The Role of the Church and Christians in Bringing Peace and Reconciliation in Contemporary Burundi

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Abstract

The nation of Burundi has repeatedly witnessed armed violence for more than 40 years since gaining independence in 1962. Conflicts and civil wars rooted in political and historical tensions have claimed thousands of lives and livelihoods, displacing many to neighboring countries. This paper looks at the possible contributions of the Body of Christ and Christians in Burundi toward the peace and reconciliation process. The study employs a historical analysis of the etiology of conflict in Burundi in the various historical periods from the colonial period to the present time. Before focusing on the role of Christians in bringing peace and reconciliation, the paper explores the historical nature of Burundi's current challenges tracing back to pre-colonial times. The article highlights Burundi's present political dominance, historical injustices, social exclusion, inequality in opportunities, and unequal resource distribution. The study recognizes the positive role of the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation in working on these historical upheavals and argues that the church can be a resourceful partner in the process. Finally, the paper argues that Christians can better heal the situation in Burundi as they live out their biblical mandate of bringing peace, healing, and reconciliation in a broken world.

Keywords: Burundi, Christianity, Peace, Truth, Reconciliation, Church, Christian

Introduction

During the pre-colonial period, Burundi was governed by the Tutsi monarchy, like her neighbor Rwanda. At the onset of the colonization period, the Belgians generally identified the ethnic distinctions in Burundi with the following observations: Twa, who were short, and the Hutu, who were of medium height, while the Tutsi were tallest among them but also owned more than ten

cows.[1] These characterizations were beyond physical distinctions. The distinctions cemented the demarcation lines of these three ethnic groups and created a situation of "us" and "them." Notably, the colonizers worked closely with the minority Tutsi while excluding the rest. Thus, when Burundi attained independence from Belgium in 1962, ethnic inequalities and unequal opportunities were already present. The volatile situation worsened after a successful *coup d'état* against the monarchial rule of King Ntare V Ndizeye in 1966. Michael Micombero made Burundi a presidential republic and entrenched the dominance of the minority Tutsi ethnic group in the economic and political spheres of the nation.

In response, records indicate that, in 1972, Hutu militants organized and carried out systematic attacks against the Tutsi, with the declared intent of annihilating the whole group. The military regime responded with large-scale reprisals targeting Hutus. The total number of causalities on both sides remains unclear, although estimates are said to exceed 100,000. As a result, many refugees and asylum-seekers left the country for Tanzania and Rwanda.[2] Thus, the Civil War in Burundi from 1993 to 2005 emerged from a long-standing ethnic division between the Hutu and the Tutsi ethnic groups in Burundi. The conflict, triggered by historical injustices and unhealthy political temperatures during the first multi-party elections (in June 1993), split the country along tribal lines. The mayhem formally ended with Pierre Nkurunziza in August 2005 as the President of the Republic of Burundi.[3] The post-election conflict was dire, with reports indicating that both sides widely used children in the war, and the estimated death toll stood at 300,000.[4]

Methodology

The research looked at the historical analysis of the etiology of conflict in Burundi in the various historical periods from the colonial period to the present time. Also, through targeted interviews, the paper incorporated critical authors' views and personalities in Burundi's history. The interviews enriched the library material on the role of Christians in bringing peace and reconciliation in contemporary Burundi. Specifically, the paper looks at conflicts from the

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[1] Human Rights Watch, "Ethnic Groups in Burundi," *Nytimes.com*, July 18, 1983, https://www.hrw. org/reports/ 1995/WR95/AFRICA-02htm (accessed January 6, 2021).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Mark J.D. Jordans, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Burundi: A Tracer Study," *BMC Public Health.com*, October 25, 2012, https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/article/10.1186/1471-2458-12-905 (accessed January 6, 2021).

