

# Widows of conflict become Women for Peace

By Tim Wright

In a remote area of northern Kenya, women widowed and impoverished by conflict between warring communities are an example of healing, reconciliation and modelling peace. This is changing the hearts and minds of both communities in ways that 20 years of peace initiatives by churches, agencies and politicians have not. No one thought that women victimized by violence between these Rendille and Borana communities would become powerful agents for peace.

Historically, there has been conflict over water and grazing land between nomadic communities, such as the Rendille and Borana. Elders were usually able to come to agreement, make restitution and resolve the resource conflict. Then, due to extreme drought and loss of livestock in the early 1970s, these two tribal groups were settled adjacent to each other, and Catholic and Protestant churches helped them begin farming in Marsabit County.

Soon, though, unresolved conflict over a water source for farm homes escalated to conflict over grazing land for growing herds of sheep and goats. Livestock raids between the communities became frequent, and herdsmen, including young children, were killed.

Revenge killing became common. This was fertile ground for further conflict, which was instigated by "divide and rule" politicians and corrupt businessmen who used warriors to raid and sell

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Sauti Moja

**WOMEN SINGING** — Rendille and Borana widows join in songs of peace and celebration. Transformed women now have transformed communities, says Tim Wright.

them livestock for shipping to market. Eventually, about 250 persons in the Songa (Rendille) and Badasa (Borana) area were killed.

Every Borana and Rendille household has felt the impact of this conflict and, as one widow said, "We are like captives in our own land." Widows of conflict were the most seriously affected: they had lost their husband and their livestock, so were alone and impoverished. As for other households, it became unsafe to go to their fields, so they and their children were often hungry. It was too dangerous for their children to walk to school and many had to move to camps to escape the violence. Most could not afford to travel to Marsabit town to sell produce or seek casual labour.

Food aid became critical for survival and, because they had no

livestock or husband, widows lost social standing and were seen as a drain on others. They referred to themselves as the "invisible poor."

As a Canadian charity, Sauti Moja does not see itself as a major peace facilitator. In fact, our focus is on vulnerable people within pastoralist (livestock-keeping) communities. A major program involves establishing a livestock bank which loans four female goats and a donkey to 20 widows and abandoned women with young children within one community. This is a hand up to reduce the workload of women and provide increased household food and income. Each woman pays off her loan by passing on the first female offspring of the goats to another of the most needy widows in her village. Soon the loan of livestock to 20 women is benefitting 40 impover-

ished households.

In response to the conflict between the Borana in Badasa and the Rendille in Songa, Sauti Moja implemented a pilot project that most leaders considered foolish. The new livestock bank would be made up of 10 widows from each village, and in order to qualify for a livestock loan, each had to have had her husband killed and her livestock stolen by someone from the opposite village/tribe. Further, they had to be willing to enter into a process of reconciliation and peacemaking. This required courageous women who not only feared the "enemy," but were willing to stand up against the distrust and revengeful attitudes of the neighbours and family they often depended on for assistance.

This initiative was launched

with a Peace Implementation Day attended by government and religious leaders, who encouraged women in their peace commitment. Though widows joined the meeting in skepticism, they symbolized their commitment by singing songs to honour one another. The meeting wrapped up in joyful celebration with songs and a meal that was the first positive interaction most had had in more than a decade.

The next step in the peace process was for women to join in setting up the livestock bank, in the distribution of livestock and joining for training in livestock husbandry. Every month, these Muslim and Christian widows met with our peace co-ordinator to discuss their common pain and challenges, as well as learn about peacemaking and reconciliation.

Local religious leaders contributed to transformation in the hearts of these women with messages of peace. The barriers were broken further as they attended monthly training in child health and nutrition, family planning and reproductive health. Trust began to build as they soon recognized that they were not really different, and they openly talked about their feelings and attitudes. They realized the need to change their own language, especially with their children, from that of fear and hatred to that of peace and compassion.

Unexpectedly, our Women for Peace began to take the initiative. They formed peace gardens where women from both tribes worked together each Saturday. The women started going to each others' villages to sell produce and each others' homes to visit the sick, celebrate new life or have tea. Widows began chastising neighbour women whose sons had stolen livestock and threat-

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This Christmas, all she wants is

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*May we always be blessed with the light of Christ's love.*

Merry Christmas to all from the editors and staff of the Prairie Messenger and St. Peter's Press.

