

First impressions, Rwanda Direct Visit, February 2020

- Unconditional love shown to me
- A visit that gave meaning to the word dignity
- The church in 3D

Manchester-Brussels, Brussels-Kigali.

After more than twelve hours of travel we could never have imagined the courteous and professional health screening on arrival at Kigali Airport, by a young Rwandan doctor, would be a herald to our current Covid-19 crisis in UK.

These are my first impressions of a two week visit to Rwanda in February with a small group from the charity Rwanda Direct. Our brief was to see the church in action in Rwanda and to be introduced to Africa itself. This was not only my first visit to Rwanda; it was my first visit to the continent of Africa.

Where shall I begin? *"Muraho, nitwa Susieeee!"* * I am a recently retired health professional seeking God's guidance for the next stage of my life. I live in Cumbria and am married to John. We have three grown up children. Last summer God drew my eyes to a notice in my local church about the trip with Rwanda Direct. Now, after a most wonderful visit of discovery I am home, thinking through my experience, and seeking to draw out what God wants me to do with the experience.

God invites us not just to contemplate him, but to experience him. The Bible reading on my first morning, set me thinking; *what it would be like to live as a citizen of heaven right here in Rwanda?* As I met God's people in Rwanda, I met God. They welcomed the team, some of whom were already their friends, they honoured us, and showed us Godly love; graciously receiving us into their homes and churches offering hospitality and fellowship wherever we went. Nothing was too much trouble. If our driver could bring us to the door of church he did, despite there being a steep rutted incline to negotiate, not to mention bicycles laden with possibly up to 30 plastic chairs or iron front doors, multiple sticks of bananas or several milk churns.

Travelling within Rwanda visiting Dioceses and sharing fellowship with local Christians, gave me the unique opportunity of experiencing so much more than a regular tourist. Rwanda, the "Land of a Thousand Hills" is deeply beautiful. In the north are distant towering volcanoes. Closer, steep terraced hillsides contrast with green mountains and allude to a densely populated country where subsistence farming is the norm and wealth centred close to the growing towns and cities. Children must attend Primary school, but senior school only available to those who are able to pay the fees. In Shyogwe Diocese we visited a church run nursery school, delighting the children with our cameras. *Muzungu**, are an unusual sight in rural areas. Wherever we went children were fascinated by grey hair, constantly wanting to touch us and feel our skin! Seeing them seeing themselves on our camera screens was another delight.

I met ever so many people! Church members, youth groups, bishops, pastors, teachers and college principals. In everyone I found a deep and reverent love of God. For many, there is no choice but to rely entirely on God and his provision. Compared with the plenty I have available to me in UK, many of my new friends seem to have very little. Some might even say they have nothing. Yet I saw in them great riches of faith and trust that left me speechless.

Bishop Emmanuel took us on a late afternoon walk to visit a child headed family. The house of 2 rooms and an entranceway, is home to Ishimwe (17), 5 younger siblings and an alcoholic mother. A goat and rabbit are brought inside after dark and cooking is by open fire outside. Meeting Ishimwe gave meaning to the word dignity. Climbing up the steep hillside away from Ishimwe's home in complete darkness, guided only by the phone lights of our new Rwandan friends left me humbled and challenged.

“There are so many still to become Christians-other churches are our friends.” Churches in Rwanda are seeking to empower villages and communities in a variety of ways including improvements in health and health provision, education and savings schemes. The team made many visits to see this vital caring work in action, including to a technical school in Byumba Diocese, a nurse led health centre with basic midwifery capacity and a feeding project for children living with HIV/AIDS. My impression was of church working in 3D. *“Show Jesus love by teaching practical things”*

The Government is striving to transform Rwanda; to move the country forward at pace. The business centre of the capital, Kigali, is I believe, modelled on Singapore, with wide boulevards luxuriant with foliage and flowers, newly built high-rise offices and developments. Laws have been passed requiring public buildings to be constructed to detailed specifications, including concrete floors, certain roofing materials and parking for 4 vehicles. This of course includes churches, many of which have been condemned or already demolished. Some have now been rebuilt by the local churches, mainly using their own resources, but there is still much work to do.

Another piece of Government legislation requires all clergy leading churches to be educated to degree level. Rwanda Direct believes that it is the Church in Rwanda that should set its own priorities. When we met, and shared fellowship with bishops in their diocese they reinforced the importance of theological education. The team were able to see their support in action both in the local churches and at KATC (Kigali Anglican Theological College). It cannot not be underestimated that this is an enormous challenge for the Anglican Church. Not least that University teaching is in English with many of the pastors speaking only Kinyarwanda.

The beautifully situated and comfortable SU compound in Kigali was our base for the trip. We were overwhelmed by the love and care we received, with staff members bringing hot water in the morning, laundering our clothes, serving meals and sharing fellowship and meals with us. We saw first-hand some of the SU work of supporting vulnerable children and empowering families, caring for Congolese refugees in transition to a new life in USA and writing and distributing resources for groups and churches.

SU compound was my introduction to the birdlife of Rwanda. Before the trip, I had not appreciated East Africa's prolific and varied bird population. On that first morning, my bird alarms began singing at around 5am. I picked out at least 6 different species from my balcony, some I recognised but most were new. Towards the end of our visit we spent a day in Akagera Game Park seeing many and varied game and bird species. Wonderfully we had 2 separate sightings of a lone elephant and unexpectedly, just as we were leaving, a hyena wallowing in dry mud right beside the vehicle. (It is extremely unusual to see hyena during the day). My bird list at the end of the trip reached a grand total of 66 species.

Jesus says; *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (John 10 v10). These first impressions are taken from my daily diary of happenings, feelings and thoughts.

This is Rwanda, Rwanda is life!

Susie Barstow. 31/03/2020

* *Hello, my name is Susie*

* *White person*