[4] Ibid.

independence period (1962) to the Hutu regime in 2005 and Christians' role in peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Christianity in Burundi and Its Struggles

The origins of Christianity in Burundi trace back to the onset of the colonial period. The earliest Christian missions arrived in 1879, but the missionaries were killed, and the King of Burundi, who ruled through 1908, had no interest in foreign theology or imported god.[5] Joseph Gahama argues that Protestant Christianity was introduced during German rule (1894-1916) but remained a minority religion. Later, Roman Catholicism was introduced under Belgium's reign (1916-1962).[6]

Christianity has since grown to be a religion of the majority in Burundi. John Misachi argues that 61.1% of the Burundian population are Roman Catholics, 23.9% are Protestant, 3.5% are Muslim, while 11.5% are from Animism, Indigenous Baha'i Faith, Atheism, and other Beliefs.[7] Of note here is that these wars happened when those who professed to be Christians were the majority. This raises questions on the nature and quality of Christianity in Burundi. It has been pointed out that professing Christians is not the same as practicing Christians. In a past interview with Bishop Deogratias Nshimirimana,[8] he noted that many Christian populations represent quantitative growth rather than qualitative growth.[9] In other words, many who refer to themselves as Christians may not even have an understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The numbers of practicing Christians are lower than the usual statistics of those who claim to profess Christianity. In addition, David Niyonzima[10] voices the same concern. He argues that many call themselves Christians for different reasons. For example, some may have become Christians because of divine protection and providence during wars and conflicts, while others may have become Christian to seek divine protection and guidance.[11]

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[5] Folola Toyin and Daniel Jean-Jacques, *Africa: An Encyclopedia of Culture and Society* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 121.

[6] Gahama Joseph, *Le Burundi sous Administration Belge: La Période du Mandat 1919-1939* (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 217-219.

[7] John Masachi, *Religious Beliefs in Burundi* (Quebec: St. Laurent, 2017), 38.

[8] Current Bishop of Free Methodist Church of Burundi at the same time the Former Country Director of African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministry in Africa.

[9] Nshimirimana Deogratias, Interviewed by Author, Bujumbura, January 21, 2021.

[10] The Current Vice Chancellor of International Leadership University-Burundi.

[11] Niyonzima David. Interviewed by Author, Bujumbura, January 22, 2021.

However, this does not diminish the fact that some have genuinely come to Christ in faith. Further, the nominal nature of Christianity in Burundi makes it ineffective in addressing societal needs. Nduwarugira comments that many are Burundian Christians in their identity because of lack of proper discipleship, rather than being Christian Burundians.[12] As a result, the Christ-centered identity misses in the lives of many who profess to be Christians. Despite these challenges within the church community, the body of Christ in Burundi remains a strong partner and a solution to the nation's present challenges. This paper explores the role Christians and the church has played during these past years in the history of Burundi and how they can promote healing and reconciliation in contemporary Burundi.

Nationally, the church has received its share of criticism but has also been a refuge during times of crisis. Severally, the church in Burundi has been called upon to help heal social divisions, help end civil chaos after political assassinations, and close wounds of mass violence.[13] Thus the church remains a crucial partner in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, especially considering the rich biblical understanding of peace and reconciliation. In the same vein, Christians are biblically mandated to transform society by being the salt and light of the world.

From this context above, it is observable that the church had numerical strength when the conflicts took place in Burundi. However, this does not mean that the church initiated the conflicts; it only means that it could have prevented, stopped the clashes, or minimized the effects of the conflicts. Therefore, the rest of the paper focuses on Burundi's history and the role of Christians in building peace and reconciliation in contemporary Burundi.

Definition of the Key Concepts

In this section, two key terms, peace and reconciliation, are defined.

Peace

The Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology observes that the word "peace" conjures up a positive picture in English, showing an absence of civil disturbance or hostilities or being free from internal and external strife. The biblical concept of peace is more significant and rests

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[12] Nduwarugira Emmanuel, "Christians in Burundi" *Evangelical Focus.com,* June 19, 2018, https://evangeicalfocus.com/world/3597/christians-in-burundi-a-systematic-crisis-not-a-presidential-one (accessed April 20, 2021).