# There is hope, even for those who live in darkness

By Peter Oliver

The darkest part of the winter is upon us again. Many people who are clinically depressed find this time of year particularly difficult, so it seems appropriate to reflect on this “common” challenge and in doing so offer some perspective and perhaps some words of hope.

Many comparisons come to mind as I consider clinical depression, each with its strengths and weaknesses. One helpful metaphor is blindness. One could say a clinically depressed person suffers a kind of impaired vision. The natural human resonance with that which is good, beautiful or humorous is impaired. It is as if a psychic curtain hangs over one’s inner vision, a barrier that denies satisfaction, leaving one in darkness.

I recall a friend telling me she had laughed uproariously as she read the book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I had just finished the book and was surprised that people found it comical. The humour completely escaped me.

Similarly, pangs of guilt sweep over me when a new father describes holding his child in his arms for the first time. He experiences wonder and awe whereas I recall only feelings of anxiety and deadness. My wife and I had no reservations about having children and each pregnancy was welcomed, but the joy normally associated with becoming a father was completely absent.

These experiences are representative of my daily life and this has been so for about the last 35 years. Occasionally, the veil is lifted and the sun shines in. But it lasts only a day or two and then the darkness returns. I have come to know this as a mysterious encounter with God that must be grounded in a clear understanding of the nature of clinical depression and faith.

Blindness is not chosen, and nor is clinical depression. Other people who experience depression have shared with me the pain caused when friends or family demand that they “get over it.” It would seem odd to most of us to make such a demand of a blind person. The demand would suggest that it is within the power of the person to remove the blindness by force of will. Clinical de-

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pression is not chosen and cannot be removed by choice.

Perhaps some confusion arises because most people have experienced depression. The kind of depression that is commonly experienced in the course of most of our lives is occasioned by an event. One is slighted by a friend, or a project at work falls apart, or even something as painful as a marriage breakup leads to feelings of sadness, purposelessness, loneliness and emptiness. The important thing to remember is that these experiences of depression have a clear external cause. A loss has occurred and depression follows. Grief work is important in these losses and, with time, the company of friends and prayer, the wonder in life returns.

Those who experience this form of depression may grow impatient with clinically depressed people because their experience suggests that the individual is wallowing in depression. “If only they would do the psychological and spiritual work they needed to do, the depression would lift.”

If “getting over” clinical depression were simply a matter of doing the work, I would be one of the cheeriest fellows you’ve ever met. I have been blessed with the council of some of the best psychologists, spiritual directors and psychiatrists one could care to meet. I meditate daily, pray the rosary, attend Sunday mass, exercise, have explored various forms of medication, tried journalling, gone on silent retreats and preached retreats and charismatic retreats, read, sang merry tunes, changed my diet and gone to confession. I have done all of these things consistently for years. Still the darkness remains.

This is not a hopeless situation. Despair and depression should not be confused. Just as the absence of sight need not lead to despair, so also a person who experiences depression need not despair. I have a friend who has experienced depression all his life. Now in his 70s, I asked if he believed that the depression would ever go away. He said, “no, but I can be happy.” Of course, happiness in this sense is not a mood or a feeling. Mysteriously, God makes it possible for happiness to coexist with a sense of absence.

It is important to understand the nature of this happiness. The question is, if I am clinically depressed, can I do something to make myself happy? The answer is no and yes.

C.S. Lewis’ conversion to Christianity illustrates the mysterious dynamic that is at work here. He describes the reality beautifully in his book *Surprised by Joy*: “I know very well when but hardly how the final step was taken. I went with my brother to have a picnic at Whipsnade Zoo. We started in fog, but by the end of our journey the sun was shining. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and when we reached the zoo I did. I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, becomes aware that he is now awake.”

As one comes to know Lewis’ conversion story, it is clear he struggled intensely, even arduously, with the reality of God and Christ in his life but, in the end, he did not identify his conversion with anything *he did*. The inner awakening was brought on by God. It is in this sense that one who is depressed can discover happiness. This happiness is deeper than the pleasure associated with a beautiful moment — a sunset, holding a newborn child or an enchanting walk with a friend. It is a kind of confidence in God’s faithfulness that abides regardless of the suffering one experiences. Its presence in one’s life arises in relation to a prayerful inner struggle but, in the end, this kind of happiness is a gift, a grace. I may receive it but I cannot bring it about.

