

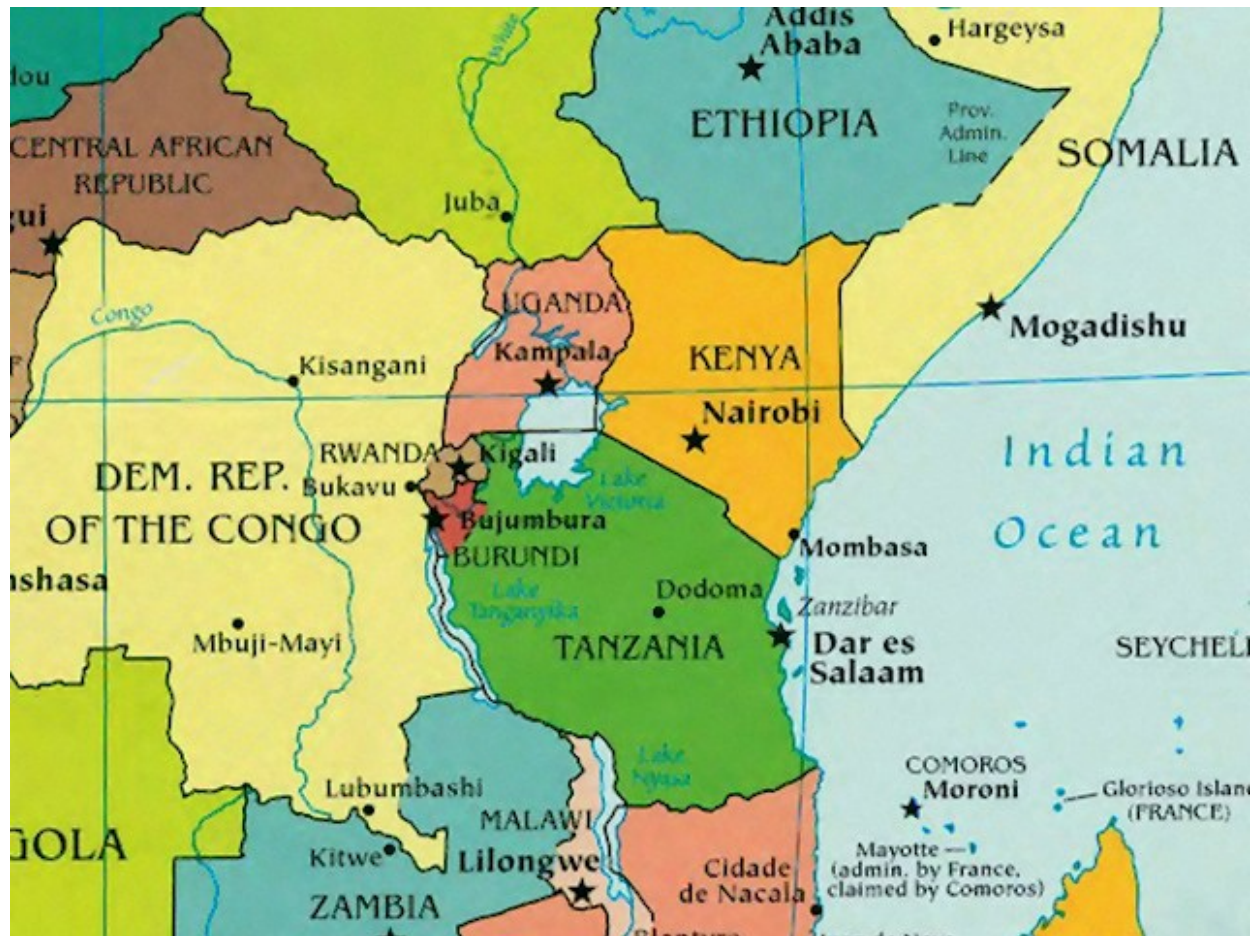
Rwanda's Open Door



The children of Karbore Lutheran Church, Rwanda

In November of 2016, Rev. Daniel Finn, an Evangelical Lutheran Synod pastor with a congregation in Brisbane Australia, was contacted by Rev. Jean Claude Maniragaba from the Reformed Lutheran Church of Rwanda (RLCR) through Pastor Finn's church website. They began an email conversation that led to a recent mission exploration trip by WELS representatives.

The RLCR has been a legally registered church body since 2014. Six pastors and eleven evangelists serve 400 members. Although their church is very young, the RLCR wants to be a confessional Lutheran body.



Rwanda is located in East Central Africa, near Zambia and Malawi

Pastor Finn dovetailed a planned visit to the USA to attend the ELS yearly General Pastor Conference with a visit to Rwanda. His close relationship with Rev. Maniragaba was indispensable for this trip. He prepared two carefully put together presentations to the RLCR on the history of the Lutheran Church and on church fellowship.

