

## Beautiful, Poverty-Stricken Burundi a Land of Contradictions

Most Burundians travel by foot.

As I ride in a well-used jeep through the heart of Bujumbura, Burundi's largest city, I see mamas wading through the equatorial heat with babies strapped on their backs, toddlers scrambling alongside them, and household necessities — food, water or firewood — balanced artfully on their heads.

### Julie Marner

Most men are walking, too, but a lucky few own bicycles, and they ride instead, with 15 plastic chairs for a wedding reception or bundles of bananas they intend to sell balanced on their bikes and backs.

Motorcycle taxis, called “tuc tucs,” and other vehicles pass us, zooming in and out of unmarked traffic lanes. The smell of burning crops wafts relentlessly from the nearby plains, scenting the city air. I hear Kirundi, French and Swahili being spoken. Traditional drums, like those featured in the movie “Black Panther,” begin at sunset. I feel the soul-stirring percussive rumbles in my chest before I hear them.

I'm the executive director of Burundi Friends International (BFI), a San-Diego-based nonprofit that's working to eliminate poverty in Burundi, East Africa, and in August I completed my ninth trip to this astonishingly beautiful, poverty-stricken land.

Burundi, a primarily Catholic country, is about the size of Maryland, but while Maryland is home to 6 million people, Burundi's population is expected to reach 24 million by 2050. Burundi's lush green rolling hills rival those of Sicily, and its beautiful beaches bring to mind the big island of Hawaii. But, all the beauty in the world can't mask the ugly reality that 60 percent of

Burundi's children suffer from chronic malnutrition, or that women working in farm fields in an effort to feed their families are routinely raped.

Burundi was a Belgian colony until launching a struggle for independence in 1962. Continuing conflict between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups led to years of violence and genocide, crippling generations of people. Every person who still lives has suffered trauma, and the fight for what's left over after the fighting often leaves human dignity behind.

Burundi is full of contradictions. Beauty and suffering. Laughter and trauma. Community and isolation. Although BFI has a carefully worded mission statement, made up of words like “empower” and “self-sustaining,” our simple wish, in biblical parlance, is for Burundi's future to hold less darkness and infinitely more light.

My master's in Practical Theology from the University of San Diego helped put me on the path to Burundi, and both the opportunity to earn the degree and the time I've spent in-country have brought a mountain of humility to my heart and soul. It seems the more I learn about the country and its people, the less I know. Where do I begin in my quest to help? How do I lead BFI's staff, volunteers and members of the board of directors? I can sing every psalm and recite every Gospel story, but no biblical readings prepared me to intervene effectively in post-conflict Burundi, where millions live in circumstances unfathomable to those of us in the United States.

What BFI and I can do is to keep showing up, share our abundant blessings, and call on the Holy Spirit for grit and guidance.

Children under the age of 15 make up 46 percent of Burundi's population, so we know Burundi's youth are the country's future. We teach them English and pay for their college educations. We

empower them through information technology and entrepreneurial training. We connect them to the wider East African community, where they can become political and economic leaders.

We know that women have primary responsibility for supporting families; we bring them together in savings groups, so they have seed money and support to start businesses. We teach unity and peace. Our English Clubs are a safe space for people of different ethnic groups to learn together.

I don't know what my 10th trip to Burundi holds in store. I know there will be some darkness, along much light, as with every trip before it. In the meantime, I'll continue telling the story of this beautiful, complicated, largely unrecognized country.

BFI's ongoing success depends on financial gifts from foundations, churches, businesses and many generous and caring individuals like you.

Earlier this year, we received our largest single grant to date — \$125,000 from the Patrick McGovern Foundation to bring information technology to the country. Meanwhile, we are working to establish a reserve fund at the Catholic Community Foundation of San Diego. Donors interested in bringing hope to Burundi can mail donations to Burundi Friends International, P.O. Box 927356, San Diego, CA 92192-7356. Learn more on our website, [www.bufri.org](http://www.bufri.org).

Thank you for your compassionate support and for keeping the people of Burundi and BFI in your prayers. Together we can create the opportunities needed to bring light, hope and empowerment to children, youth, women and families across Burundi.

*The Southern Cross*

*Julie Marner is the executive director of Burundi Friends International (BFI).*

### ► CLIMATE

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## Environmental issues were at heart of Amazon synod, bishop said

“Science knows what to do, science does not know how to do it. We need society's help. It's people who solve problems, not scientists.”

He said economists are going to ask who is going to pay the significant cost of switching to renewables.

“We need to talk about this in people's terms. That's where ‘Laudato Si’ comes in,” he said. “And that's where the faith leaders assembled here come in. We don't have that language to talk about this problem in a moral and ethical dimension.”

Bishop McElroy said that the issues the scientist had raised were at the heart of the synod on the Amazon, which had concluded days before. He was one of two U.S.

bishops selected to participate in the synod, which explored how to respond to the moral, cultural and ecological crisis in that vast region.

“The Amazon is emblematic of the future of our world,” the bishop said. “It's really a test case for whether we can face the issues of climate change and environmental degradation or whether we're just going to drift.”

He said that “it was stunning to hear about the degradation, not just of the envi-

ronment but also of the society that we are all contributing to.”

The bishop cited exploitative mining and cattle grazing being done in the Amazon rain forest by foreign companies, which at times used brutal, deadly tactics against indigenous communities to seize land for their operations. “It's not just national policies at work there.”

He said there was a “tremendous emphasis on the fact that we are nearing catastrophe. And on the fact that we, in our generation,

are simply stealing the future from the next generation.

“We can't wish a world in which we are transformed without making sacrifices. We have to address the socio-economic issues as well as the environmental issues.”

He noted that there has been no progress made in slowing climate change.

“What we have to do as a society is to protect this gift, the whole of Creation, which is God's gift.”

The bishop, too, said that people in the U.S. had to find new ways of living, “which are not going to be impossible but not cost-free.”

“But that is our responsibility as people of faith, as humans beings with a moral responsibility.”

There were several fires burning in the state when the forum was held.

“We should not forget about this once the fires are no longer in the headlines. This is what God is saying to us, that we need to act now.”

*The Southern Cross*



## Environmental Workshop

The San Diego Diocese, under the leadership of Father Emmet Farrell, helps to organize “Creation Care Teams,” at parishes, schools and other faith communities. The diocese is presenting a series of four free workshops on the implementation of “Laudato Si,” offering concrete ways to lower personal and community carbon footprints. The first one was on Nov. 16 and the next three are on Saturdays, Dec. 7, Jan. 11 and Jan. 25, 9:30-11 a.m., at the diocesan Pastoral Center, 3888 Paducah Dr., San Diego 92117. The workshops will be led by Robert Gillespie, an engineer and instructor at UCSD, and author of *Lighting the Way: Providing Leadership in Sustainable Development*. More information is available from Kimberly Callier at (858) 490-8324 and [kcallier@sdcatholic.org](mailto:kcallier@sdcatholic.org), who also can be contacted about the Creation Care Teams.

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