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# FRIENDS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

D. ELIZABETH TODD

## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

*There is a richness of Friends history in Central Africa that I have not captured here. When I first became curious about how the church emerged from the mission and the resilience that had guided them through 75 years, so many with heartache, I interviewed early Friends and Americans who spent years in Burundi. That experience makes this short article seem inadequate and embarrassingly unfair to many people who honored me with their stories. The Burundi-centric approach may be defensible for Burundi's historic primacy and the importance of narrative focus, but each story of Friends in the region deserves equal attention that I have not given. So I begin and end with apology for all that is omitted and deep gladness for people I have met along the way. Americans and Africans - "they're just people," Dorothy Thomas instructed me from the start. They were heroic, sometimes. Prone to the follies of their times, they, even then, heard whispers of the Divine. Today among Friends from Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo there is a strong commitment to transformed life, passion for faithful service to shattered communities and steady confidence in the real presence of Christ as the Light that shines in the darkness. Central African Friends have inherited the church and have much to teach Friends in the west. Here is a quick introduction.*

— Dawn Elizabeth Todd

October 15, 2014

## THE FRIENDS AFRICA GOSPEL MISSION IN BURUNDI

When American Friends from Kansas arrived in Burundi in the early 1930s, French speaking Belgian Catholic colonials were entrenched among cultural elites in Gitega.<sup>1</sup> Nearby, among the disadvantaged Hutus, Friends established medical and dental care, education programs, work and nutrition training programs. They sold western

clothes, advocated western ways, built houses and churches, planted gardens, brought water from the stream down in the valley... They established themselves as protectors of their area interceding with colonial authorities to end beatings and colonial taxes levied against Friends constituents.<sup>2</sup> They collected land, established their authority, and worked to undercut the traditional religion and the new influence of the Roman Catholic Church. They intended, above all else, to establish living Christian Holiness communities rooted in the Friends tradition.<sup>3</sup> For Burundians to inherit the church, they would have to become members and navigate issues of leadership and authority.

The Friends mission initially consisted of Arthur, Edna, and (adult daughter) Rachel Chilson. Confident, dynamic, and authoritarian, the Chilsons were determined to build a Friends Church in a prescribed image. With their experience in Africa and early (for western Protestants) arrival in Burundi, the Chilsons won partnerships with Protestants that ensured cooperation without contention over Friends testimonies for baptism of the Spirit without water and Communion with God without ingestibles.<sup>4</sup> For ten years the Chilsons kept tight personal control over church membership, teaching it was the Friends rite of passage indicating baptism. No one became a member unless s/he convinced the Chilsons, through testimony and behavior, that s/he was ready.<sup>5</sup>

With the death of Arthur (1939), departure of Rachel (1943), and death of Edna (1945), oversight of church membership came to less authoritative Clayton and Louella Brown and Ralph and Esther Choate. How were they to train and vet hundreds of potential church members so that the result would be sustaining Friends presence in the expected form? Rather than relying on personal authority and direct oversight, they introduced an authoritative text to be taught and administered by others.<sup>6</sup> A historic theological foundation was chosen: the *Questions and Answers concerning the Christian Faith Approved and Issued by the Ministerial Association of Oregon Yearly Meeting*. It had been vetted over time, apparently originating in New York Yearly Meeting in 1889 as *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine as held by the Society of Friends*.

Translated for Burundi Friends with few and minor adaptations for its new context, it was canonized to the extent that it continued in use through the departure of missionaries in 1984, long after it was replaced in New York and Oregon. Probationary members memorized it to prepare for examination by visiting Yearly Meeting Elders; they

were only accepted if they convinced the Elders of their cognitive assent and behavioral compliance.<sup>7</sup>

So the central practice to determine and rule membership, the *Z'Ishengero Ry'Abagenzi* (The Teachings of Friends) assumes a historic western Christian cultural context and represents products of hard-fought ecclesiastical disputes among 19th Century American Friends. It added a prohibition against witchcraft, a generalization for all customs and practices defined by the mission as heathen, pagan, or unchristian.

