

Themes of forgiveness and reconciliation are always relevant but especially so at the Holidays. Alleah introduces a farm family who learned the value of forgiveness through a challenging time. Bill then considers the notion of national reconciliation, highlighting a touching story from Africa. As always, we would love to hear from you. May Christmas be a time of peace for you and your family this year.

Reconciliation: A Family Story

By [Alleah Heise](#)

When we set out to cover reconciliation for our Christmas issue, we canvassed you, our readers and our network, for compelling acts of forgiveness that you either received or witnessed. From that inquiry comes the following story on forgiveness.

A Growing Business Provokes Family Opposition

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a family business focused on poultry production set a course for sustained growth. The patriarch of the family was in the process of not just buying other, smaller companies; he was also making necessary repairs to the existing family-owned farms. When the opportunity arose to purchase a farm that would expand the family birder permit to 3,000,000 – effectively tripling the size of the farm – the patriarch knew this was an opportunity he could not refuse.

Given the size of the farm, there was community opposition to that dramatic growth. That community opposition resulted in articles being written in the local papers and conversations in town. One of the biggest opponents of the growing farm was the patriarch's own sister. She assisted in the publication of stories reporting the family business was cruel to animals, that their goal was to make money at the expense of the locals, that they were even criminals. These articles did not stop the family's growth goals and the patriarch was eventually able to secure the permits, though the relationship with his sister was understandably strained.

Ten Years Later....

Fast forward ten years, and this same sister and her husband found themselves in dire financial straits. The hard times they encountered were going to require them to sell their land, their home, and most of their remaining assets. When the patriarch heard of his sister's trouble, he went and asked her if it was true. When she confirmed the situation, he made her an offer: he would buy her land, home, and assets on a ten-year contract. She could live in the home rent free and, at the end of the ten years, she and her husband could purchase everything back. The sister was astounded at her brother's generosity and took the deal. She apologized for her part in the opposition to the farm's growth. Her brother, the patriarch, forgave her.

When I asked another family member why he thought the patriarch forgave his sister, he said, "Family is family. You always do what you can to help them. Even if they're horrible to you, you do everything you can to mend the relationship."

The compelling act of forgiveness did not immediately make everything perfect. There were hurt feelings that remained after the sister passed away about half-way through the arranged purchase of assets. However, this



family modeled an important lesson for all of us, a point Bill suggests in his article. Reconciliation does not happen overnight, but families can be repaired, one mended relationship at a time.

Reconciliation: A National Story

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

Few of us over 40 can forget the graphic images and sense of international helplessness as nearly 1 million people (out of a population of 7 million), mostly of the Tutsi ethnic group, were slain in reprisal for their suspected collaboration in the assassination of the Hutu President of Rwanda in 1994. The bloodbath continued from April – July 1994, until a Tutsi-led army trained in neighboring Uganda intervened to take control of the devastated country. Tensions had existed between these groups since colonial days, when the Belgian colonists gave authority to the Tutsi, who were about 15% of the population. Now everything was coming to a horrendous, nightmarish head.

Next year is the 25th anniversary of this carnage, universally recognized as a modern genocide. By now the population of the country has risen to 12 million, nearly 1/3 of whom were not even born when the events of 1994 took place. Though stories of those events no doubt are known to every Rwandan child, none of these young people at least bear the physical scars of that event.

Following these events, a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission was established. In 2000 a President was elected whose principal goal was to establish a process by which national reconciliation could take place. Many, for good reason, were skeptical. People questioned the validity of a top-down reconciliation process that required participants in the process to accept an “official narrative” of the genocide. Many felt that there was a stigma if you didn’t say you were involved in the reconciliation process. Then, there were many who refused to participate. As one survivor said, “Reconciliation is never going to happen—at least for me.”

Progress

Yet some dramatic events have happened in the past 20 years that suggest that the skeptics may not have the last word. Important, legally, were a few things. First was the sentencing to prison of those actually found guilty of crimes. Second was the passage of a law reducing sentences if a convicted person would write to a person against whom he had perpetrated violence and express remorse. Third, because the judicial system became overcrowded, the country reinstated a pre-colonial institution called the *gacaca*, a village court whose mandate it was to rebuild the community through their work. Finally, on the government’s initiative, all reference to two contrasting ethnic groups (Tutsi, Hutu) was dropped in favor of “Rwandan.”

Then, the international community responded. Two Christian non-profit organizations familiar to Americans, Prison Fellowship and World Vision, became involved. Most often noted is the effort of Prison Fellowship Rwanda to establish six “reconciliation villages,” where perpetrators and victims, after extensive screening, live next to each other and learn the rudiments of forgiveness and rebuilding a country together. These reconciliation villages now house about 3,000 people. Certainly this is a mere fraction of the current Rwandan population, but they hold out hope that the lofty and usually elusive concept of reconciliation might actually bear fruit.

Reconciliation, or learning to balance justice and healing, or retribution and forgiveness, not only doesn’t happen overnight, but it doesn’t happen in 25 years. Yet, a survey taken of Rwandans recently suggested that more than 90% of Rwandans believe that reconciliation is working. The skeptics may indeed have the last word, but for now the dominant tone is that the country is rebuilding itself, one relationship at a time.

