

Deputy Bishop John Rutsindintwarane, Executive Director of PICO Rwanda

Summary

Rev. John Rutsindintwarane—co-founder, thought leader, and Deputy Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Rwanda (LCR)—serves as Executive Director of PICO Rwanda, a pioneering community organizing and leadership development organization. He helps Rwandans put their faith into action to build sustainable communities and courageous congregations. Raised in exile in a refugee camp in Tanzania, Rutsindintwarane was ordained in 1994 and, in the wake of genocide, settled in Rwanda and established the LCR in 1995. Dedicated to massive national recovery efforts; reimagining Rwandan Christianity as it struggles with complicity in extreme violence and near total loss of credibility; and empowering ordinary Rwandans challenged by poverty and isolation, Rutsindintwarane also completed two masters degrees in the United States—one in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University, and the other in Theology, Evangelism, and Development at Wartburg Theological Seminary. In addition to his impact in Rwanda, he continues to share his expertise in organizing, leadership, and peacebuilding across East Africa, Europe, and the United States.

Life in Exile in Tanzania

Rutsindintwarane was born on February 19, 1963, in Karagwe, Tanzania. Raised by his mother, Kabasinga Beltilde—his father died in 1965—he and his sister spent their early years living among an estimated 35,000 Rwandans in the Nkwenda/Kimuli Refugee Settlement in Tanzania. Denied the government scholarship assistance he deserved while attending a secondary school in Bukoba, Rutsindintwarane became aware of the disadvantages tied to his refugee status. Nevertheless, he pursued education at Katoke Teachers Training College, also in Bukoba, and St. Paul's Theological College in Kenya, where he earned an Advanced Diploma in Theology. Rutsindintwarane was ordained in 1994 in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), and appointed as Diocesan Assistant Coordinator of Christian Education. Based near the Rwandan border in Ngara, he immediately faced a challenge nearly impossible to comprehend—hundreds of thousands of terrorized, traumatized, and desperate refugees fleeing genocide and needing support.

Rwanda after Genocide

Rutsindintwarane worked primarily as a translator between the Tanganyika Christian Refugee Service (TCRS), associated with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), other NGOs (e.g., Tearfund, Christian Aid), and people residing at the Benaco Refugee Camp, in addition to facilitating emergency services. With genocide threatening to undo his faith, he struggled to understand why Rwandans were killing each other and why the church was not speaking out. He also relived his own degrading experience of loss of identity and limits on self-determination that he expected these new refugees would eventually feel. In September, 1994, after the massacres subsided, Rutsindintwarane accompanied a delegation sent by the Archbishop of Canterbury to assess the relief programs in Rwanda for internally-displaced persons (IDPs). Returning to the Benaco

Refugee Camp in Ngara, which received one of the largest influxes of refugees from the genocide, he began transporting Rwandans, already despondent about the prospect of remaining in Tanzania, across the border. One year later, Rutsindintwarane relocated to Rwanda, settling in Kibungo, and volunteered with the Lutheran World Federation's humanitarian work in repatriation, resettlement, reconstruction, peacebuilding, and development from 1995–1999.

Rwandan Lutheran Church

After living in exile for up to 35 years, Rwandan Lutherans in Tanzania returned and launched the Lutheran Church in Rwanda (LCR) on May 23, 1995. The five founders include Martin Habiyakare, the head of the church and first legal representative; pastors Celeste Sarambuye, Gerard Mahirane, and Rutsindintwarane; and evangelist Faustine Muzigura. The LCR took root in Kibungo (in today's Eastern Province), with the majority of the Lutheran returnees settling in the Rusumo and Rukira Districts. Rutsindintwarane summarizes the challenges facing the LCR in its early years:

Thirty-two years of country divisionism, more than eight years of economic collapse, and four years of civil war and 90 days of savage genocide had left one million people dead, a collapsed nation and economy, and infrastructure destroyed. The violent legacy of genocide, civil war and of an authoritarian state has caused poverty, political instability, and social and spiritual fragility.¹

Rev. George Kalisa served as the LCR's first bishop from 2002–2011, followed by Rev. Mugabo Evalister, its current bishop. Comprising over 40,000 people, the LCR is a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Lutheran Communion in Central and Eastern Africa (LUCCEA).