With limitations of the *Z'Ishengero Ry'Abagenzi* as a guide for emerging Burundi Friends, there was a rapid growth in new members and a geographic spread beyond what the missionaries could oversee. New missionaries (George and Dorothy Thomas and Randall and Sara Brown) meant more training and attention for emerging leaders. Still, Friends trained as leaders began to leave poorly paid church positions as their levels of education and training equipped them for roles in the booming colonial economy, in business, civil service, and Protestant Alliance institutions.

Simultaneously, some colonial-salaried staff at Friends hospitals and schools resisted mission leadership. The conflict culminated in a crippling struggle reportedly over Banana Beer. While there was a genuine push to allow the cultural practice of drinking Banana juice (which rapidly ferments), the core struggle was over decision-making and money in a country with increasing political violence and desire for independence.

The debate raged on whether to preserve the “canon,” as the mission and its closest allies determined to do, or to be open to modernize, democratize, and/or indigenize. Was there a role for Burundi Friends to participate in the construction of their identity if it ran counter to established order? The conflict escalated and the king of Burundi intervened in favor of the mission; it was a costly victory. Church membership dropped, most dramatically in the number of young, educated men who had contributed the most to church funding (through mandatory tithes). In some churches it seemed “only women and children remained.”<sup>8</sup> Without income, the mission had to choose to abandon the principle that the church be financially independent, or to lose leaders that they had invited into pastoral roles. In fact both occurred, but the mission guarded particular leaders by moving them into new leadership roles funded by other revenue.

As the ones mission-chosen to advance had “remained faithful” in the Banana Beer conflict, conservatism, a staunch determination to hold to Friends identity as imparted by the Chilson mission, was strong. Through 1984, there was no revision to the 1892 *Z’Ishengero Ry’Abagenzi*, or pastoral guidance on cultural practices. Those who disagreed left or were excluded.

Even so, it had become clear that the relationship between mission and church must change. Colonialism was ending and among Burundi Friends came a rapid reallocation of roles, property, and power. The mission formally separated from the Friends Church. Burundians inherited the church and were given voice in assignments of missionaries. They retired the most senior mission members; other long-tenured missionaries chose to leave.<sup>9</sup>

## FRIENDS EXPAND

The end of colonialism was turbulent. Waves of violence broke out with large-scale killing of many Friends: teachers, medical workers, a pastor and even high school graduates. In the anti-western post-colonial Burundi, terror and helplessness reigned. In letters home missionaries asked for prayer and silence, fearing any report of concern reaching Burundian authorities would result in targeting of Friends.<sup>10</sup>

Missionaries quietly helped. Bujeje Nicodeme recalled that Jim “Morris had a code to alert people to flee; he would call ‘I’m sending a package’ and then everyone knew to hide.”<sup>11</sup> Bugoke reported that when all his teaching colleagues were killed, he made his way to George Thomas; missionaries, he knew, had been hiding Friends “so killers wouldn’t find them.”<sup>12</sup>

Educated Hutus who survived fled to Tanzania and Congo, both places Friends churches later took root. Nonia reported “only men fled because the political problem caused men to be killed. So women went forward and continued the churches.”<sup>13</sup> Burundi Friends women, for the second time, sustained the churches through crisis.

After years of unrest and trouble, there was a rapid expulsion of Friends (and all western) missionaries. In 1984, the transition from mission to church was complete. Burundi Friends continued work in bordering Congo and Tanzania; American Friends moved to Rwanda.

Under the direction of Evangelical Friends Mission, some Americans leaving Burundi were reassigned to begin Friends

churches in Rwanda. Entering under the established Free Methodist Church and wanting to avoid contention or confusion, the Mission initiated water baptism and use of bread and juice in ritual observance at Communion. Hearing the report, the Burundi Friends Church sent a delegation to question and correct. They returned unsatisfied.<sup>14</sup>

But soon, such a concern lost urgency. Central African Friends stood at the precipice of attempted genocide. Communities shattered, and survivors were bereaved and traumatized. Much has been written about those events and much is yet to be recorded of Friends sacrifice and resilience through it and their work in healing, forgiveness, and peace building since. From those times Central African Friends report keen awareness, when facing death, of the real presence of God, the power of realizing hope and extending mercy, and deep thankfulness for help they have received. This tenderizing result is the foundation for their outreach today.<sup>15</sup>