[13] Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (Routledge: CRC Press, 2015), 369.

heavily on the Hebrew root *slm,* which means "to be complete" or "to be sound." The verb conveys both a dynamic and static meaning "to be complete or whole" or "to live well."[14] In addition, *shalom* means to be in a state of wholeness or completeness, without any deficiency or lack. *Shalom* is frequently used in the Old Testament about the wellness of others. Sometimes it is translated as well-being or welfare, such as in Genesis 37: 14; 43:27; Judges 18:15, 1 Samuel 17:18; 2 Samuel 11:7.

Within the context of this study, peace is not merely the absence of war and problems; rather, it is a holistic state of completeness where the wounded soul is healed, relationships are reconciled, and where there is harmonious living among the people.

Reconciliation

According to Pictorial Bible Dictionary, reconciliation is a change of relationship between God and man based on the changed status of man through the redemptive work of Christ.[15] This definition highlights three dimensions of reconciliation. First, there is a reconciliation of persons between whom there has existed a state of enmity. Second, there is a reconciliation of condition so that all basis of the enmity-relationship is removed, and a complete basis of fellowship is established. Third and last, there is a reconciliation arising out of change in man induced by the action of God.[16] Thus true reconciliation involves connecting people to God and one another to bring a bond of friendship, togetherness, and unity.

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[14] Elwell A. Walter, *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), netLibrary e-book.
[15] Merrill C. Tenney, *Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Zondervan, 1967), 707-708.
[16] Ibid.

Literature Review

This section deals with the scholarly discussions touching on peace, reconciliation, and the role of Christians in propagating these ideals.

Etiology of Internal Conflicts in Burundi: Pre-Colonial Times

There are three dominant ethnic groups in Burundi, namely the Twa, Hutu, and Tutsi. According to René Lemarchand 80.9% of the population are of Hutu ethnic origin, 15.6% are Tutsi, 1% is Pygmy while 2.5% are other non-specific groups, including foreigners, and fewer than 1% are indigenous.[17] According to Strizek Helmut within his work *Geschenkte Kolonien: Rwanda and Burundi unter deutscher Herrschaft,* the Twa, Hutu and Tutsi peoples have lived in Burundi for at least 500 years. For more than 200 years, Burundi was an independent kingdom until the beginning of the 20th century, when Germany occupied and ruled the region.[18]

In the mid-18th century, the Tutsi royalty consolidated authority over land, production, and distribution with the development of the *ubugabire* (a patron-client relationship in which the populace received royal protection in exchange for tribute and land tenure).[19] By this time, the royal court comprised the *Tutsi-Banyaruguru*, who had higher social status than other pastoralists such as the *Tutsi-Hima*. In the lower levels of the society were the *Hutu* people, and at the very bottom of the pyramid was the Twa. However, the hierarchical system had some fluidity because some Hutu people attained nobility, thus having a say in the functioning of the state.[20] For example, Jean-Pierre Chretien observes that Hutu farmers who managed to acquire wealth and livestock could attain the higher social status of Tutsi; some even became close advisors of the *Ganwa* (descendants of the king in Burundi). Conversely, the ethnic Tutsi who lost their cattle subsequently lost their higher status and became Hutu. Thus, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi was beyond ethnic grounds; it involved other social, economic, and political factors.[21]

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[17] René Lemarchand, *Burundi: History, Geography and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), netLibrary e-book.

[18] Strizek Helmut, *Geschenkte Kolonien; Rwanda and Burundi Unter Deutscher Herrschaft* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2006), netLibrary e-book.

[19] Collins O.R. and J.M. Burns, *A History of Sub-Sahara Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), netLibrary e-book.