While serving as LCR's General Secretary from 1995–2011, Rutsindintwarane pursued further education and completed two masters degrees—one in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and the other in Theology, Evangelism, and Development at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. At Wartburg in 2005, after conducting a needs assessment of the Rusumo and Rukira Districts in Rwanda through observation and interviews, he wrote a master's thesis on sustainable development, leadership empowerment, and social change to support the mission of the LCR.² The conclusion, directly connecting development to a range of political capacities, reads:

Through practical experience with the Rwandan crisis of 1994, during repatriation, resettlement, reconstruction and reconciliation, and now with a move toward sustainable development, it is obvious that development should come from within. Development is not merely a question of economic progress, skyscrapers or material goods; it involves freedom of mind, political openness, access to education, and deconstruction of the culture of impunity and corruption that has ruined the Rwandan society over the past 45 years.³

Faith in Action: Organizing

Following graduate school and marriage to Robin Strickler, the founder and program director of The Rwanda School Project and a missionary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Rutsindintwarane interned with PICO National Network, a broad assembly of faith-based community organizations established in the United States in 1972 and based in Oakland, California.⁴ At PICO, mentored by Father John Baumann, PICO's founder and director of special projects, and Ron Snyder, director of international organizing, among others, he learned a proven model of community organizing that immediately appeared to provide what he believed Rwanda needed to recover and develop, especially considering the country's increasing worries about the debilitating effects of foreign aid. The Rwandan intern soon decided to transform PICO organizing practices from a developed-world to a developing-world application, and to specifically engage Rwandans' experiences of dehumanization. He founded PICO Rwanda in 2006.

National Leader, Two Callings

In 2011, Rutsindintwarane was elected to the position of Lutheran Bishop of Rwanda, but declined, opting instead to expand his community organizing. His current projects include, for example, a remote rural community completing a health center; a rural community developing a roof tiling collaborative; urban women's associations leaving prostitution for other forms of employment; youth organizing for job possibilities; a school addressing safety, discipline, and transportation issues; reforestation work; and parish development. At the synod assembly on December 28, 2014, Rutsindintwarane was elected to serve as Deputy Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Rwanda. In addition to community organizing, his ecclesial responsibilities now include leading efforts in clergy and lay leadership formation with the goal of equipping clergy, church, and community leaders with skills to put faith into action, building sustainable communities and parishes in Rwanda.

Research on Rutsindintwarane

Victor Thasiah has spent the last two summers conducting field research in Rwanda on Rutsindintwarane's work. The research forms the basis of a book in progress tentatively titled *Pedagogy of the Organized: Reimagining Christianity after Genocide*. The book explores Rutsindintwarane's theology inscribed in grassroots organizing practices and argues that his work – especially as it seeks to develop political thought and practice in communities and churches – significantly contributes to contemporary, African efforts at reimagining Christianity.

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¹ Rutsindintwarane, "An Appreciative Inquiry in Rusumo and Rukira Districts, Kibungo Province of Rwanda: A Study of the Perceptions, Challenges and Needs for Empowering the Lutheran Church of Rwanda," Master's thesis, Wartburg Theological Seminary, 2005, 16.

² Rutsindintwarane, op. cit.

³ Rutsindintwarane, op. cit., 56.

⁴ In 2004, the Pacific Institute of Community Organizing (PICO) changed its name to PICO National Network to reflect the national scope of its work. See John Rutsindintwarane, "A Strategy for Empowering Communities," in *So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth: Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and Musa Pantu Filibus (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Studies, 2007), 141–144.