

An Agent of peace

McDaniel works to bring reconciliation to post-genocide Rwanda

By Tim Ellsworth

When Andrea McDaniel first visited Rwanda, she was immediately drawn to the country in part because of the devastation there – genocide 16 years ago claimed the lives of 1 million people in 100 days.

“I was surprised to see how the people who are there now are really a lot like us,” she says. “They’re ordinary people with dreams that their children will go to school. They want to make a living for their families.”

As she talked to the Rwandans, she was especially encouraged and moved by their stories of forgiveness. Many of these were people who, because of their faith in Christ (Rwanda is 90 percent Christian), had been able to forgive the killers who had inflicted such atrocities on their family members.

“If they have the power to forgive after genocide, this is a message the whole world needs to hear,”

McDaniel thought. “It’s really a message about the power of the gospel. It’s not about the Rwandans. It’s about the power of the gospel.”

As co-founder and chief executive officer of the As We Forgive-Rwanda Initiative, McDaniel now works to be an agent of peace in that impoverished and devastated east African country, providing healing and reconciliation in a nation that desperately needs both.

Her connection with Rwanda began during McDaniel’s years in the government. After graduating from

Union in 1999, McDaniel eventually landed a job in the White House during the George W. Bush administration, working directly with the president at times and advising him on political appointments to government agencies. She later spent five years with the State Department, where she focused on public-private partnerships and established a federal office responsible for promoting private sector involvement in worldwide public diplomacy initiatives.

Her work at the State Department included spearheading the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership, which supported peaceful solutions to conflict by promoting economic opportunities in Israel and Palestine. During one trip to Israel with Karen Hughes, when the U.S. government was announcing a project, McDaniel remembers sitting in her hotel room and praying.

“Lord, I don’t know what it means,” she prayed, “but make me a peacemaker.”

McDaniel’s tenure with the State Department ended in 2009 when Bush left office, providing her with an opportunity to do some extensive traveling. She had several friends in various countries who had invited her to visit, and one of those friends invited her to Rwanda.

In her return trip to the country, she discovered that her friend Laura Waters Hinson had produced a documentary called “As We Forgive” that promoted reconciliation between victims’ families and the perpetrators of the genocide. McDaniel was curious to see what the gospel presented through the film could do in the country. The Rwandan government took an interest in the efforts of McDaniel and Hinson, and McDaniel caught a vision for what she and Hinson could do there — they could work with Rwandan Christians and help strengthen churches for their own mission. They could help equip Rwandans as they worked to heal a broken land.

The success of that trip led to return visits and the founding of AWFRI. The faith-based

organization has several initiatives to encourage reconciliation, including showing and discussing Hinson’s film and teaching a basketball camp for students. The organization also works to empower Rwandan pastors to teach their congregations the concepts of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation from a biblical perspective.

She estimates that AWFRI has now reached more than 35,000 people. In response to the AWFRI training, some pastors have organized home-building projects, bringing victims and perpetrators together to work on projects that help their communities.

“It is amazing to see how the changing of somebody’s mind and heart produces results in their life,” McDaniel said.

Her desire is that her work in Rwanda will have reverberations in the United States as well. She and Hinson are now working to begin As We Forgive International, a new faith-based U.S. organization dedicated to inspiring forgiveness and reconciliation in nations and communities worldwide.

“I would like for the work in Rwanda and the example of the church in Rwanda to inspire us,” McDaniel said. “To call us to action about what we need to be doing to minister to needs in our own communities and to be actively pursuing the goal of being a disciple of Christ and being about the kingdom of God — not just a future event, but right now — and to be participants with God in building the kingdom. ☩

With additional reporting by Samantha Adams



Members of the Kininya Association who were former enemies are now working together, forming small livestock businesses.



Former Director of Outreach Rachel Weber, Country Director Benjamin Ndizeye and Andrea McDaniel at a fundraising event in Rwanda.