

February 2011

A Belated Happy New Year from Rwanda!

For us at Rwamagana Lutheran School, it is indeed a new year because the school year also starts in January. On January 24th, we had **our first morning circle with 45 students** instead of last year's 24. The returning students looked confident and energetic and the new students, like new students anywhere, looked nervous and unsure of themselves. We took measurements for uniforms, passed out notebooks and pens and textbooks and did all those ordinary things I remember from my own school days, both as a student and a teacher.

But looking back and looking forward, there are also many extraordinary things. Nineteen of our 24 students last year finished S1 and moved on to Secondary 2, and the new teachers find them confident, comfortable in English and full of questions. Nine of our students were selected from a thousand students nationwide to attend a leadership camp for boys and girls run by Peace Corps.

It was also a year that illustrated for me the hardships that many of our students face. On the day after Thanksgiving, and while my family and friends in the US were munching on turkey leftovers, I visited one of our students who is especially poor and who had had health problems for months. It was a mud-walled house, big with three rooms, but there were only two wooden chairs, a bench and a tiny table. A picture of Jesus looking skyward was hung on the wall along with a poster of a gospel singer from Uganda. In the other room, there were woven plastic mats instead of mattresses for sleeping on the floor. I was telling the student's elderly grandmother that it would be good for the girl to eat leafy green vegetables to increase her intake of iron but the grandmother was shaking her head. "Ai weh..." she sighed. "Vegetables are expensive!"

A week later, I visited two other students who were sharing a rented room in a house belonging to a family. Both 18 and both orphans, they had secured the room near the school for convenience and I was admiring the nice big cupboard. "It belongs to the family," one boy explained. "They come and get things out of it as they like. For us it is a good place for sitting but we can't keep something in it." Indeed, about three minutes later, a tall girl entered and greeted us and took several dishes from the cupboard and left. "Even if we leave, the glass is out of the window so they can unlock it freely," he said. Later they showed me the places where the rats and roaches came in at night and ran across the bed. "It's better than where we lived before," they both agreed, "because we have electric light and we can study." Nonetheless, one boy has a chronic stomach ache and we're working with him to figure out the cause.

These are the students who need our school most because it will be, as people say, "a game changer" for them. Today there are leaders of Rwanda with PhD's who can recall similar situations as they grew up in exile or lived in poverty among the rural hills of Rwanda. With this chance to make such a difference in the country, we take our jobs very seriously.

Given this context, you can imagine our profound excitement and appreciation when we learned that **Wheat Ridge Ministries** accepted our application for a grant of \$40,000 over the

next three years! Wheat Ridge helps start-up ministries in the US and abroad with a variety of health-related needs and this grant is helping us to purchase sorely needed kitchen equipment, garden tools and supplies. It is also funding the construction of our biogas digester (it will provide methane gas for heating water, cooking and science lab) and at Christmas time, we purchased our first 20 chickens that will help us to provide better protein and possible income generation. Finally, the grant will help us fund volunteer Melissa Roussin to advise our girls' sports club, helping girls to learn about fitness, nutrition and STD's as well as to help them build confidence and self-esteem. We've seen that girls who are shy and don't ask questions fall far behind in their studies, so confidence is critical for their success.

We had other good news too: the **Rotary Club** of Gasabo joined forces with Rotary Clubs in Santa Rosa, CA and elsewhere to grant us \$24,000 to fund construction of ten latrines, a second water tank and the purchase of our first cow. Since we currently have 51 people using two latrines and we've already experienced two dry periods with our first water tank, we are also very thankful to Rotary!

So what does 2011 portend?

We renovated a small house that was left on site to board 12 girls and another 7 boys are staying in an empty classroom, all with an eye toward **eventually building a dormitory** so we can attract paying students to help support those who are attending locally. I'm happy to report that both the girl who was malnourished and the two boys who were renting the room are now staying in our temporary quarters. Even though there are many challenges for them staying on campus (the outdoor bath stall for the boys being one of the main ones), they are thrilled to be in a more stable situation that can encourage them to study than where they were before. In fact, despite the extremely basic conditions (no running water and latrines 160 meters away at night), we had a long line of students begging to stay in the "dorm" because those that live with step-families rarely get an opportunity to study at home.

Our teacher Mr. Muhire attended a two-day training on a no-till farming method called **"Farming God's Way"** which is seeing significant success in southern Africa. We are excited to test this way of carefully stewarding God's gifts of seeds, labor, fertilizer and time and the way it encourages farmers and gardeners to reduce soil erosion and wastage. It is the beginning of our focus on sustainability in our curriculum and in our activities.

We've already had international visitors in 2011: Kumiko Tsuda and Rie Inoue of **HarvesTime - Japan** came to teach interested Rwandans about making paper from banana plant fiber. Since Rwandans throw away tons of this part of the banana plant every year, it has interesting potential. Church members and students both expressed interest in developing this project further and it is just one example of the ways we are cooperating with the wider community.

We're also very excited because the Sierra Pacific Synod youth who came to visit us last year have now invited **ten youth in the Lutheran Church of Rwanda** to come and visit them in California in July. Thanks to the same grant that helped them travel last year, this group, including four students from our school, will be able to further that relationship and build a deeper understanding of how to do community development and youth ministry. It is truly creating a cross-cultural bridge between our two groups!

I noticed in the first week of school that the returning students showed a tremendous sense of community. When it was time to clean the classrooms, they jumped to grab brooms and mops. Meanwhile, the new students stood looking around. "What...us? Clean?" I watched returning students go out of their way to welcome new students and show them where things are. I was proud of the teachers and what we started last year. We'll work this year on strengthening our Crew program and building a stronger academic assessment model that offers a variety of ways (beyond testing) to assess students' progress. We've welcomed two new teachers (Protogene and Paulin) who are already a welcome addition to our teaching staff. This year we have our first parent board member and we hope that gradually parents will move into leadership roles at the school.

During the last week of school in 2010, a student named Patricia was in charge of leading morning circle. "Tell everyone what your best day was this year," she instructed, "and then I'll ask you to find a partner."

The day we met students from California.

The day we came to our new land and our new school.

...and Mr. Viateur made a dance that we all danced.

The day we had meeting and games with Rotary Club.

The day we looked in the microscope about mosquitoes.

The day I made my hip hop song.

Patricia asked everyone to find a partner and pray about what they hoped to accomplish next year. Everyone withdrew a little from the circle, and my partner, a young man of 19, took my hands and prayed for next year, prayed to study well, prayed that he would be more able to stand in front of others and be a leader and he prayed for good health. I prayed that I would be able to lead the school well and I gave thanks for all the people who have helped us get this far.

We are dreaming a dream together and we are the future.