Politics of Divide and Rule during the Colonial Times

The roots of the ethnic conflict in Burundi became even more entrenched during the colonial era. Burundi was first a German colony before becoming a Belgian protectorate. During the First World War, the East African Campaign[22] greatly affected the Great Lakes region. As a result, the allied powers, the British Empire, and Belgium launched a coordinated attack on the German colony. The German army stationed in Burundi was overpowered numerically by the Belgian soldiers, and by 17th June 1916, Belgium took over Burundi and Rwanda.[23] The Belgians established *Usumbura* as their center of power of the Ruanda-Urundi region, but the local kingship dynasty continued despite the European invasion.[24]

On 20th January 1959, Burundi's ruler Mwami Mwambutsa IV advocated for Burundi's independence from Belgium and the dissolution of the Ruanda-Urundi union. Burundian political parties like the Union for National Progress (UPRONA) began to advocate for this same plan in the following months. Eventually, the country attained independence on 1st July 1962 and legally changed its name from Ruanda-Urundi to Burundi.[25] Thus, the nation of Burundi became a constitutional monarchy, with Mwami Mwambutsa IV serving as the country's king.

Post-Independence Era: A Period of Mistrust, Political Instability, and Civil Wars

There was a general unity of purpose among the various ethnic groups during the fight for independence, but this drastically changed after independence. The age-long mistrust and divisions began to set in. For example, in 1963, King Mwambutsa appointed Pierre Ngendandumwe, a Hutu prime minister, but was assassinated on 15th January 1965 by a Rwandan Tutsi.[26] Again, King Mwambutsa, who had fled the country during the October coup of 1965, was deposed by a coup in July 1966 and his teenage son, Prince Ntare V, claimed the throne. In November that same year, the Tutsi Prime Minister, then-Captain Michel Micombero, carried out another coup, deposing Ntare, abolishing the monarchy, declaring the nation a republic, and forming a one-party government.[27]

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[22] Also known as the Abyssinian campaign. It was fought in East Africa during the Second World War II.

[23] Hew Strachan, *The First World War: To Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), netLibrary e-book.

[24] Warren Weinstein and Robert Schrere, *Political Conflict and Ethnic Strategies: A Case of Burundi* (Syracuse University: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1976), 5.

[25] Chris Cook and Diccon Bewes, *What Happened Where: Guide to Places and Events in Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999), 281.

[26] René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

[27] Ibid.

In the 70s and successive decades, the history of Burundi is a period that a dark cloud hovered over the nation. In 1972, a rebellion led by Hutu members of the gendarmerie broke out in lakeside towns of Rumonge and Nyanza-Lac. The rebels declared the short-lived Martyazo Republic (a secessionist state) that ignited deadly violence against the Tutsi and moderate Hutus.[28] During this bloody period, King Ntare V returned from exile, heightening political tension in the country, but was soon murdered. In subsequent months, the Tutsi-dominated government of Michel Micombero used the army to combat Hutu rebels and murder targeted members of the Hutu majority. The total number of casualties remains unclear, but recent estimates are 80,000 and 210,000.[29] In addition to this, several hundred thousand Hutu fled the killings into Zaire, Rwanda, and Tanzania.[30] Reportedly, following the civil war and genocide, Michombero became mentally distraught and withdrawn.

Relatively, a new era of reforms dawned with the coming in of Colonel Jean-Bagaza, a Tutsi, who led a bloodless coup to topple Micombero in 1976. His administration drafted a new constitution in 1981, which maintained Burundi's status as a one-party state. In 1987, Major Pierre Buyoya (Tutsi) overthrew Bagaza, suspended the constitution, and dissolved political parties. He reinstated military rule by Military Committee for National Salvation. Anti-Tutsi ethnic propaganda disseminated by the remnants of the 1972 UBU,[31] which had re-organized as PALIPEHUTU[32] in 1981, led to the killings of Tutsi peasants in the northern communes of *Ntega* and *Marangara* in August 1988.[33] The government approximates the death toll at 5,000. Again, an estimated 250,000 people died in Burundi from the various conflicts between 1962 and 1993.[34]

In June 1993, Melechior Ndadaye, the Hutu-dominated Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) leader, won the first democratic election. He became the first Hutu head of state, leading a pro-Hutu government. Though he attempted to heal the country's bitter ethnic divide, his reforms antagonized soldiers in the Tutsi-dominated army. He was assassinated after only

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[28] Manirakiza Marc, *Burundi : De la Révolution au Régionalisme* (Bruxelles : Le Mat de Misaine, 1992), 211-212.

