clinic, dressed in the white lab coat he wore as an x-ray technician, giving practiced pauses for the translator every sentence or two. He seemed bitter and defensive. "There were fourteen in my family—I was the only one who survived," he said. "I know he [Pastor Ntakirutimana] participated. But he says he is innocent. One thing pleases me in his denials: it indicates he is not a pastor in the actual sense. It shows he was just someone working for money and prestige. Someone who participated, was arrested, and yet continues to deny instead of repenting—this shows exactly what he is. He can deny before people, but before God he cannot deny."

Ndagijimana told me it was difficult for him to continue going to church because he sees people in church who he knows killed others during the genocide. He also told me that he did not have a high opinion of Pastor Ntakirutimana even before the genocide. "He is a person who cannot just give you a lift in his car even when he knows you," Ndagijimana said. "If he had somewhere to go, he would put empty paper boxes in his car, so no one could sit there."

When I asked Ndagijimana if the pastor could have done anything to help the people, he asserted that Ntakirutimana was well-known and influential and "could have saved people if he wanted to, even a few. Or he could have at least warned them of impending doom. If he had just stood in front of them and said: 'Don't kill,' that would have been a first step."

Probably the most moving story I heard was told by Jaël Kankindi, a nurse at the Mugonero hospital. She was tall and graceful, with smooth brown skin and a beautiful face. We sat in her tiny living room with bright green walls and furnishings that took up most all the room. Her husband was there, and her small daughter ducked behind her mother's skirt.

Kankindi also talked in a very practiced way, telling her story in terse sentences—unspeakable horrors I could never imagine enduring.

She said that when the killing started, she hid in a bathroom in the hospital with five other girls. They heard shouting outside the window: "*Nyenzi* [cockroaches] know how to hide themselves, maybe they are inside." The attackers smashed the window and pushed in carrying a big stick named *Nta Muphwe*, which means "No Mercy."

"They beat us with the stick," Kankindi said. "Everyone was falling down. They broke my fingers and hit me around the head. I fell down. They pulled off our clothes and searched us, looking for money. Then they said: 'The *nyenzi* have not died yet.' One attacker hit with his spear, through the heart. He killed four girls. When he reached the fifth person, the

spear bent. She didn't die quickly—she died later that night. He hit me, but he said the spear was not sharp and he would have to go get another one. He didn't come back. I spent the night with dead bodies. In the morning I crawled out from the bodies. I just wanted to get home."

Kankindi believes that Pastor Ntakirutimana



Photo: Alita Byrd

Jael Kankindi escaped death because her attacker's spear had dulled. He left to get another one, but never returned. She poses here with her husband and daughter.





and Dr. Gérard were involved and helped plan the attacks. She said she was surprised the senior pastor participated. Her only explanation is that it must have been part of Satan's plan. She does not believe the Adventist church should condemn anyone, however. "The church has no power to condemn," she said. "That is the job for justice."

Like Kankindi, many of the people to whom I talked still hold onto a strong faith and continue to attend the Adventist church. They believe in Ntakirutimana's personal guilt, but do not hold the Church responsible. Others, however, have difficulty with the local church.

Damascène Uhoraningoga told me that he was born an Adventist and his parents were Adventists. "But I don't go to church now," he said. "I am among twenty or thirty people who don't go to church, because the people preaching in the church participated in the genocide. We feel angry when we see them. We don't talk to them. If the preachers came from other countries, we could go. We just pray in our homes instead."

Uhoraningoga believes that, although several church leaders are guilty of participating in the genocide, Pastor Ntakirutimana is the worst because he helped to plan what happened and he knew ahead of time.

David Gasigwa was one of those who said he had not seen Pastor Ntakirutimana do anything wrong. He is a gardener paid by the hospital, and he attends the local Adventist church. My translators told me he was a Hutu, but not to ask him about his ethnicity. They knew I could get away with some impolite questions because I was a foreigner and a journalist, but every now and then they would not translate things they deemed too offensive. Asking whether someone was Hutu or Tutsi was one of those things.

Gasigwa told me he had lived near Pastor Ntakirutimana. "When you are a neighbor of someone, you see them every day," he said. "You know them. Pastor Ntakirutimana is a good man and a pastor so he would not do that. I never saw them participating. . . . I don't know if they could have saved people."

Alphonse Nsengiyumva blames Pastor Ntakirutimana for not warning the people hiding in the church, though he made a point of saying he never saw the pastor killing personally. "He never told us we were going to die, though he was aware of it," Nsengiyumva said. "He was walking around with the gendarmes. The killing was planned by high officials and he was aware of it. We thought they could not kill us in the church. He told us we would be safe there. But attackers came

Photo: Alita Byrd



Other churches also became killing sites during the massacre. These skulls are in the crypt of a Roman Catholic church near Kigali.

from all directions."