## RWANDA – CONGO

American and Rwandan Friends served refugees who had fled to Congo during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. They gathered communities in northeastern Congo and churches formed. Rwandan Friends remain in close relationship with these churches and a Quarterly Meeting has been established.<sup>16</sup>

## BURUNDI – CONGO

In the 1980s, Bamboneyeho Etienne, a Burundi Friend, took refuge in the community of Abeka and Friends communities gathered.<sup>17</sup> A young Congolese man was promoted to leadership. He secured the position, and, 20 years later, retains it. “Friends in Congo suffered one or two difficult schisms and leadership conflicts and some leaders acknowledge the pain and stress of clan and regional loyalties.”<sup>18</sup> Around Abeka Friends number four to five thousand in 30-40 fellowships organized in four Quarterly Meetings.<sup>19</sup>

## TANZANIA

Waves of refugees in Central Africa took Friends teachings to Tanzania. Now three or four congregations numbering around 300 are requesting affiliation with Evangelical Friends International-Africa Region and recognition from the central government of Tanzania. Friends from neighboring nations have established a schedule of visits to encourage them forward.<sup>20</sup>

## NEW INITIATIVES BY INTERNATIONALS

With the emergence of the Evangelical Friends Mission (EFM) and Evangelical Friends Church International – Africa Region (EFCI-AR), bilateral affiliations changed. Led by American Friends, approved representatives from Central African Yearly Meetings attend annual EFCI-AR sessions. This gives representatives direct access to American money, invitations to international travel, and networking. This was particularly welcome to the leader of Congo who had “often lamented Congo’s ‘orphan status,’ longing for direct expatriate western ties.”<sup>21</sup> And that is what international Friends groups provide. They approved and sponsored the Great Lakes School of Theology, Great Lakes Leadership Training programs, pastor conferences, international travel, and peace conferences. Advances are intended in ministry training, church renewal, inter-visitation, evangelism, and initiatives in regional missions.<sup>22</sup>

In the aftermath of 1994 events in Rwanda, billions of dollars of foreign aid flooded into Central Africa. There was a great demand for educated leaders to coordinate with foreign funders and Friends leaders stepped into these roles just as Friends had done the generation before. Friends led programs in Aids awareness, trauma healing, clean water, micro enterprise, community peace, economic empowerment of women and care for children. Often pastors became bi-vocational retaining their position among Friends while adding an international NGO funded position (or two). This work democratized international relationships and decentralized the flow of money and decision-making. Along with life-transforming benefits of these programs, side effects included unsustainable development, cultural contention over use and reporting of donations, pronounced inefficiency, and mounting jealousy and conflict among leaders. In one example, a Burundi Friends leader reached such a state that he felt it prudent to

only travel with open-carry armed guards even when visiting Friends meetings.<sup>23</sup>

## MINISTRY IN LOCAL CHURCHES

American Friends have largely retained their commitment not to fund local church work. In the past institutions and foreign Friends hired workers, so attending church was advantageous. “People were coming to church because they were hoping they could get a job. But now it is different; there is no money. But God is still here. Now local people started to study, teach others, and go to evangelize in other areas. We are reaching many different places. We are local people who know culture and language and so the church increases.”<sup>24</sup> Remembering past initiatives to seek converts and to establish outreach sites, new churches, and schools, Friends began low-cost, high personal involvement initiatives exhorting people to a living relationship with God, hope for the future, and love for one another.<sup>25</sup>

While the majority of church members are women, they are significantly underrepresented in formal leadership. This is noticed and, increasingly, challenged. “Before women were not active during services, but now ladies are teaching, preaching. Now there is even a lady pastor and the Burundi Yearly Meeting Clerk is a woman. Now Government is saying ‘women can be ministers’ (of government). So even in the church, men are starting to understand. But we women are still back, we still need to reach, we are still not satisfied.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet there is a central role of Friends women too easily overlooked: the choirs. When Burundi Friends began writing their own songs in the 1950s, writing lyrics was limited to especially equipped Friends with instruments, special training singing parts, and access to missionaries.<sup>27</sup> In times of devastation, women’s choirs emerged. These groups now write their own songs. They learn from one another. They require no printed music, no electricity, no special training, no education (even literacy), and no money. They are homegrown not imported. Songs come from experience and are delivered as testimony with pastoral intent — encouragement to exhortation. There is as much song as preaching in any given service, and much of the text comes from Friends Women.<sup>28</sup>

“With missionaries here the Friends singing had no moving, just standing still. Now there is laughing, jumping and dancing.”<sup>29</sup>



Had early American Friends written and canonized their own text for Friends, they may well have included pastoral instruction on acceptable forms. Certainly they gave guidance in early days. Yet as the text they chose did not address these topics, so Friends established their own norms when missionaries ceased oversight.

