Member News

Announcements for April 19, 2012

Posted on April 20, 2012

Trip Update—Wednesday, April 18, 2012

Dear Brethren,

We (Joel Meeker and I) have now completed two weeks on our trip, and I will return home to the U.S. next week. (Joel has a stopover in London.) Our final stop on this trip is Burundi. I will write one more update next week from this small country in central Africa, but today I would like to tell you about our trip to Rwanda. What a beautiful country it is, with many mountains, lakes and valleys! But it is also a country beset by the same struggles as many others in Africa—extreme poverty and overpopulation.

I have met many people on this trip and learned a lot about the Church in these small African countries. Did you know we currently have the largest congregation of the Church of God in Rwanda in our modern history? We are so used to thinking of smaller numbers (given all we have experienced since 1995) that it is surprising to hear of a group that is actually larger than it has ever been in the past.

The story of the Church in Rwanda is very interesting from a variety of perspectives. Jean-Marie Mundeli, an elder of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, serving in Rwanda, was the first person baptized by the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) in Rwanda back in 1972. He had been listening to The World Tomorrow broadcast in French on Radio Luxembourg while attending college in Belgium from 1967 to 1971. He and his wife were later visited by Bernard Andrist and baptized in Rwanda in the early 1970s. Can you imagine being one of only two members in an entire country? What would you do? There were no services to attend on the Sabbath or holy days. All they had were their Bibles and church literature. From this they continued to learn over the next 20 years.

The Church in Rwanda gradually took shape in the 1970s and grew to be a congregation of about 50 people by 1995. As a result of the doctrinal positions of the Worldwide Church of God at that time, the entire group chose to leave and join the new association that was formed (which was also where Mr. Andrist attended). For the next 16 years, the Church continued to grow; and in 1997 Mr. Mundeli was the first elder ordained in Rwanda.
In 2011 because of problems in the U.S., the group once again chose to join with a new organization—the Church of God, a Worldwide Association. Although the group in Rwanda is very poor, a number of members are quite well educated. They were able to follow the news of the Church through the Internet (and those who had access shared information) and came to the decision they did early in 2011.

One of the ironies of all this is that the Church of God in Rwanda has been seeking registration from the Rwandan government for more than 30 years. Without registration, they run the risk of arrest and being unable to locate halls for rent or even being forbidden to meet. Mr. Mundeli began the registration process for WCG back in the 1970s. After wading through the red tape, he finally got their application before the right governmental agency in 1995. Unfortunately, that was the year they left WCG!

After 1995 as members of a new Church of God organization, Mr. Mundeli once again began the registration process. This time they received a letter in 2006 informing them that there were a few items that needed finalization, but that they should be able to achieve registration after an official visit that would take place shortly. They waited for almost five years but no visit ever came from an official. And then in 2011 they once again joined with a new Church of God organization. In an effort to expedite the registration process in the new organization, they decided to be proactive and let the government know that they had changed their name to Church of God, a Worldwide Association, hoping that this would not impede progress.

In March of this year, they received an official response questioning why they changed their name. They are now in the position of having to write to the government and explain themselves. They are hopeful that after all these years they can finally achieve registration, but it is still unclear as to whether it will become a reality without more work. Although no one is bothering them currently and they are well-known in the community where the Church meets, there is always the possibility that the state will not allow them to meet on the Sabbath since they are not yet officially registered.

One of the saddest memories I will take away from Rwanda has to do with the genocide that took place in 1994. In a period of approximately three months in April, May and June of that year, as many as 1 million people were brutally murdered. This sad episode began with the death of the president, whose plane was shot down by a ground-to-air missile just before landing in Kigali on April 6, 1994. Within 45 minutes of this incident, death squads began roaming the streets of Kigali. The violence quickly spread all over the country; innocent people, men, women and children were killed with grenades, guns, machetes, arrows, clubs and knives. Rivers and lakes were literally filled with bodies. Each of the two primary political groups within the country (the Hutu-led government and the Tutsi-led rebel forces) blamed the other for the death of the president, but it has never been determined who was responsible. The Hutu and Tutsi are the two primary tribal groups in this region. The murder of the president was used as the pretext for ethnic cleansing that had been planned and prepared for months. Most of those killed were Tutsi and moderate Hutus. When the killing stopped, almost 1 million people were dead (20 percent of the entire population of Rwanda).