I asked why Pastor Ntakirutimana would have participated. "I do not know—I cannot read his mind," he said. "But even before the genocide he was nicknamed *gifarū*, or tank. He was not a good man." Nsengiyumva believes that the pastor could have helped to save people because he was respected by the soldiers and government officials. He told me stories of other Hutus who had helped people to escape, though many were then killed themselves. "If I told you about everyone who tried to save people, it would be a long story from morning to night," he said.

I went to visit another survivor—a former secondary school teacher at Mugonero—who had lost his wife and six-month-old baby girl in the massacre. Now he is married again with two adorable round-faced boys. When I went into his house and asked to speak to him, he bowed his head in remembrance and everyone sitting in the main room of the house went to sit outside, leaving only the translator with us, so we could talk in private. This was the standard practice with all the interviews I had. It was understood that you spoke in private—presumably so people would feel comfortable speaking the truth.

"Usually, whenever there was an incident like this, people went to the church for refuge," the former teacher told me. "During previous incidents



people were protected there from invaders, but this isn't what happened in 1994." He said he saw Pastor Ntakirutimana driving, with some attackers in his car, leading another group of soldiers. There were tears in his eyes as he talked to me and his forehead was wrinkled up in thought and memory.

"I don't have anything against Ntakirutimana, but I saw him in front of them and them in his car. We just had Bibles, hymnals, and stones. But there was no church service that day because they attacked instead." The teacher was not killed; he escaped detection by lying under the dead bodies, then fled to the mountains. "The point is, a Hutu woman helped me escape out of Rwanda," he said. "Ntakirutimana had the power. He could have told the *bourgmestre* to help at least two or three people to escape. If he had had that spirit, he could have helped."

When I went to see Isaac Ndwaniye, president of the West Rwanda Association, in his little office that used to belong to Pastor Ntakirutimana, I was surprised by how open he was. I thought he might try to protect the Church, but as a survivor who lost his

they were in trouble, but he just left them and managed to escape himself. The Bible says the Good Shepherd would die for his sheep. Ntakirutimana could have at least tried to save them and failed, but he didn't even try."

"I lived in the house next to the Ntakirutimanas. According to people who know Dr. Gérard very well, he is guilty. They said he had a gun. I heard that Pastor Ntakirutimana brought attackers. I can't say Pastor Ntakirutimana got a gun or a machete to kill people,

Rows of skulls in a shed at the entrance to a government memorial in Bisesero.

Photo: Alita Byrd



**"Usually, whenever there was an incident like this, people went to the church for refuge.... During previous incidents people were protected there from invaders, but this isn't what happened in 1994."**

wife and nine children in the slaughter at the Mugonero church, he placed himself firmly in the victims' camp.

During the time of the genocide, Ndwaniye had been the literature evangelism director for the association, reporting to Pastor Ntakirutimana. When Mugonero was attacked, he was away in Kibuye at a literature ministry seminar. He had gone two days before President Habyarimana's plane was shot down and the country was still calm, so he had no inkling of the bloodshed that was about to erupt.

When the trouble started, Ndwaniye had no way to get back to Mugonero, "but I was thinking that my family was safe, because my friends, who were pastors, would keep them safe and not allow them to die," he said. Not until later did he learn that his wife and children were dead, as were as his parents, aunts and uncles, and brothers and sisters. Only one sister out of his whole family managed to escape.

"I can't say that Ntakirutimana is guilty because I didn't actually see it," Ndwaniye said. "But he failed to save anyone and he is a pastor. If he knew where to go for safety, why didn't he bring people with him? He saw that

but as an intellectual he organized people. In my mind, he is guilty, but I can't speak for how others feel."

Ndwaniye said the people at Mugonero were preparing to build a memorial for the genocide in the form of a house with all the names of those who died and with graves in the floor. He said they were waiting for funds.

Ndwaniye invited my translators and me home to lunch. I don't think he even warned his matronly wife, but she quietly set the table for all of us with typical African fare and fresh milk, still warm from the cow. The house was almost as plain as the office, with sparse furniture sitting on a cement floor, but Ndwaniye's four adorable children (born after the genocide to him and his new wife) provided plenty of beauty and entertainment.

One of the most interesting people to whom I talked in Mugonero was Rachel Germaine, an eighty-three-year-old half-Tutsi, half-Belgian woman who lived in a cozy, grandmotherly house up the hill from the hospital.<sup>6</sup> The defense investigator, former







Photo: ICTR

The defense team headed by Ramsey Clark and David Jacobs stands in front of the Ntakirutimanas.

missionaries, and others had urged me to talk to her on my visit to Mugonero. Some felt she could demonstrate the pastor's innocence. She had been inside the church with the doomed people, but was then taken away in Dr. Gérard's car and saved.

When I met Germaine, I found her energetic and fiery, telling me quite bluntly that if she found I was an investigator from the ICTR she would throw me out of her house. "I'm fed up with those people from Arusha," she said. With some sweet talk from the translator, we managed to stay in her house long enough to hear bits of her story. I left my notebook and my recorder deep in my bag, then took notes with my translator's help as soon as we left the house.

