



Mama Lambert providing support to a survivor after she was tested for HIV



“A person who has suffered a lot has a story to tell. They need to tell it to someone who is willing to listen and who will empathize. Otherwise, it can be more damaging to tell your story to someone who doesn’t want to listen. This is what we have been experiencing in the course of doing this work. When [survivors] trust you, and share their story, the heavy load and burden that they are carrying is somehow lifted a bit. And I think this is the first contribution leading to the process of healing.”

JEAN GAKWANDI
Founder and Director of Solace Ministries

THE SURVIVORS FEATURED in this book are current or former beneficiaries of Solace Ministries and the Mukomeze Foundation.* Solace Ministries is a Rwandan ecumenical non-governmental organization dedicated to meeting the needs of widows and orphans of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Jean Gakwandi, a genocide survivor, established the organization in December 1994, and it continues to be run by genocide survivors today. The sorrow that plagued Jean during and following the genocide, as well as the love he felt for his fellow survivors and his devout Christian faith, motivated him to dedicate his life to comforting others.

Solace provides its members with counselling, community development programs, medical care, education and employment support. Those who have the capacity to work also receive micro-credits for agricultural or business endeavours. These services are uniquely tailored to the needs of genocide survivors. The organization’s holistic approach is informed by the belief that the first step in the healing process requires survivors to feel that they are truly being heard. Trauma counselling, in both individual and group sessions, is vital. In Solace’s experience, survivors are generally unable to adequately care for themselves or resume other activities without this crucial first step. Even after survivors have received

* This chapter is based on interviews with Solace Ministries staff: Jean Gakwandi (Founder and Director), Mama Lambert (Head of Counselling) and Agnes Mukankusi (Sponsorship Programme). Their perspectives and insights have also been integrated in the chapter, “Life after death.” For more information about the work of Solace Ministries, see: Jean Gakwandi and Karin Heidrich, *Solace: The Story of Solace Ministries* (Stiftung Bethel-prowerk, 2015); Mama Lambert, *For Those Who Do Not Believe in Miracles: The Resilience of a Rwandan Woman Who Survived the Genocide* (Wolf Legal Publishers, 2015); Solace Ministries, online: <www.solacem.org>. For more information about the Mukomeze Foundation, see: <www.mukomeze.nl/en>.

counselling, trauma related to the genocide is deep-rooted, enduring and may affect subsequent generations. The healing process unfolds over many years.

Solace has five regional centres around Rwanda, with a total of sixty-two staff. Solace supports more than eight thousand families (about forty thousand people) across Rwanda, in sixty Solace communities ranging in size from fifty to several hundred members. The organization strives to become an alternative family for survivors, to restore survivors' sense of dignity and to create support networks for those who are traumatized, isolated, poor and crave hope in the face of an uncertain future.

In 1999, at the initiative of a group of women within the organization, Solace began providing specific services for survivors of sexual violence. It was soon evident that there were many more genocide survivors of sexual violence, most of them living with HIV, who had feared speaking up about their experiences. They were afraid of the reactions of their relatives and community members. Within the year, Solace had set up specialized individual and group counselling sessions with Mama Lambert as the main counsellor. Mama Lambert, Jean Gakwandi and other Solace staff listened to survivors' stories and provided them with comfort and advice.

In 2002, Solace established a private clinic in Kigali, where women could be tested for and counselled about HIV in a safe and private environment. In 2011, Solace converted the private clinic into a public one. At the public clinic, twenty-nine Solace staff now serve tens of thousands of people from the region, and continue to provide crucial individual counselling to genocide survivors of sexual violence.

By 2004, Solace Ministries had documented among their membership more than eight hundred survivors who were subjected to sexual violence during the genocide, and this number continues to grow. Even today—25 years after the genocide—Solace continues to encounter survivors who have never spoken about their experiences of sexual violence during the genocide.

Throughout the years, Solace has supported survivors as they faced a myriad of consequences related to their experiences of sexual violence. After 25 years, numerous psychological, health and socio-economic impacts of the genocide persist, and Solace provides crucial, long-term services and support to survivors. Among other things, the organization has helped survivors grapple with medical complexities associated with HIV, as well as other illnesses linked to the sexual violence they suffered; in some cases, survivors succumbed to their illnesses. Solace also created a safe space for male survivors of sexual violence, who faced—and continue to face—significant challenges in recounting their experiences. Moreover, the organization has helped to heal dysfunctional relationships between

mothers and their children who were conceived from sexual violence inflicted during the genocide. Over the years, Solace has grown to accommodate survivors' needs, as they navigate the devastating ramifications of genocide.

Thousands of genocide survivors of sexual violence have benefited from Solace's comprehensive, compassionate and dedicated approach to healing. Despite a host of often-debilitating obstacles, survivors of sexual violence are active and many have taken on leadership positions in their communities. The survivors are proud of their accomplishments.



“I have been working at Solace Ministries for so many years because I see the positive developments in genocide survivors. When I see someone hopeless, but I can encourage her and tell her that she has value, that she is created in God's image, this makes me think that I am perhaps in this world to do this kind of work. When I see how these survivors go from one level to the next, I believe that even I can overcome anything.”

AGNES MUKANKUSI
Sponsorship Programme at Solace Ministries

SOLACE PARTNERS WITH different organizations, both inside and outside of Rwanda. One of these organizations is the Mukomeze Foundation, based in the Netherlands. Mukomeze supports genocide survivors of sexual violence, in an effort to help them regain their sense of dignity, hope and economic independence. Most of Mukomeze's beneficiaries live in southern Rwanda, where fewer services and facilities are available.

Mukomeze coordinates individual sponsorships and group projects, intended to support beneficiaries in rebuilding their lives. Survivors spend their sponsorship funds in different ways, including by repairing or purchasing their own homes, paying for their children's school materials and fees, supporting their own post-secondary education, setting up small businesses (e.g., handicraft-making and sewing), and engaging in livestock farming or agriculture.

To date, seventy-five women and one man have benefited from the Mukomeze sponsorship program, and several hundred Rwandans have also received support through a variety of projects. Mukomeze regularly coordinates meetings between Rwandan survivors and sponsors, donors and others. By raising awareness of survivors' living conditions, resilience and strength, and by promoting cross-cultural exchange, the Mukomeze Foundation strives to provide a global platform for genocide survivors of sexual violence.





Mama Lambert embracing a woman during a group counselling session in Kigali