Since 2000, the Burundi Friends church experienced rapid growth without an authoritative text. Printed copies and printing presses had been destroyed (by looting and the elements), so newly approved leaders and members did not learn it. Efforts to revise and establish a new authoritative text became trapped in church disputes over leadership and no revision was fully implemented. The selection of pastors, chosen by insiders without a transparent process or criteria since early mission days, became particularly erratic in second generation Burundi Friends. Instruction varied widely. A series of mini-pastoral conferences was sponsored, planned, and taught by visiting American Friends. Content and cultural relevance was inconsistent. Today the teaching of visiting Americans, the memory of the conservatives, and the will of the emerging leaders, mix together with the restless questions of the newcomers.

For instance, “Church members still have a lot of questions about Friends doctrines especially about water baptism. In fact, they believe that the water baptism is biblical, and they don’t understand why the Friends Church doesn’t practice it. Why do Friends believe in one baptism only: the baptism of the Holy Spirit? However most of our church members don’t understand it, and they are not sure if they have experienced it or not. The reason is that it not well taught and explained in the church, and even church leaders have different understandings about what it means.”<sup>30</sup>

This is an opportunity for Friends to respond to their current context, to represent their own identity, to craft their own canon. And the future is theirs.

## FRIENDS FUTURE — BURUNDI

The past is ever present in Burundi as is the dream of reclaiming the status and influence that existed in the days of Friends institutions. “One old man” said to a young leader “we planted those trees and built these schools; what are you doing?”<sup>31</sup>

Since calm returned to most of Burundi ten years ago, significant reconstruction happened. However, Burundi Friends have been hampered by internal stress and hostility.<sup>32</sup> In 2012, the 78-year-old Yearly Meeting divided. Visiting American Friends worked alongside Burundi Friends leaders to “hold the two groups together in fellowship under the same governmental recognition and to free leadership in both groups to pursue independently their dreams and visions in positive ways.”<sup>33</sup>

Will the leadership pursue independently their dreams and visions in positive ways? A shared vision could guide each group of Burundi Friends into the future, and cohesion could increase with a statement of shared identity constructed by and for Burundi Friends. Perhaps the availability of American Friends’ money and influence will facilitate communication and cooperation between the divided Meetings, but it could also empower unhealthy competition. For instance, both groups are founding secondary-level schools for ministerial level training in Bible and theology.<sup>34</sup> To what extent will these institutions duplicate, compete, or depend on long-term funding of outsiders? Yet the future of Friends does not rest in institutions or national leadership. At the heart of the church are resilient and dedicated Friends who reach out to others with creativity, hopefulness, helpfulness, and purpose rooted in the Good News that they have received and the tradition in which they stand. And the church grows.

## FRIENDS FUTURE — RWANDA

Rwandans had a shorter history with money and oversight of American Friends. Five years after its start, top leadership positions began to be filled with Rwandans. They met together to seek and express a shared vision in the aftermath of genocide, and “We were given a vision of light. We need to be people who are holy and transformed. We are to be disciples of Jesus, learning from him. We bathe everything in prayer. The Holy Spirit is our present guide. We are to shine Christ’s light throughout the country and beyond through our lives, in our homes, in everything we do.”<sup>35</sup>

There had been a vigorous foreign-funded and overseen church-planting program from the start, but when funds for church buildings stopped, growth stopped. With the new vision and strategic plan in hand, leaders challenged local churches to show ownership of

buildings and ministry. Friends in the Ruhengeri region raised over \$17,000. “People used to think that this kind of giving was for rich foreigners only so seeing this sacrificial giving brought us much joy. We no longer see ourselves as poor, always needing the financial help of the outside.”<sup>36</sup>

In fact, through the Discipling for Development program, Rwandan Friends leaders found that “foreign-initiated projects are often not very effective; they do not necessarily answer local needs. Projects need to be the idea of the people; they must initiate them and own them using the resources they have to be successful. We’ve learned that we don’t want things to be done for us. We want to be empowered. We’ve often been seen as too poor, and so people have given us things, but instead of being given fish, we want to be taught how to fish. Instead of being carried across the river, we want to be taught how to swim.”<sup>37</sup>

Rwandan Friends have 14 Recorded Ministers, and more than 20 (including the first two women) in process. Today, in three quarterly meetings, there are 11 monthly meetings, 47 daughter churches and 13 church plants.