[29] Matthew White, *Death Tolls for the Major Wars and Atrocities of the Twentieth Century: Burundi* (Paris: Harmattan, 2000), 47.

[30] Paul Timothy Longman, *Proxy Targets: Civilians in the War in Burundi* (Paris Flammarion, 2001), netLibrary e-book.

[31] *Umugambwe w'Abakozi b'Uburundi* meaning Burundian Workers Party.

[32] *Parti pour la Libération du Peuple Hutu* meaning Party for the Liberation of Hutu People

[33] Peter Haggett, *Encyclopedia of World Geography* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002), netLibrary e-book.

[34] Ibid.

three months in office amidst a failed military coup in October 1993. The ensuing Burundian Civil War (1993-2005) saw persistent violence between Hutu rebels and the Tutsi majority army.[35] In 1996, Pierre Buyoya (a Tutsi) again took over through a *coup d'état,* suspended the constitution, and was sworn in as President in 1998. This period was his second term as President, after his first term from 1987 to 1993. In response to rebel attacks, the government forced much of the population to move to refugee camps.

Since Burundi's independence in 1962, two genocides have taken place in the country: the 1972 mass killings of Hutu by the Tutsi-dominated army[36] and the mass killings of Tutsi in 1993 by the Hutu majority. The final report of the International Commission of Inquiry for Burundi presented in 2002 to the United Nations Security Council recognizes these two mass killings as genocides.[37]

This section has traced Burundi's historical challenges from pre-colonial to modern times. The emerging question is whether the church or Christians have a role to play in such a situation by bringing peace and reconciliation. The following section looks at initiatives by government and international bodies to address the problem in Burundi. Afterward, the paper looks at the critical role of Christians in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process.

Peace and Reconciliation Initiatives in Burundi

Due to the escalating violence in Burundi in the 90s, Africa leaders began a series of peace talks between the warring factions following the United Nations Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali's request to intervene in the humanitarian crisis. The former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere in 1995 was one of the forefront leaders, and after his death, South African President Nelson Mandela led the mediation process and other successive leaders.

The peace talks took the form of Track I mediations. This method of negotiation involves governmental or International representatives, who may use their positive reputations, mediation,

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[35] Remy Jean-Phillipe, *The Ghosts of Assassinated African Presidents* (Paris: Le monde, 2018), netLibrary e-book.

[36] Bowen Michael, *The United States and Genocide in Burundi* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1972), 49.

[37] United States Institute of Peace, "Report of International Commission of Inquiry for Burundi," *Peace Direct.5.* no.2 (Fall 2019), https://www. Peaceinsight.org/conflicts/95urundi/ (accessed January 6, 2021).

or the "carrot and stick" method as a means of obtaining or forcing an outcome, frequently along the lines of "bargaining" or "win-lose."[38]

The main objective was to transform the Burundian government and military to bridge the ethnic gap between the Tutsi and Hutu. In addition, it was to establish a transitional power-sharing government with the top leaders holding office for three-year terms. Further, it was to restructure the armed forces to equal representation.[39] As the protracted nature of the peace talks demonstrated, the mediators and negotiating parties confronted several obstacles. First, the Burundian officials perceived the goals as "unrealistic" and viewed the treaty as ambiguous, contradictory, and confusing. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the Burundians believed the treaty would be irrelevant without any accompanying ceasefire with the parties involved. The Hutu party was skeptical of the offer of power-sharing government; they alleged that the Tutsi had deceived them in past agreements.[40]

In 2000, the Burundian President signed a peace treaty with 13 of the 19 warring Hutu and Tutsi factions. However, inevitable disagreements persisted over which group would preside over the nascent government and when the ceasefire would begin. The hardliners in the parties involved refused to sign the accord; as a result, violence intensified.[41] However, the election of Pierre Nkurunziza in 2005 (a Hutu), who was once a rebel leader, reignited hopes of peace and reconciliation. As of 2008, the Burundian government initiated talks with the Hutu-led PALIPEHUTU-National Liberation Forces (FNL) to bring peace.[42]

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission formed by the government to look into matters of peace and reconciliation has so far managed to collect information about the historical injustices and accounts from the war victims. The ideals like truth, forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation as propagated by the Commission are foundational in the biblical teachings. Therefore, the church and Christians can play an active role as critical partners alongside the government.

