

There's always room: Costly practices of Christian living

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

The Christians gathered at Duke for the weekend had come from places marked by destructive ethnic and tribal violence and conflict: South Africa, Sudan, the United States, India and Rwanda. They posed challenging questions: How can we find paths forward in the wake of destructive violence and conflict? How do we bear witness to a Christian vision of reconciliation?

The group included two Christians from Rwanda who have dedicated their lives to Christian reconciliation—one a Hutu, the other a Tutsi. One of them told me that most of his family had been killed in the genocide and its aftermath. His mother was left for dead, but regained consciousness when she heard a baby's cry. More than 800,000 people were killed in three months—while the rest of the world, including me, looked away.

My Rwandan friend told me that a commitment to reconciliation is very hard in the wake of such violence and pain, both on a broad scale and personally. But it is clear, he said, that Jesus calls us to a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is lonely, he added, because your own people think you have betrayed them by reaching out to the other side, and the other side doesn't trust you because you are not one of them. Even so, he noted, "I have no choice."

I admired the passion, courage and vision of our guests. They were serious about their faith and about the costs they are willing to absorb in service to "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17) to which we have all been called.

The stories and witness of my Rwandan Christian friends were in my mind as I viewed the film *Hotel Rwanda*. The film is a powerful depiction of the genocide and of how one man, Paul Rusesabagina, sheltered and helped rescue more than a thousand people. I could not help thinking about the families of my Rwandan friends as I watched the drama unfold. I also could not help admiring their commitment to reconciliation in the wake of such devastation.

As the film unfolded, I kept wondering how, in the midst of such horror, one can find one's way forward. Even Paul, the main character in the film (played by Don Cheadle), is less a hero sheltering people out of Christian commitment than an ordinary man using ingenuity to care for others. To be sure, he has well-established habits of commercial hospitality (including bribery) as manager of the luxurious Hotel Des Milles Collines in Kigali. Once the genocide starts, however, those habits are nurtured into a gift of a more expansive vision of hospitality. Paul displays remarkable courage and improvisational skills in protecting his family and many others at the hotel, slowly deepening his understanding of the risks and opportunities of caring for others.

At the conclusion of the film, Paul and his family are taken by UN officials from the hotel to a refugee camp. They make their way through the camp looking for their nieces, who they hope are still alive. When they can't find the girls, they make their way to buses that will transport hundreds of people to Tanzania. A Red Cross worker who has worked with Paul to rescue orphans is in the camp, and realizes that the hotel workers are passing through. She runs to catch the bus carrying Paul and his family, climbs aboard and tells Paul that his nieces are alive. The convoy stops so they can go back to the camp and find the young girls.

In the film's final scene, Paul, his family, the nieces and the group of orphans that Paul has promised to find a home for are all walking back to the bus. The Red Cross worker says to Paul, "They say there may not be enough room." Paul quietly answers, "There is always room."

And it dawned on me: here's an image for bearing witness to reconciliation. There is always room—in our hearts, at our tables, in our lives—to welcome others and to be welcomed by them. Paul discovered that there is room to transform commercialized hospitality into a morally rich practice of hospitality. Indeed, hospitality had come to express who he was as a person.

I recalled central themes of the gospel—of there being no room in the inn, and of the ways in which Jesus continually embodied the conviction that there is always room. A few loaves and fishes feed thousands, a table accommodates unexpected and undeserving guests, children are welcomed rather than scorned, a heart is filled with unlimited compassion.

I recalled Christine Pohl's beautiful book about hospitality, *Making Room*, and her portrait of communities embodying costly, life-giving practices that create space for others. Just as exclusion, hatred and violence shrink our worlds, our imaginations and our hearts, so hospitality, love and forgiveness enlarge them. My Rwandan friends are embodying a path forward in their commitment to practices of costly forgiveness, hospitality and loving their enemies.

What about us in the United States? Do we know what it means to practice forgiveness, hospitality, loving enemies—whether with strangers or those from whom we are estranged? What would it mean for American Christians to say to ourselves and within our congregations, "There is always room"? I have known congregations that chose to die rather than to make room for those different from them, people who have let their lives become dominated by bitterness, and people and communities that would rather shrink than be enlarged by those around them.

Does it take a crisis for us to learn that there is always room, and to then discover the capacity to make room? Or can we discover it afresh in the ordinary practices of faithful Christian living?