

A Letter from Robin Strickler

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Murakazaneza! Welcome to Rwanda! I've spent the past month getting acquainted with my new home in Kibungo, Rwanda and the capital city of Kigali about 115 km to the west. Even since the visit I made two years ago, **much has changed**: new buildings continue to go up, services continue to improve and new roads are paved. It seems Rwandans are working almost incessantly to rebuild their country and improve the future.

Having said that, there are many reminders of the **work still to be done**. A bone-jarring ride through Kigali's Remera district or a jolting 20-km trip into a rural area demonstrates that good **roads** are key to getting products to market in time. A trip to get **water** in jerricans (40 lbs when full) when our water service was temporarily out reminds me that most families in Rwanda must walk 1-2 km every day carrying that weight on their heads, or perhaps, three jerricans (120 lbs) on a bicycle if they're lucky. And sitting in our house in candlelight for 20 minutes when the generator went out makes me remember that **90% of Rwandans sit in candlelight every night**. Many shops with electricity stay open with one 40-watt bulb. Finally, the genocide memorials, draped with purple for mourning, are the starkest reminder of all: that behind the warm smiles and sincere welcome I've received at every turn, **reconciliation and trauma recovery** are still key issues.

Rwanda is beautiful: in any direction, layers of mountains stretch away in the distance. Purple jacaranda flowers and bright red pointsettias and thorn trees bloom near neatly swept yards surrounded by umuyenzi hedges. The night is still full of stars. Banana groves are interspersed with tall eucalyptus trees and at 5000 feet, the weather is pleasingly cool at night and just right for short sleeves in the daytime. Storks, cranes, sunbirds, turacos...to me, the birdlife is exotic.

As part of my learning process, I visited **a government school in rural Rukira**. Several kilometers down a dirt road, the school serves grades 7-9. It has no electricity and one typewriter and no computers. About 300 boys and 100 girls attend because their parents can pay about \$125 a year, a price which is out of reach for many others. There's no library, no sports equipment, no science equipment or laboratory, and the students often share texts. With 50 students in a class and only two of the teachers college graduates (the remaining teachers are mostly college students), they are doing a heroic job of providing what they can.

In July, a group of Lutherans from the Sierra-Pacific Synod in California visited Rwanda, and Lutherans from the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) and California saw a building site in **Rwamagana, the recently designated capital of the new Eastern Province**, about midway between Kigali and Kibungo. Together, we are **discussing the possibility of a Lutheran Center that**

would incorporate the school, the local congregation which currently has no place to worship, and the Bishop's office, presently located in Kigali. Under this scenario, Sierra-Pacific Lutherans would help us to purchase land that would serve all three. This is an exciting possibility that would help the school integrate with the community members, keep its Christian principles in focus, and make best use of buildings with multipurpose use.

As a result, I have met with the mayor of Rwamagana, who has shown great interest in the school and we are discussing several possible sites and specific issues like road access, water table and proximity to the town. We are moving quickly: check back and see how we are doing!

Grace and Peace to you,

Robin Strickler