"I can't tell whether he's guilty," Germaine said. "I heard from other people that he's guilty, but I don't know." She said she believes it was Pastor Seth Sebihe, one of the pastors inside the church, who actually saved her because he was the one who told her to leave the church and find Pastor Ntakirutimana. Pastor Sebihe told her she was part-Belgian and she could be taken away and rescued. That was all she would say.

Germaine just wants to live out her days in peace on the Mugonero hillside with her adopted orphan children running around and chickens scratching outside the back door.

## Prosecution vs. Defense

When I spoke to Prosecutor Charles Adeogun-Phillips in Arusha one of the things to which he returned again and again was the nature of the witnesses who had

knowledge of those who persecuted them. . . . People laughed when they were asked in court, 'How did you know it was Pastor Ntakirutimana that you saw?' Mugonero was a Seventh-day Adventist complex. Many of them went to school there. If they didn't go to school there, they worked there. If they didn't work there, they worshiped there."

Phillips also noted that the witnesses took pains to distinguish the culpability of the father and of the son. "Obviously this wasn't just a mudsling," he said. "If they were just here as part of a campaign, then why didn't they just say that both were very guilty? But no, they distinguished. No one ever said they saw the old man kill anyone. They must be witnesses of truth."

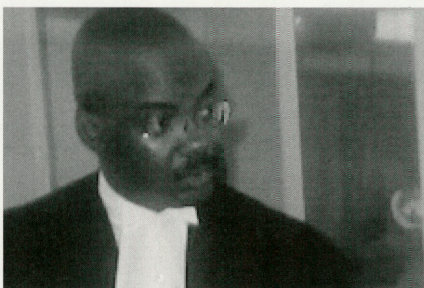


Photo: ICTR

Prosecutor Charles Adeogun-Phillips.

Although highlighting the credibility of the witnesses, however, Phillips also told me he hadn't necessarily needed them. "I could have gone into the courtroom without a single witness," he said. He feels that the Ntakirutimanas

are guilty of two separate things. In addition to claiming that the Ntakirutimanas brought the attackers to the site, which depended upon believing the prosecution's witnesses, Phillips argued in court that the men were guilty of omission.

"They owed the refugees a duty of care," said Phillips. He argued that just the omission per se, without taking into consideration any participation, was of such "extreme indifference" or "reckless disregard" for the lives of the Tutsis sheltered in the church, that it was deliberate and constituted genocidal intent.

"One of the things we see as proof of genocidal intent was the lack of steps that the Ntakirutimanas took after the event," Phillips said. "It's all okay to say: 'This was



a mob attack,' but tell us what you did afterward. Show us the memorial sites that you erected at Mugonero to commemorate those who had died. Show me an official report that you prepared containing a list of those who had died. Instead, you tell us that you made announcements in the church on the Sabbath, asking those who had looted the complex to return what they had stolen. That implies that you knew members of your congregation were involved in the attacks!"

as a way for local people with grudges to get back at them, and as part of an overall attack on the churches. "Adventists are the second-largest church in Rwanda, with 300,000 members," he said. He argued that churches were independent sources of power and the new government wanted to get rid of these outside power bases to consolidate its own hold on the country. "They killed a lot of leadership in the churches to knock out leadership that wasn't absolutely supportive," he

## **"We all do bad things. We all do things we don't like to admit. Only God can be a judge."**

Phillips told me that working on this case has challenged his faith. "It's hard to understand why Christians could not put religion before ethnicity," he said.

After the verdict, Phillips felt good about his victory. "The outcome is what we expected," he said. "The not-guilty counts are subsumed by the guilty finding on the counts of genocide. That is the crime of crimes. They have been convicted of the ultimate crime."

Not surprisingly, members of the defense team disagreed completely with many of the prosecutor's claims. They said that Pastor Ntakirutimana did not know most of the witnesses who accused him of genocide—they were strangers to him. The defense spent significant time and energy attacking the other side's witnesses.

In his closing statement, Clark referred to many of those witnesses as "ridiculous," "bizarre," "crazy," "outlandishly absurd," and "inconsistent." He tried to show that their testimony was inconsistent with previous statements, that it didn't match with each other's statements, and that they had connections to groups with sinister agendas.

The heart of the defense's case was an assertion that the witnesses had a political motive to lie about the involvement of the Ntakirutimanas, whose good characters simply don't match the accusations.

The prosecution came back to argue that all of the defense's witnesses had a motive to testify for the two accused. It was mostly family members who testified in support of their alibi. "Good character doesn't mean you can't commit a crime," they pointed out.

"If character isn't relevant to credibility, then what is? Pastor Ntakirutimana was moderate, a man of peace, with no history of prejudice," Ramsey Clark said in his closing statement.

Clark maintains that father and son were targeted

told me. "This is a desire to demonize Christianity."