What I am describing is not a cure for clinical depression and one might conclude that treatment is unimportant or even futile. I certainly have not come to this conclusion in my struggle with depression. As I mentioned earlier, I have rare but very real moments when the darkness lifts. Why? I do not know. Will I ever know? There is no certainty. Some people have journeyed to the end of their life without recovering, but others have discovered the source of the depression in their lives. Some find a deeply buried experience in childhood needs to be grieved, others discover a medication that lifts them out of the darkness and others experience healing through their faith.

Can I say what is in store for me? No. It’s an adventure. For all I know, the depression I experience may lift one day and not return. So I am resolved to continue to experiment, struggle, pray and learn. I am assured of happiness as I walk this journey and one day I may also experience a dawn that per-

manently dispels the darkness.

Recently, the “sun shone in” at the halfway house on 20th and Avenue B in Saskatoon. It is a place where men and women transition back into the community from prison, a place much in need of hope and humour. A thoughtful

person hung a little sign where we could all read it. It said, “I used to be addicted to the hokey pokey but I turned myself around.” I’m sure it brought a smile to more than one person who passed through the centre and I hope it does the same for you. Peace.



Oliver

**LIVING IN DARKNESS — Blindness is not chosen, and nor is clinical depression, writes Peter Oliver. It isn’t a matter of “doing the work,” and “getting over it.”**

## Most critical stage of peace process a success

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ened to report this to the police, if the livestock were not returned.

Rendille widows cajoled men from their tribe to help fight fire in the Borana grazing land and, after that, the Borana had a goat roast in honour and appreciation for unexpected help from the “enemy.” The women developed peace songs and dramas to present at local schools and in public meetings. They lobbied the governor to help them revive their farms that had been disused for many years, and to provide security for them working the fields.

Soon this good news began to spread, leading to Catholic Peace and Justice inviting a few widows to give their testimonies in another region with severe conflict and to the capital to tell their story of peace and reconciliation nationally. Neighbouring communities came asking these women to tell them how to have peace.

While this was impressive, many remained skeptical for, next to her children, the most prized possession of a pastoralist woman is her livestock. They are her prime source of food, income and wealth, and are key to social status and community acceptance.

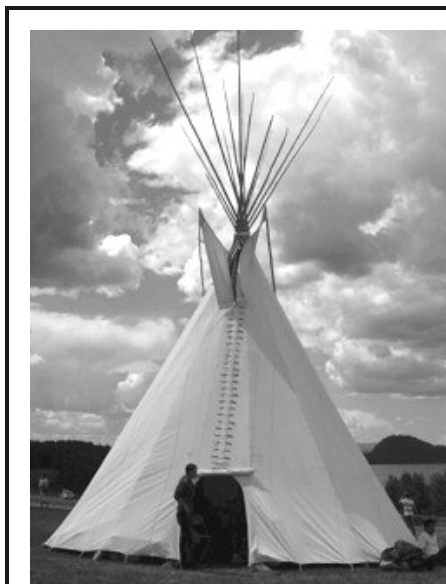
Our fear was that when it was time for Rendille women to give female goats to the Borana, and vice versa, the process would break down. How could a pastoralist give livestock to those who stole hers?

Our fear was unfounded. On Oct. 28, all the widows gathered in the midst of the conflicted area where they sang songs of peace, and each one passed female goats to new widows from the other tribe. The most critical stage of our peace process was successful, and with that there are now 40 Widows for Peace.

At the meeting, we heard the sheik praise the impact these women have. Because of them, men can walk between the villages at night. An old man told us that now he takes only a stick when herding his goats; there is no need to carry a weapon. When a Borana man was recently beaten and his three donkeys stolen, the Rendille elders punished the warriors, forcing them to return the donkeys and give the Borana man three cows. In the past, the warriors would have been praised. The Widows of Conflict are truly Women for Peace — transformed women now have transformed communities.

In recognition that “peace is God’s gift,” Rose, a Rendille widow, said, “Nothing is more important than peace. God who created all these tribes loves everybody. God who is creator of the Borana and Rendille loves all of us. He created us to live together as brothers and sisters.”

For a video describing this peace initiative, go to YouTube and select “Peace-Making in Marsabit, Kenya.”



*“The Word became flesh,  
and he made his dwelling  
among us.”*

John 1:14

Wishing you  
the joys & blessings  
of Christmas.

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