



Welby, to spend time in prayer and reconciliation training

In July 2018, Caroline Welby and a small team from Lambeth Palace visited Burundi to spend a week with the wives of its Archbishop and Bishops.

The aim was to give them a break from their responsibilities and commitments – a chance to come away by themselves “to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31).

Although the week was structured around various activities, our first priority was to pray with, listen, encourage, value and love them in the best way we could in the short time we had.

The conversations we had revealed so much of the suffering these women endure daily from living amid conflict. Meanwhile many of them struggle to manage the extra responsibilities that come with being a bishop’s wife. Over the week, their vulnerability in sharing – and their overflowing joy for God – blessed us beyond all imagining.



July’s visit happened as part of a wider programme called Women on the Frontline. Archbishop Justin has often described how women are catalysts for bringing about peace and reconciliation in areas of conflict and war-torn countries.

Yet few women are officially trained for these leadership positions. As a result they are often the most vulnerable to the conflict – affected by its consequences, exhausted and traumatised.

Caroline Welby, like her predecessors, has observed that some women within the Church, notably bishops’ wives, are especially burdened by their positions of leadership. In many parts of the Anglican Communion, as men move from being pastor to bishop and even to archbishop, the wives go from mothering their own children to becoming “Mama” of all the women in their diocese or province.



bouses have had.

As a result, Women on the Frontline was born, a programme that unites these two specific visions, with the long-term hope that it might reach women at all levels in all contexts. It was rolled out for the first in South Sudan in December 2017. Burundi was the second of its kind.

The programme began with a two-day retreat led by Mrs Welby, with the emphasis on Ignatian imaginative contemplation of Scripture. The pace was slow and relaxed, to give the women as much space as possible to connect with one another and with God. Some really enjoyed being given permission to focus on themselves and their relationship with Jesus. Others found it more challenging, particularly if it was their first experience of this kind.

Part of the retreat included afternoon art sessions led by Fiona Ruttle, to respond and engage with the morning reflections. Fiona was keen to emphasise that works of art and perfection were not required – and to help the women “play together” for fun. This removed all judgement and insecurity that one person’s abilities were less than someone else’s.

Women shared openly and vulnerably about what they had created. One said, “I can’t wait to go home and show my children what I have made.

In our house, my children play all the time and I am always asking them to help me around the house. Now I am going to go back and play with



After the retreat, the Mothers' Union CDCs (Community Development Coordinators) joined the Bishops' wives for reconciliation training, led by Comfort Idowu-Fearon (wife of former Archbishop of Kaduna, Nigeria, Josiah Idowu-Fearon) and Jane Poggo (wife of the former Bishop of Kajo-Keji in South Sudan, Anthony Poggo). The sessions included Bible studies, practical training on conflict resolution, learning to disagree well and understanding true forgiveness.

A highlight for everyone involved was the storytelling exercise where almost all the women had had serious experiences of deprivation and loss. The stories were shared by bishops' wives and CDCs alike.

They spoke of devastating losses at young ages, being orphaned or having unloving and abusive parents, raising younger siblings in the absence of parents and dropping out of school as a result or being reprimanded for going to school altogether as a girl, the precariousness of young motherhood and sickly children, the challenges of being a practising Christian when your family doesn't approve or as a woman being called to a life of ministry and facing those within the Church who oppose you. No two stories were the same and yet there was a running theme



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In all that Women on the Frontline does, the hope is that our visit is not a fleeting one where we appear and disappear with no follow-up. In every place we visit, the vision is that either organisations and charities already embedded in the country will continue the work we began – or that the women take up this challenge themselves, and are trained to teach others back in their own dioceses.

There is no doubt that in Burundi, even amid deep sorrow and difficulty, these women walked into the retreat and training with every intention to learn. At the start, one woman asked, “What does reconciliation mean? What does that look like in practice?” Throughout, hearts were open to be challenged and absorb as much as they could, to spend time together and share good practice. There is no doubt that this week was only the beginning of their personal journeys to seek God’s peace on their frontlines.

Imana ishimwe! (Praise the Lord!)

Emma Woodhams was part of the delegation from Lambeth Palace.

Find out more about Archbishop Justin Welby's reconciliation ministry

5 min read

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