Clark admits that Pastor Ntakirutimana and Dr. Gérard left Mugonero on Sabbath morning, April 16, 1994. But he says that gendarmes told them to leave, so they went. They had done what they could for the people in the church. They had gone to the bourgmestre and pleaded for help, as the letter from the pastors asked them to do. But they had been turned down. There was nothing more to be done.

Clark doesn't believe anyone should have expected them to stay. "All my life it has troubled me that people who weren't there stand up and say: 'If I had been there, I would have done it differently,'" he said. "UNAMIR, the French, the Belgians couldn't stop this killing. Why does anyone think [the Ntakirutimanas] could? They were both as courageous as anyone could have been under the circumstances without getting killed."

David Jacobs, Dr. Gérard's lawyer, agrees. "If he was planning to kill people, why did he even bother to go to Gishyita to see the bourgmestre—why did he even bother to reply?" he asked. "And why did he bother to go back and write a note back to the pastors if he was going to kill them?"

After the guilty verdict was announced, I had a conversation with the disappointed defense team. Ramsey Clark complained that two things made it difficult for him to accept the judgment. "The court agreed that both these men had led lives of service and religious devotion, with consistent nonviolent compassionate conduct," he said. "Yet the court made no effort to suggest how it was possible that such people would then participate in a genocide the way the court claimed that they did. It is almost an irrational connection. . . ."





"The second thing the court failed to explain was how it could reject almost all of the worst testimony—like the witness who said they killed ten people at the Murambi church—and still convict them. . . . [T]he court completely disbelieved these incredible witnesses with such appalling testimony. Yet they are assuming that the other testimony is credible." Ramsey Clark stated again his conviction that the witnesses were obviously involved in an organized political campaign to get the Ntakirutimanas convicted.

"But why would the victims lie to me?" I asked. "Why would they accuse these people unfairly when I appeal to them, Adventist to Adventist? What benefit is in it for them?"

Jacobs's explanation is that the victims cannot move from their previous story because it would make them look bad. "You have to realize that Rwanda is a tightly controlled military dictatorship," he said. "If people were to move off their story or away from the script, they would be endangered. . . . It is in the interest of the existing regime to maintain this particular picture of what happened in 1994, that it was a one-sided genocide instead of a war with political connections."

Perhaps Jacobs is right, or maybe even partly right. But the fact that he makes statements saying he doesn't believe in the existence of the *interahamwe*—generally known as the most ruthless killers and the architects of the Rwandan genocide—encourages people with more moderate, or mainstream, political views simply to stop listening. Together with Clark's statements doubting the existence of a genocide in Rwanda, the two lawyers are politically incorrect enough that some people feel they cannot express sympathy for the victims in Rwanda and believe in the possibility of the Ntakirutimanas' innocence at the same time. Even Pastor Ntakirutimana uses the term "genocide."

But the bigger picture these and other defense lawyers are painting is of a country torn by civil strife and war with an invading army of Tutsis, instead of a one-sided mass slaughter aimed at exterminating an entire ethnic group of people. They maintain that horrible killing took place on both sides, but that it was spontaneous and chaotic—not a meticulously planned and orchestrated slaughter. This argument obviously paints their clients in a different light.

Clark believes the Ntakirutimanas would have had a much better chance of winning their case if it hadn't been tried in a court "specifically set up and designed to accuse Hutu people of genocide." Clark felt that the case was also weakened because of the difficulty in procuring defense witnesses from Rwanda. "We

can't even go and talk to people [in Rwanda] without endangering them. . . . I went three times trying to find witnesses. But we can't reach witnesses so we are left with people outside."

Ramsey Clark and David Jacobs say they intend to appeal the court's decision on behalf of their clients. They will file an appeal with the Appeals Court based in the Hague. "I am absolutely convinced of their innocence and their struggle—within limits—to prevent violence," Clark said.

## Ntakirutimana Advocates

A diverse group of former missionaries who knew Pastor Ntakirutimana in Rwanda, including Ruth Brown in England, have corresponded with him throughout his incarceration and several of them have staunchly and publicly insisted on his innocence.

Barry Burton, who worked as an auditor for the Church in Rwanda, has followed the case carefully from his computer in Colorado. He has made countless phone calls and written numerous letters on Pastor Ntakirutimana's behalf, including a letter to former U.S. attorney general Janet Reno to ask that she keep him from being extradited to the UN court in Tanzania. Burton is convinced without a doubt of the Ntakirutimanas' innocence, both father and son, and works tirelessly to persuade others into the same belief.

Several former missionaries who worked with Pastor Ntakirutimana in the past decades testified on his behalf at the trial. Others to whom I talked said they thought he must be innocent, yet there seemed to be uncertainty in their minds. They felt they knew him well enough to know he would never be involved in genocide, yet they kept in mind that they simply hadn't been there when the slaughter occurred.

"We cannot understand the tribal upbringing," said former missionary Louise Werner, whose husband served in various top church leadership positions in Rwanda for almost twenty years from the 1950s to the 1970s. "It is totally different in thinking. They are the best liars in the world. They are taught not to tell the truth."

