

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

Mosques in Rwanda might seem extremely far away from churches in Southwest Pennsylvania, but we have more in common than you might expect.

In 1994, longtime mistrust between Rwandan ethnic groups turned into vicious violence and ultimately to genocide, with over half a million people killed within eight months. Members of the Hutu ethnic group attacked their Tutsi counterparts. Often this violence was perpetrated face to face among people who knew each other: literal neighbors, classmates, and colleagues were transformed into murderers and victims.

However, historians of the genocide have noticed one group that, for the most part, did not participate in the genocide: Rwanda's Muslim minority. Although Muslims included both Hutus and Tutsis, they did not turn on one another. Instead, they spoke out against the killing and helped to protect Tutsis of all religious groups, at risk to their own lives.



Photo by Brian Cohen



Human skulls at the Nyamata Genocide Memorial, Rwanda.
Photo by I, Inisheer, CC BY-SA 3.0

Researchers credit this extraordinary action to the actions of Muslim leaders before and during the genocide. The imams de-emphasized ethnic identity, promoting a united identity as Muslims. They preached frequently about the behavioral expectations of believers: acting peacefully, doing justice, helping the innocent. They grounded these norms in their faith tradition, citing the Quran. They shared these calls to action often, in sermons, at schools, and in pastoral letters circulated throughout the nation.

I learned about the work of these Muslim leaders in my service with Common Ground USA's Pennsylvania Resilience Network, the team committed to preventing and responding to political violence in our commonwealth and promoting social cohesion across political difference. At a time when our country is showing worrying signs of division, their story gives me hope. I believe that Christian leaders in Southwest Pennsylvania are positioned to lead work resisting violence in our communities, following the same example:

- **We can create, share, and reiterate the norms of expected behavior in our communities.** We can set peace as a baseline expectation, praise nonviolent approaches to conflict, and declare our intention to live in diverse multicultural community.
- **We can draw on the resources of our faith tradition.** We don't need to be experts in political science or group psychology to do this work: our scriptures, liturgy, history, and theology offer all we need. Our faith teaches us that peacemakers are blessed, that Christians have stayed true to our faith during challenging times before, and that peace is something we can pass from one person to another.
- **We can remind one another of our truest identity.** No matter our denomination, no matter what our immigration status or our race, no matter how we voted in November, or what we have made of these first dizzying weeks of a new presidential administration, or happens next in our nation, we have an identity that is stronger than any other. We are Christians. We proclaim that Jesus is Lord. We are called to love one another, to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies. And we are called to share that good news of love with the whole world, in our words and our actions.

At this fractious time, we too can prioritize an identity that takes precedent over all other identities we name. May we continue to be worthy of claiming the name of Christ; may we live out our high calling with God's help.

Your sister in Christ,

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA

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