Viewing the genocide memorials is very sobering. Many of them are located in churches, where people sought refuge from the violence; but the church grounds were not respected by the killers. Death squads entered the churches and killed many thousands in the most brutal manner imaginable. Today thousands of human skulls line walls of churches in cities and in villages, graphic reminders of the massacres.
One of the most encouraging stories that came out during this 1994 genocide was the story of the small village of Giti. Most Church of God members in 1994 lived in this small village. The mayor of the village decided there would be no genocide in Giti. He placed guards at the entrances and denied access to anyone carrying weapons. While the world stood by and did nothing, this small community did something. It is one of the few villages in the entire country where not a single person was killed. At one time a sign stood at the entrance to the village announcing: “Giti, the village where there was no genocide.” Still today, the majority of the Church members in Rwanda live in this small village.

The members I met in Rwanda are all very certain that it was God who intervened to make sure none of them were killed or injured during this horrible time in the history of their country. While some members disappeared and one died of other causes while fleeing the killing, still today it is commonly reported by the members that they were all spared. Those who disappeared were Congolese citizens, and it is assumed that they fled back across the border into the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

There is so much more I could tell you about my time in Rwanda. One family I met traveled for an entire day to arrive at services. This is the Burumé family from the Congo, who have been Church members since the early 1990s. These were the first services they have ever attended as a family (the parents have attended the Feast before). They came with their eight children, and this was the first time their children ever attended a church service outside their own family.

I will conclude this update with a verse from Psalms that includes a prayer for protection. I was reminded of this verse after hearing all the stories in Rwanda.

Psalms 141:8-10: “But my eyes are upon You, O God the Lord; in You I take refuge; do not leave my soul destitute. Keep me from the snares they have laid for me, and from the traps of the workers of iniquity. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I escape safely.”

Sincerely,

Jim Franks

Announcements for April 21, 2012

Web content update. A series of Questions and Answers (Q&As) on God’s promises to Abraham has gone through the review/editing process and is now available online. The total number of Q&As posted on the COGWA website has climbed to 109. The latest postings are grouped under a new category titled “Prophecies of Nations.” They include:
As of Wednesday, 855 blogs have been posted to the cogwa.org website. We are very appreciative of the almost 100 authors who have contributed and continue to contribute blogs.

Now that the ministry has been organized into seven writing teams, each of which is producing content for the new public proclamation website, LifeHope&Truth, the production of new Q&As will be put on hold. Although we plan to continue the Daily Bible Verse Blog as usual, the number of blog postings in other categories will likely slow down due to our focus on developing the new website.

As for content development for the new LifeHope&Truth website, the team working on the “Bible” category has written approximately 15 new articles in addition to the 35 articles that are being copied over from the current website. This category was selected to be the first category posted in the design process since quite a bit of content for it was already available from the COGWA website.

The other teams producing content for the LifeHope&Truth website report having approximately one article from each team member in the review/editing process. With a target of May 18 for posting the initial articles, team members are hard at work to meet this deadline.

Submitted by David Treybig

Young Adult Challenger Program—application deadline approaching. Any young adults who are considering applying to the Challenger Program this summer, please remember: The deadline for this program is the end of April (not the end of May, as for the camp program). Participants need sufficient time to prepare, and we would like to inform applicants who are accepted as soon as possible.

This year’s program is a new venue—the Colorado Rocky Mountains! We will spend the first few days at a campground on the Poudre River, with class training for a day, followed by two days of rock climbing. Then we head west—and up—into the mountains, in the Routt National Forest, where we will spend four days camping, orienteering, trout fishing, learning team dynamics and leadership, and participating in classes covering spiritual lessons to take home and apply. We will actually be on and around the Continental Divide of the U.S.

For more details about the program, including everything you need to apply, go to the Challenger web page at http://camps.cogwa.org/camps/colorado-rocky-mountain-adventure.

Submitted by Paul Luecke