Werner said she remembers Pastor Ntakirutimana saving the lives of many Tutsis during a period of trouble and unrest in Rwanda. "The others would not have done that," she said. "That is why I cannot believe he would have turned against them now. It just doesn't make sense."

Werner said that Pastor Ntakirutimana was the most honest person she knew in Africa. But the more



she talks the more disclaimers she brings in. "The hatred is so very, very deep. . . . There is a possibility he lost his head with fear and was a coward," she admitted.

But even if Pastor Ntakirutimana is partly responsible for what happened at Mugonero, Werner doesn't think any special blame should be pinned on him. "When people lose their heads in this kind of genocide, you just have to give a general amnesty and say it is finished. . . . It is not a normal state. You can't apply the normal rules."

When I arrived at her neat, whitewashed cottage, which faced a cobbled square in a picturesque village near Exeter, I couldn't help thinking of the immense contrast between the pastoral English countryside and the dusty squalor of Rwanda, where this woman had spent a huge portion of her life. Brown was warmly dressed, despite the sunshiny day. Silvery gray hair was cut around her wrinkled face and very bright eyes. She was friendly, though blunt.

Although happy to show me slides of Rwanda on

Source: Barry Burton

*'About my case it is in God's hands I know for sure you suppose to know without any doubt that I am innocent today and all of my life the Great Judge will finish the case himself remember being innocent does not prevent me to suffer as I am now.'*

An excerpt from one of Pastor Ntakirutimana's many handwritten letters to Barry Burton.

Ruth Brown, now eighty-eight, was nervous about talking to me on the phone when I called her at home in Devon, England. But after she contacted someone from the defense team who encouraged her to talk to me, she did. She told me she couldn't imagine how anyone would accuse Pastor Ntakirutimana of such atrocities. Like Louise Werner, she remembered the pastor helping Tutsis on many occasions and during times of unrest in the country. She said he is the type of man who would own up to something he had done.

Brown spent twenty-five years in Africa and sixteen of those years she lived in remote Mugonero, working as a nurse and midwife and running the hospital when the doctor wasn't there. She never married—she joked that all the young men who might have proposed had been killed. Brown was born during World War I, lived in Europe through World War II, and then spent years in Africa throughout a time of massive upheaval as countries gained their independence from their colonial masters and periodic turmoil shook Rwanda.

A few months after our first conversations, I called Brown and asked whether I might visit her. She agreed, but said she had decided that she could not say anything more to me about Pastor Ntakirutimana. "God doesn't want us to talk about the bad things," she said.

her 1956 slide projector—in a room filled with African carvings, pictures, and statues—she bristled when I mentioned Pastor Ntakirutimana's name. "I told you I wouldn't talk about that," she said. "We all do bad things. We all do things we don't like to admit. Only God can be a judge." And she went on defensively, as she poured me a cup of tea and cut me a slice of delicious cake.

One of the most interesting and articulate of Pastor Ntakirutimana's advocates is his daughter Grace. She went to considerable effort to meet me and defend the innocence of her father and brother about a month before the verdict was announced. She now lives in the United States, but worked as a medical professional in Rwanda when the genocide started.

Grace escaped with her husband and children and other family members by following a motorcade of Westerners when they fled the country. But when she applied for asylum in the United States, she was told she was on a list of suspected killers and had to prove that she didn't kill anyone before she would be granted asylum. Grace showed the U.S. government the stamp in her passport that proved she left Rwanda just three





days after the trouble started; then she got letters from some of the missionaries who had been there with her to say that she had not participated.

"Otherwise I might be in Arusha right now, too," she said. "It was so unfair. I wondered how many innocent people are on that list who didn't have missionaries to write letters for them."

Grace said that the only way her father could have escaped accusations would have been if some missionaries had stayed and vouched for him, or if he had stayed and died. Otherwise, the accusations are expected. "It is the educated who are accused," Grace said. "People want vengeance. There is hatred. None of our family died in that war and my father was living well with his son in the United States. People are jealous and saying that he has to pay too."

Grace doesn't find it surprising that witnesses might lie at the trial. "People just lie and we know that—it's a cultural thing," she said. Grace is worried that if her father were released from jail someone would kill him. She said the family had received a letter from someone—an old family friend—in Rwanda saying that if he ever tried to come back they would kill him. "They don't care about the verdict—they are just looking to kill," she said. "That shows the kind of spirit that is there. It's not justice, only vengeance."

Grace listed examples to show that her father did not hate Tutsis. She told how he had rescued Tutsis when they were threatened, given Tutsis his own house and built new rooms for his family, and given them jobs when others wouldn't.

"When I was fifteen I had a Tutsi boyfriend," Grace said. "My name is Grace because I was a prayed-for child. My father wanted a girl after five boys. He never would have let me date a Tutsi if he hated them." She explained that she had not even known such a distinction between Hutus and Tutsis had existed as a child growing up. It was only when she went to school that she learned about the different groups.

