

A reminder of radio's power

By Chris Plutte

Since arriving in Rwanda six months ago, I have learned a lot about the power of radio.

On a recent Wednesday, I looked up from my Facebook page to watch six teenage girls leave my office in Kigali. They were off to the local radio station to produce *Urungano* (the local word for *generation*), a program addressing the trials and tribulations of Rwandan girls.

The girls typically begin their program with a teenage chat and then work their way into discussions of such issues as underage marriage and child labor - both real problems in Rwanda. Throughout the 30-minute weekly program, they move the conversation toward understanding how they, the next generation of Rwandan women, can empower themselves to build a better future.

Fifteen years ago last week, another movement sought to empower its people through the same Rwandan airwaves. "Rise up as a single man," the radio blared. Then, the message was not to rise up for the betterment of the population. The voice was exhorting extremist Hutus to "rise up" and kill their fellow countrymen, their neighbors, and their friends - the minority Tutsis and "moderate" Hutus.

And that is exactly what happened. For 100 days, the radio in Rwanda fueled destruction, fervor, and hatred. The radio in Rwanda gave explicit directions on who should be killed and how they should die. The innocent victims and their murderers had families and children, many of whom were left orphaned by the genocide, and all of whom were left devastated beyond imagination.

But these children survived. And these children are Rwanda today. Rwanda is a country composed of young survivors - a country being led by its youth. And they lead with the power they have at their hands: radio.

Last week, in commemoration of the genocide, *Urungano* focused on reconciliation. The girls went into the countryside and found a mutual support group of genocide victims and perpetrators who, despite their tragic past of conflict, travel together from village to village to teach and model reconciliation. By selecting this topic, the girls sent a powerful message about their vision of the Rwanda they want to live in. And everyone in Rwanda is listening.

For us in the West, it is hard to imagine how relevant - how essential - radio still is to some. In Rwanda, radio is TV, Internet, newspapers, Facebook, and Twitter all wrapped up in one. Here, the potential of radio is unbelievable, almost as unbelievable as the genocide it fueled.

There is something about the sound of a single voice that entices our imagination to fill in the details. Radio leaves room for us. And where radio is the only major medium, the relationship between it and its listeners is a potent one.

Captured by a people, radio can either empower the growth or the destruction of a country. Every Wednesday, as I watch the young journalists leave my office for the station, I am aware that they are the power today. And I think, "Rise up as a single woman," and develop your country to its potential.