Will Rwandans continue to seek and express shared vision and strategic planning, unifying their efforts and fortifying them against dissension? What will be the nature of Rwandan Friends relationship with other Friends in Central Africa? Will Rwandans, now enjoying the advantages of a growing economy and relative stability, find ways to serve other Friends? If so, to what extent will the “Rwandan model” inspire or irritate them?

## FRIENDS FUTURE — THE DRC

“In Congo, violence and poverty are extreme, health care, education, civic and political institutions are inadequate to non-existent. And Friends in the DRC face the formidable challenges of leadership tensions, some ethnic fragmentation, and debilitating habits bred by economic dependency. Nonetheless, people have been receptive to the message of hope found in Jesus Christ that has proven to have transformational power.”<sup>38</sup>

“Friends outside Congo long for a holistic development for Congo similar to Discipleship for Development employed in Rwanda.

Evangelical EFCI-AR and Friends United Meeting leaders have discussed how they might join forces to advance church growth across the DRC; programs are yet to be established.”<sup>39</sup>

But for what do Friends in Congo long and how can this be known? As leaders pursue their objectives, will they learn from nearby Friends or dismiss them in favor of American contacts with funding available? Friends around Goma may be the first in Central Africa to become firmly established without an American missionary presence and correlating building fund. With a model that releases Friends for ministry and leadership, Friends will be able to meet more of the vast needs of this beautiful land. Friends in Congo have much to offer.

## FRIENDS FUTURE — CENTRAL AFRICA

Central Africans have much to offer each other. To what extent will leaders of Central African Friends seek to build their primary relationships and dependencies with one another, designing, evaluating, and funding initiatives? When international partnerships do form, to what extent will they be free of the pitfalls so well explained in *When Helping Hurts*.<sup>40</sup>

From the earliest days of Friends in Central Africa, church leaders working closely with Americans received special privileges. This motivated some leaders to cling to their positions and others to usurp them. Were this trend to continue, hostilities and crippling distractions evidenced in the past may also continue. How different the future could be if Friends reduced incentives to conflict among leaders and opened doors for emerging leaders.

Throughout Central Africa, women seldom have any position with salary, title, access to foreigners, or international travel. Few women even participate in most programs funded by EFM and EFCI-AR. When men have access to ongoing education that women do not, it determines that men, not women, speak in churches, enter local leadership roles, and sit on the facing bench. Without local involvement, it isn't obvious to most that women should be present at larger scope vision-casting, needs-assessment meetings. The future will be different when women, deeply rooted in communities with experience finding creative, community-based solutions to problems have voice in and beyond their local meetings.

When will Friends in Central Africa write and represent their own identity? A Central African view will ask and answer different questions. How surprised I was the first time I heard Central Africans earnestly discuss “Is Africa cursed?” The implications of the answer, for the present and future of Friends, are significant. If there are spiritual forces that require a spiritual power encounter to overcome or fatalism to accept, Friends will respond. But from a distant shore, we may not even know the most relevant questions. And if we do, wisdom may lead that it is not for us to answer. So we ask and answer other questions, questions that are interesting and useful to us. Whatever comes in the future of Friends in Central Africa, we will only know it as we hear the voices of our Friends speaking for themselves.

## FRIENDS FUTURE — INTERNATIONAL

When will international Friends arrive in Central Africa with a primary, even sole, purpose to learn? Perhaps in the future Central Africa Friends will see themselves as they are: faithful through insecurity, hunger, fear, pain, and loss; sources of wisdom experienced in peacemaking, restoration, generosity, and community engagement. We have much to learn, and when Central Africans teach, we will become better Friends.

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