

Maison Shalom: Infectious love in Burundi

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"I have to tell you about Maggy," my colleague said excitedly. He was just back from Africa, and I was eager to hear about his work and his meeting with 100 Christian leaders from east-central Africa. But he wanted to talk about Maggy.

"Love made me an inventor," Marguerite "Maggy" Barankitse had told several of my colleagues with a sparkle in her eye. The more she talked, the more my colleagues wanted to see her Maison Shalom (House of Peace). They arranged to travel from Bujumbura to Ruyigi, the city in Burundi where Maggy lives.

Maggy's story goes back 15 years to the civil war in Burundi. When the Hutu militia came to her Tutsi community and massacred most of Maggy's extended family and many of her friends, she escaped with her seven adopted Hutu and Tutsi children and found refuge with Hutus in the compound of the Catholic bishop. But a group of Tutsis came to the compound to kill the Hutus there. Because she was a Tutsi, they spared Maggy, but as punishment for her adoption of Hutu children they stripped her, tied her up and forced her to watch the massacre of 72 people. Eventually she found her seven adopted children hiding in the church sacristy.

Maggy decided that she was going to rebuild her village as a place of peace. Even though she has never married, she adopted another 25 children, paying a significant price to the militia for their freedom. She now had more than 30 children, a desire to rebuild her village, and a heart full of love.

Maggy, a devout Catholic, believes that our identity as people created in the image of God is more fundamental than being a Hutu or a Tutsi. She is convinced that God's love is more powerful than hatred and violence.

Maggy built huts for children, developed a health clinic and a school, set up microfinance initiatives and instituted business training in hairdressing, auto mechanics and other vocations. She taught sustainable agriculture. She explained the power of God to foster reconciliation and create new life. She seemed intuitively to know how to embody the gospel in a community by developing the interconnections of a holistic understanding of salvation.

She also built a swimming pool and a film theater. The swimming pool is on the site of tunnels that had served as a mass grave for casualties in the war. She says that she wants those waters to cleanse the children's imagination of the violence and immerse them in an alternative, joy-filled imagination. The allusions to baptism are clear and focused for Maggy.

The film theater reminds the children that life is meant to be enjoyed, not merely endured, and that they are not simply victims of wars but human beings with dignity. Maggy even found funding for "Hollywood-style" theater seats. When rebel soldiers demanded payment in exchange for not destroying the theater, Maggy invited them to watch some movies instead (she taped a poster to the theater door indicating that weapons were not allowed). The rebels came to the movies.

Now the town also has a hospital and a nursing school—and a morgue. The morgue is important to Maggy because she believes that one teaches people how to live in part by taking care of those who have died.

Some of the first children to benefit from living in Maison Shalom have become teachers in the schools and community leaders. The huts are set up so the older children can become the caregivers for younger children. Over 30,000 children have benefited from Maison Shalom.

As my colleague was telling me about Maggy, the phrase *force of nature* kept coming into my mind for this amazing woman. Even patriarchal men in the area, who think women should stay at home and let the men lead, describe Maggy's leadership with awe and reverence.

Maison Shalom is an extraordinary resurrection story. The health clinic, hospital and nursing school have been built on the site of the village where Maggy's family was massacred. She narrates the story with a profound faith, a theological thickness and a Christian articulation that is stunningly beautiful. Love has made her an inventor, indeed.

Yet it is too easy just to share Maggy's story. As inspiring as it is, we are not called to sit back and simply admire Maggy or her accomplishments, but to imitate her love; it's infectious, and we need to catch the virus in our own settings and contexts—particularly in this time when it is deceptively easy to lapse into "ain't it awful" conversations and strategies rather than focusing on visions of God's love.

My colleagues shared one other story. Maggy's driver, with whom they had spent the day, first came to Maison Shalom to kill Maggy. Maggy talked him out of it, telling him that he surely couldn't be happy living in the bush and being defined by hatred and violence. She invited him to come and live in her community, to be her driver and to help care for the children. And he did.