## The Church's Response

I asked Grace how she thought the Seventh-day Adventist Church had handled her father's case. She expressed how much it had meant to her family and her father that Texas Conference president L. Stephen Gifford had visited him when he was held in Laredo, Texas. "We would have liked the General Conference to get involved, but we understand," Grace said. "They have a church in Rwanda to take care of."

Grace understands that the Church needs to remain

neutral—"it's the Christian thing to do"—but suggested that the answer was for the worldwide Church officials to tell Pastor Ntakirutimana and his family that they were being prayed for. "Just [hypothetically] say he did kill," Grace said. "If he was a pastor who killed, then he needs even more prayer. They could have said 'We are praying for you,' without taking sides."

In October 1998, Pastor Ntakirutimana wrote a form letter that was sent out under the auspices of the Maranatha Fund, asking for money for his extensive legal and medical expenses. He said he had "appealed to the Adventist Church—for whom I worked all my life—for help, but it is against church policy to help a member with attorney's fees, even someone who has worked for the church his entire life. Please understand, I am not bitter—I understand church policy, having worked with policies all my adult life. But it was my sincere hope that the Church would give me some assistance in this struggle."

Possibly 225 Adventist workers and up to 10,000 church members died during the 100 days of killing in 1994. There are more Seventh-day Adventists in Rwanda than members of any other denomination except Catholics. But it took almost eight years for the numbers to come back up to 300,000—where it was before the genocide. At the end of June 2002 there were 343,523 members. Just after the genocide, at the beginning of 1995, a church census counted only 194,000 members after the killings and a mass exodus from the country drained it of people.<sup>7</sup>

I went to see if I could find anyone at the Rwanda Union office in the capital city of Kigali who would talk to me about the Church's response to what had happened among its members. I was hoping for a conversation with the union president, but due to a recent death in his family, he was unavailable. Another union officer, however, who asked not to be named for security reasons, welcomed me into his office.

Again, I was surprised by the frankness and openness that met me. The genocide seemed to underlie everything in Rwanda, yet due to its extremely politicized nature and the emotions it evoked, it was not a topic that could simply be brought up in a casual conversation. I always felt a little bit embarrassed asking people to bare their opinions to me—it often seemed impolite and offensive. Nevertheless, the union officer answered my questions with candor.

He said he thought Pastor Ntakirutimana might have been accused because he had been known as a tough man in his work. "He was very responsible and



very active," he said. "If he wanted to move a tree, it had to be moved." But the officer said he couldn't believe that Dr. Gérard—whom he had known in his student days—was guilty. "Before the genocide he was really converted," he said.

Though both Ntakirutimanas are still active and strong Adventists (they consistently refused to work with their lawyers on Sabbath throughout their

and as Christians. We emphasize that."

The union officer did not mention the visit of General Conference president Robert Folkenberg to Kigali in November 1995. Folkenberg preached a sermon in Kigali from which extracts were later printed in the *Adventist Review*. He talked about the failure of Adventist pastors and other clergy to stop the tragedy. "As religious leaders we let down God,

## The genocide seemed to underlie everything in Rwanda, yet...it was not a topic that could simply be brought up in a casual conversation.

trial), they no longer hold positions in the Adventist Church. As the Church in Rwanda tried to get back on its feet after the genocide, it announced that church officers had to return to their positions by September 1994 or they would be filled by someone else. Pastor Ntakirutimana fled the country in July 1994 and was not present at his job in September, so he was replaced.

"There has been no official reaction from the Church about this case," the union officer said. "I think everybody regrets what has been done. I don't know if it's necessary to make it official to show concern. But church members and church workers condemn genocide. Whenever there is an occasion during church services, that is said."

The officer noted an absence of official church reaction not only to the Ntakirutimanas' case, but also to any accused church members. He told me that there were many Adventists in prison across the country who organized church services, and that elders took care of the others and that the incarcerated pastors preached sermons. "Sometimes the church in prison is better organized than the church outside," he said.

"Adventists have been very active in prison. They are asking fellow prisoners to tell the truth. We visit, but they don't want us to come and sing and pray. They want us to go straight to the subject and tell people to confess. . . . We have baptized many people in many prisons. We have a mobile baptismal that one church member made at his own expense and we can take it from prison to prison."

I asked what the church in Rwanda is doing to ensure that another terrible genocide does not sweep through its members. He told me about peace and reconciliation seminars being held for pastors and about youth camps that emphasize working together. "We encourage people from different areas and ethnic groups to be together," he said. "We speak on peace and unity as church members

Christ and the people of Rwanda," he said.

However, in the end Folkenberg did not seem to blame Adventists themselves but imposters in the ranks. "What happened in Rwanda is largely the result of unconverted people who carried the name of Christ," he said. He warned that what happened in 1994 could happen again unless the hearts of the people were transformed by the power of God. He urged guilty ones to plead for God's forgiveness and for victims to plead for the gift to forgive others.<sup>8</sup>

Nobody I talked to in Rwanda or Arusha mentioned the fact that the General Conference president had visited the recovering country eighteen months after the genocide. Were they unaware? Had they forgotten?