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[38] Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse and Myall Hugh, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), netLibrary e-book.

[39] Eck Van Jan, "Peace Mediator in Burundi," *Hilversum,* August 7, 2000, 13.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] M. Jeanne Haskin, *The Tragic State of Congo: From Decolonization to Dictatorship* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2017), 151.

Role of the Church and Christian in Bringing Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi

Bongmba Elias notes that Burundi's religious institutions have been called upon to help heal social divisions, help end civil chaos after political assassinations, and close wounds of mass violence. Thus, the church remains a pivotal partner in creating and sustaining peace.[43] Some scholars have criticized the colonial officials and Christian missionaries for inadvertently entrenching the already existing ethnic divisions.[44] Yet, undeniably, the church has been actively involved in peacebuilding efforts in the history of Burundi.

During the civil war period, which resulted in the deaths of more than 250,000 people, the church was not silent. For instance, the country's faith leaders persistently attempted to bring peace and reconciliation; they also encouraged the international community to "re-establish good diplomatic relationships" with their government.[45] The church community in Burundi, across denominations, participated in efforts to comprehend the past conflicts, their implications, and ways of promoting peace and reconciliation. As Ray argues, the church has been at the forefront in most parts of Africa; Christianity "has become a force for resolving life's problems…solutions to personal problems, moral guidance, and a means to personal salvation."[46] Conspicuously, the church in Burundi has made some significant strides in the peacebuilding and reconciliation process.

First, prominent church leaders in Burundi have led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Within their article *Burundi's Faith Leaders Renew Commitment to Peace and Reconciliation,* the Anglican Communion News Service announced that the talks brought together leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, the National Council of Churches of Burundi, the Council of Union of Christian Churches, the Islamic Community of Burundi, the Confederation of Churches and Revival of Burundi and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The groups met to "examine the current situation in Burundi, as well as the role of religious leaders" in the country "in contributing to enhance peace, security, and reconciliation."[47]

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[43] Bongmba Kifon Elias, *Routledge Companion to Christian in Africa* (Routledge: CRC Press, 2015), netLibrary e-book.
[44] Longman Timothy, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42.
[45] Gavin Drake, "Burundi's Faith Leaders Renew Commitment to Peace and Reconciliation," *Anglican Common News Service,* October 20, 2017.
[46] Ray B. C., *African Religion Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Upper Addle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), netLibrary e-book.
[47] Gavin Drake, "Burundi's Faith Leaders Renew Commitment to Peace and Reconciliation," *Anglican Common News Service,* October 20, 2017.

Second, the church (throughout CNEB[48]) has encouraged believers to be the models in supporting the government's program. Also, church leaders at the grassroots level have been encouraged to organize prayer and trauma and healing sessions and organize workshops on peace and reconciliation. In the same perspective, John Katunga, in *Peace and Justice Regional Technical Advisor for East Africa Region,* notes that the Catholic Church has been instrumental in peacemaking, the promotion of constructive dialogues, at all levels, among parties involved in violent conflicts in the region.[49]

Third, church leaders have actively participated and supported the Ministry of Home Affairs regularly when it organizes seminars on the best practices on peacebuilding and reconciliation. Fourth and last, churches in Burundi have ecumenical activities at the community level, like joint prayer and peace-preaching sessions. These initiatives, among others, have contributed to the peacebuilding and reconciliation process in Burundi.

