

Stephen McIlhenny's Burundi Reflections – June 2008

Sorry about the mass email, but I have just come back from a very exciting trip to Burundi! Just before Easter I was asked by a centre I used to work at if I wanted to consider starting a centre (camp) in Burundi for people with disabilities. An Anglican Bishop from Burundi, called Eraste, came over for a visit and looked around my old centre (Keppleway). He then asked Keppleway if they could provide assistance in starting a centre in his diocese in Burundi.

So 10 days ago I found myself sitting on a plane with my old boss Peter Sanders travelling out to Burundi. Don't worry I had to look it up as well! It's a small country about the size of Wales South of Rwanda in east central Africa. It has a population close to 8 million and is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa. It went through the same genocide that afflicted Rwanda. About half the population are under 18! It is a very poor country with very little going for it. A ceasefire occurred in 2006 and it has been mostly kept to. The country is looking to the future and trying hard to put the past behind it.

The people we met out there were fantastic, very friendly and hospitable and you would not have suspected that the country was recovering from a civil war, apart from the mass of aid agencies and UN trucks visible. The area we visited is in the north east of the country in a town called Muyinga. It is very close to the Tanzanian border in the east (28km) and the Rwandan border in the north (40km). About a 3hr drive from the capital Bujumbura. The country is very heavily farmed; almost every spare inch of land is cultivated. The area is rolling hills, and I saw no cliffs.....NO ROCK CLIMBING, man alive!



On the road from Bujumbura to Muyinga

The climate is however very nice as it is 25-30°C all year round. Never too hot or cold. There is no wildlife, only 2 small game reserves that don't have much in them. The country has been so affected by man that the natural wildlife has been kicked out.

The project is basically to set up and run a centre in partnership with the Anglican Church in Burundi, Keppleway and with links to CMS (church mission society). The idea is that the

centre will be similar to Keppleway in the UK. People with disabilities in Burundi are considered the lowest and are hidden away. There is so much need in Burundi, and I struggled with the question of why am I going out to play in canoes or teach people to climb a wall? But the opportunity to give someone the gift of joy, excitement and adventure in an otherwise dull and difficult existence is amazing. The opportunity to go out and offer the skills I have to people who have nothing, and be able to give them a day or an experience they will never forget. A day of joy in a life of pain, to be given special attention when every other day you are ignored, to give people the possibility of doing things that they never would have imagined possible, this is why I want to go. To show that God loves them, by showing that people do care and are willing to give up lots to serve them.



This is in front of the Church with Bishop Eraste and Peter (boss of Keppleway)

The project will be based in the grounds of the Saint Andrews Cathedral in Musinga. The idea is that initially we will go out and develop activities and when the funding comes in we will oversee the building and expansion of the project. We will be working closely with a man named Everest (great name). He will hopefully come over to England and train with us in the Lake District next year. He will be our main man out there. We hope to head out to Burundi in September 2009. In the mean time it looks like Lucy and I will be heading back up and working a season in the lakes. Which is great as we both wanted to spend our first year of marriage in the UK.

We are both excited by the prospect, but very scared at the same time. There are many obstacles and challenges (including trying to learn two languages by next Sept!), but it will be an incredible adventure!