On the day the Ntakirutimanas were convicted at the international court in Arusha, the General Conference released the most explicit statement it had ever made about the case. "We are saddened by the outcome of this trial," Ray Dabrowski, communication director at the General Conference, said in the release. "We acknowledge with sadness that some of our church members turned against their fellow members and their neighbors. We are saddened that the accused did not act in harmony with the principles of their church. We offer an apology."

This was not the statement for which Pastor Ntakirutimana's supporters had hoped. And for others, it was an appropriate statement simply made much too late. The statement went on to say that the Church had cooperated fully with both the tribunal and with the defense lawyers.

Phil Taylor, investigator for the defense who seemed to know more of the gritty details of the case than anyone, told me he was not aware of any cooperation. "I know there were talks about possible talks but they







Photo: Alita Byrd

Mass grave sites have become part of the Mugonero Adventist campus. In addition to this roadside site, there is another one beside the hospital.

came to nothing," he said. "The individual leaders we spoke to did so on their own. I'm sorry the Seventh-day Adventist church did not make an independent effort to investigate and interview all leaders with direct knowledge, including the Pastor and Gérard."

When I asked Ramsey Clark about the Adventist Church's involvement in the case, he complained that he hadn't gotten the help he thought he deserved. "Say as little as possible was the policy," he said. "Among the courageous are those who speak out for the Ntakirutimanas. . . . The church leadership has a high duty to protect the Church and they have a history of being under attack. But they have a higher duty to the truth. If a church doesn't stand for healing the sick in spirit, it's not worth much."

So I asked Robert W. Nixon, general counsel for the world church, how the General Conference had cooperated with the Ntakirutimana's lawyers. He said that Ramsey Clark had contacted him to ask for any help the Church might be able to give in defending Pastor Ntakirutiman. Nixon had then communicated with current and past leadership of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division to get some feedback about where the Church should position itself. He said the consensus from the leaders was that the Church should be even-handed and not take sides in the case.

Although many leaders believed strongly that Pastor Ntakirutimana must be innocent, they felt it was unwise for the General Conference to get involved because of a lack of information and a belief that "sometimes good people do bad things." They wanted the church to cooperate equally with both legal teams, sharing any information with both. That was what Nixon's office did.

I asked prosecution lawyer Charles Adeogun-Phillips if he had talked to any Adventist officials about the case. He said he hadn't. The only opportunity he

had to talk to someone from the Church was when he cross-examined Pastor Merle Mills, the division president from 1966-1980, now an old man, who came to testify on behalf of Pastor Ntakirutimana.

"I laid into him," Phillips said. "I laid into him because it was my job, but also because I thought it was a slap in the face for him to come and sit in that courtroom and testify and give character evidence on behalf of Pastor Ntakirutimana, having not had any relationship with him in fourteen years."

After the verdict, when I asked him what he thought this meant for the Church, Phillips called the case "an indictment of the Adventist movement." He said it is regrettable that there has been no memorial erected at Mugonero and no official acknowledgement from the Church. "This is Adventists killing Adventists and there was no official response at all," he said.

Most Adventists in Rwanda and Tanzania don't seem to blame the General Conference for not being more involved in the case. "The GC cannot do anything," said a pastor I spoke to in Kigali. "They depend on the information they get from here. The Church has tried to reconcile the issues and put people together. Some people say they want to forget about it. But no, we must talk about it. . . . [T]he church cannot do anything. It is only Jesus who can touch the heart."

I spoke to several well-educated Adventists in Arusha who agreed that the Adventist church could not have been more involved than it was. "The Church could not stand up for the Ntakirutimanas," said one man, originally from Rwanda. "If we lobby for something it means we have made a judgment ourselves. When he is convicted our reputation is tarnished. We should not try to influence the course of justice."

I asked what he thought of the Church's statement after the conviction. "Why should the church apologize?" he asked. "No one killed as a Seventh-day Adventist. Some in the Church are just not truly converted."

Another church member standing nearby politely disagreed. "The apology is the same as a company apologizing for the mistakes of its chairman or workers," he said. "The institution takes responsibility, even though it wasn't the institution that did it."

All of the church members to whom I spoke in Arusha felt somewhat defensive about the conviction, however. There was a brief conversation about the news in the Sabbath School circle: "The BBC, the newspapers, everyone reported that it was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor in big letters. They are trying to discredit us." But then one person said wryly, "Well, maybe it's good. More and more people will hear about



us!" It was one of those optimistic semi-jokes that people hope might be true.

I called J. J. Nortey, who had been president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division during the 1994 genocide, to see what he thought of the Church's response. Nortey, originally from Ghana, is now working as the vice president for finance at Atlantic Union College in Massachusetts.