Opportunities for Individual Christians to promote Peace and Reconciliation

The historical situation in Burundi presents believers with an opportunity to live out their biblical values like forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation. In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul taught about forgiveness as a reciprocation of the forgiveness they received from God (Mat 6:12; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Jesus required his followers to unconditionally forgive those who do wrong to them (Mat 18:21-22). Forgiveness should be coupled with confession since confession allows the offended party to express anger and forgives, thus ushering in a new relationship and a new life with a former enemy.[50] Marc Gopin adds that forgiveness is a central focus of Christian peacemaking. David Niyonzima observes that this forgiveness allows people to break down "us versus them" boundaries and takes away from the concept of the "other."[51]

Recognizably, to foster forgiveness, boundaries must be crossed even when a conflict is fierce and violent. Usually, forgiveness focuses on loving others. Jesus's two commandments,

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[48] National Council of Church in Burundi
[49] John Katunga, "Peace and Justice Regional Technical Advisor for East Region," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs,* October 24, 2008.
[50] Dodo Obediah and al., *African Initiated Churches, Pivotal Peace Building: A Case of the Johane Masowe Chishanu* (The Kripke Center, 2014), 7.
[51] Niyonzima David and Fendall Lon, *Unlocking Horns: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Burundi* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 2001), netLibrary e-book.

"Love God and love others,"[52] aspect of loving others refers to caring for all human beings, regardless of ethnicity, disability, and sex.

Indeed, believers in Christ are responsible for reconciling the world to God, then to one another (2 Cor 5:18). Jesus modeled reconciliation when he reconciled men to God and commissioned his followers to be agents of reconciliation. Similarly, believers proclaim a unique biblical aspect of shalom that holistically addresses human needs (John 14:17). Believers have the inner peace that, in turn, influences their lives and the communities they live in. The values of peace and forgiveness are not just inner values for an individual but are also God-given values that transform lives and communities. Civil wars and strife occur when these values are absent or not cultivated. Peace is a gift of God and the fruit of human work that must be considered based on values such as trust, justice, freedom, and love.[53] Believers should, within their context, be peacemakers after Christ (Jas 3:18). Peacebuilding and reconciliation are originated from God, who mandated believers to bring these values to the broken world.

Conclusion

Burundi's divisions and civil wars have been ethnic and historical, dating back to pre-colonial times. These internal conflicts have caused loss of trust, property, and, more so precious lives. Efforts made by the past political leadership to make peace and unity have been elusive. The use of military power to settle issues has aggravated matters even more. Political settlements have particularly helped but have not provided a long-lasting solution. Thus there must be a way that the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa ethnic groups can coexist. The paper has proposed that the Body of Christ and individual Christians proclaim and live out the biblical values of peace, healing, forgiveness, confession, justice, and reconciliation corporately. Coincidentally, these are also foundational values of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Thus, the church remains a critical partner in building a cohesive and peaceful Burundi. The centrality of the church within this process is evident in Burundi's history, but it is also essential, noting that many Burundi nationals profess to be Christians. The church can indeed be a key partner at the grassroots levels throughout the nation in bringing healing and reconciliation. Further, the research proposes that the church builds on cultural virtues to contextualize the gospel message in the Burundi context.

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[52] New International Version (Mark 12:30-31).
[53] James Matthew Thompson, *Peace and Justice* (New York: Orbis, 2000), netLibrary.

For instance, the church explores cultural resources in the national healing process. Burundi's culture has rich values that are in harmony with biblical values, and this can be a window through which the contextualization of the Gospel message can be applied. I propose that this conversation starts with key terms such as *Ubushingantahe,*[54] *ubupfasoni*,[55] and *Ubuntu*,[56] and the spirit of living a faithful life full of dignity, humility, responsibility, and equity. These are worldview resources that can be rearticulated for peace and order in society.

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[54] A term that describes a set of personal virtues, including a sense of equity and justice, a concern for truth, a righteous self-esteem, a hard-working character, a man with those qualities is called *umushingantahe*.

[55] A term that describes a set of personal virtues including confidentiality, humility, gracefulness, and elegance. It is used for women, and a lady who has these qualities is called *umupfasoni*.

[56] A Burundian value of being human.

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