Joining Pastor Finn on this trip was Rev. Forward Shamachona, a Zambian national pastor. In addition to serving four congregations in the Mwembezhi District, he is also the chairman of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa - Zambia (LCCA-Z) Mission Board. I also accompanied Pastor Finn as the WELS representative.

Rev. Shamachona and I arrived in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda early in the morning on Friday, the 22nd of September. As we exited the immigration/customs area of the airport we saw a man holding up a sign with the name "Philip" on it. We greeted each other, got into their waiting car and were taken to the Hillview Hotel.

Rev. Shamachona and I went to our rooms, showered and then got some needed catch up sleep having taken the overnight flight from Lusaka to Rwanda. Around 10:30 a.m. we took a leisurely lunch at the hotel restaurant when suddenly my cell phone rang. The anxious voice on the other end was Rev. Maniragaba asking where I was. He had been to the airport and could not find us! An hour and a half later, we met up with Rev. Maniragaba at our hotel. It was then we learned from the hotel that there was another “Philip” who had not gotten his ride to the Hillview hotel. We, on the other hand, were not staying at this hotel. We were going on to Nyagatare some 80 km to the east and north of Kigali after we picked up Rev. Finn at the airport.



Inside the house church in the city of Nyagatare

Nyagatare was the base from which we visited 7 of the 11 RLCR churches. On Saturday morning, we were driven to a church located in the village of Kabarore, where 50 people are currently meeting in a rented house. Songs were sung by a children’s Sunday School choir and an adult choir. A drum at this gathering and

every subsequent gathering we attended in Rwanda played a very important part of the singing. Dancing was also integral to every church event we attended in Rwanda. We were read a “prayer request” by this church asking for property and help to put a church on the property. We were impressed by this congregation, which has existed for only 4 months.

On Saturday afternoon we were driven to the village of Karoma. The drumming and dancing in this church was phenomenal with both adult and children’s choirs dancing and singing and then everyone in the church joining in. I was somewhat uncomfortable by the level of “enthusiasm.” Several of the woman who were dancing almost appeared to get into a “zone” where their eyes rolled back into their head as they danced away. The drumming then almost became hypnotic. It was not quite rolling in the aisles and there was no speaking in tongues but it was very close to a Pentecostal service. At the end we three visitors were all asked to speak. We used the chance to encourage the leaders to attend our Wednesday, Thursday teaching sessions.



Rice farm just 300 meters from main street in Nyagatare

On Sunday morning we went to church in Rukomo. Pastor Munyondomitza Bernard led the worship service. Pastor Bernard had donated the land to the congregation. This was no small gift as the parcel of land on which the church sat was worth USA \$1,000. The church was really a larger house with its room divisions still intact. They hope to remodel it to serve as a church. They have been a congregation for less than a year. The service structure was very loose. From 9:30 until 11:45 the adult and children's choirs sang and drummed. Rev. Maniragaba gave a short law and gospel sermon.

It was at Rukomo we learned of the RLCR's charity program to orphans. The community has quite a few orphans. Most all these orphans have some extended family, but little or no opportunities for school. This is where the congregation was trying to help out. The congregation and the pastors try to fund school supplies for the children who cannot afford them. They encourage the orphans' church attendance and act as an additional support group for them.



The church in Rukomo where Rwandan pastors attended presentations

In Rukomo we held teaching sessions with RLCR leaders for a day and a half. For each topic we were given two hours, but each topic had to be translated from English into Kinyarwanda by Rev. Maniragaba so in effect, there was only an hour to present our content. Rev. Finn started off with a brief Lutheran Church history. I talked about the importance of confessional statements to unite Christians who have the same beliefs.

Pastor Shamachona from Zambia shared an explanation of the structure of the LCCA-Z together with its worker training system. One of the great “AHA” moments of our teaching took place when Rev. Shamachona drew a simple triangle on the blackboard to illustrate how members of the congregations, at the base of the triangle, support their church, their pastors and leadership structure as we go up the triangle to its top. This simple fact was all the more impressed upon the group because it was a Zambian pastor saying this. His presence proved to be invaluable on this trip.

I also made a presentation on the topic of worship. Worship in the RLCR is a mostly one-way course of the people giving to God and very little of God giving His Word to the people. The fifth and last topic was church fellowship. Rev. Finn distilled a difficult subject to a level that his audience could understand. He talked about the importance of joining in fellowship with those who teach God's word correctly as well as keeping away from those who teach falsely.



L-R: Rev. Bernard, Rev. Birner, Rev. Maniragaba, Rev. Shamachona, Rev. Finn and Rev. Felicien

We observed lots of interested visitors at the churches we visited. At every church, interested community leaders were in attendance. Rwanda's door is wide open.

Missionary Philip Birner serves as the Acting Principal of the LCCA Seminary in Lusaka, Zambia

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engage with future news and receive updates. Go to this link to learn more about our mission fields in Africa and how the Holy Spirit is working faith in people's hearts
<https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/africa>