"From what I know and what I have seen, I cannot

political. . . . Even if they knew absolutely that the pastor was innocent they could not do it."

In the 1996 *Spectrum* article I wrote about Pastor Ntakirutimana, I quoted Nortey as saying that the Rwandan people need to forgive and forget and move on. Many people criticized this attitude—it is not popular in Rwanda. I asked Nortey if he still held this opinion.

"Absolutely," he said. "So many people are thinking that we should punish those who did this. But I have

**I think the best thing is to forgive, forget the past, and learn to live together.  
This is not the first time this has happened in Rwanda.**

believe the pastor is guilty," Nortey told me. He called the Church's response to the case "disappointing," saying "even though we couldn't say categorically that these people are innocent of any wrongdoing, I think we had a responsibility to give character information, to say that we had known this gentleman for forty years and had no reason to believe that he did this."

Nortey wrote to Folkenberg and later to General Conference president Jan Paulsen, but was told the Church could not be involved. Nortey was told that the Church would not stand in his way if he wanted to describe the pastor to the court, but that he would be acting as an individual and not as an official church representative. Nortey wanted to travel to Arusha and testify on the pastor's behalf, but could not get his visa and paperwork in order in time, much to the dismay of the defense lawyers.

Nortey was very involved in putting the Rwandan church back together after the genocide and he was the one who made an official report to the General Conference at its Annual Council about the nationwide tragedy. As division president, Nortey traveled around Rwanda to assess the destruction, with Mugonero his first stop. United Nations soldiers were still in the area and would not permit Nortey to travel up into the hills without a military escort. They gave him vehicles and soldiers, but only permitted an inspection during daylight hours and brought him back to the larger town of Kibuye before dark. "The place was pretty well destroyed and we saw hardly anyone," Nortey said.

Nortey said he would not expect church leaders in Rwanda to say anything—he feels it is the responsibility of the world Church. "The GC says they would rather the church in Rwanda made a statement," he said. "But that is not possible. It would be too

known Tutsis who were able to say in private that they were saved, or their family members were saved, by Hutus. Because of that, I think the best thing is to forgive, forget the past, and learn to live together. This is not the first time this has happened in Rwanda. We can't let people come back in twenty years and seek revenge. When will it ever stop? Our children—Hutu and Tutsi—must learn to live together in peace."

## In the End

After thousands of pages of transcripts and hundreds of hours of interviews and plane flights and phone calls, what have I learned? I have heard names and dates, rhetorical answers, and a litany of suffering from survivors who are crying out for justice. But any attempts to use rational, reasonable logic to explain what really happened only end in frustration.

It is terribly important to look for truth wherever it is hidden in defensive or hurting people, but the perfect truth has died with the victims. And though the search continues, they are the ones who must not be forgotten. To save our humanity, we must not get so caught up in the political debate that we forget the ones who died in terrible agony in a Seventh-day Adventist church. As their lives get tossed around to meet the personal ends of people thinking only of their own agendas, an atrocity on top of the massacre is created. No matter what else happens or what further truth is discovered, it is imperative that we bear witness to their lives. Justice has been meted out, but whether it is right or wrong, those lives that were lost can never be brought back on this earth.





In the end, three wise persons in a court in Tanzania decided that evidence available to them pointed to the guilt of Pastor Ntakirutimana and Dr. Gérard. Nine years after the the massacre, one can only speculate as to whether the certainty and defiance of the Ntakirutimanas' own defense has removed any guilt they may have once felt. They will continue to protest their innocence; their accusers will continue to point condemning fingers. And so for those asking the questions, the truth remains elusive. Its vestiges have been reframed to serve the purposes of the living, and blame has been duly assigned.

As I stood looking at the five simple coffins in the Mugonero church, I wondered about the human lives that had been extinguished so ruthlessly, leaving only a few white bones stuffed in a wooden box. I wondered what those dead would have thought, could they have known about the international trial that raged over the perpetrators of the crime against them. If they could have known, would they have been satisfied that justice had been done? Would they call for forgiveness above all else? Or would they simply mourn the tragic loss of their own lives, and plead to be remembered?

## Notes and References

1. *Washington Post*, Dec. 15, 2002, F01.
2. Ramsey Clark in an undated interview with *Judicial Diplomacy*.
3. *Ibid*.
4. I later spent time in Rwanda looking for the pastors about whom Taylor had told me and went to several prisons. I was refused admittance, however, and told that the people I sought were not there. My translator told me that the government did not want someone like me to see the prisons and would tell me anything—whether or not true—to keep me from arguing to get in.
5. According to Roland K. G. Amoussouga, spokesperson for the ICTR, in a press conference on February 19, 2003.
6. Note that the ages and other details of the interviewees were correct at the time of the interview, but have increased or could have changed in the months since then.
7. Numbers from the Rwanda Union office, Kigali, Rwanda.
8. Newsbreak in *Adventist Review*, Mar. 1996, 6.

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