

# Answering Conflict with Community



BY CLIFTON KIRKPATRICK

It seems that serious tension and violence are present in some part of the world each and every day. Unfortunately, some of the hot spots, such as the Middle East, are areas we have come to expect to be in the news on a regular basis.

One of the countries that made the news earlier this year because of unrest is Kenya—an African country that seemed to be one of, if not the most stable in the region. The country erupted in deadly violence practically overnight in the wake of a presidential election that many claimed was a corrupt and unfair process.

While the explosion of violence shocked many within Kenya and beyond its borders, those more familiar with the country and its history were not as surprised. To them, the election was “the straw that broke the camel’s back”—spilling over from a history of colonialism, deep ethnic tensions and a setting in which the gap between the haves and the have-nots is one of the widest in the world.

## Conflict and Mediation

The recent violence was perpetrated by Kenyan against Kenyan, ethnic group against ethnic group. The majority of Presbyterians in Kenya (a country that is at least 80 percent Christian) belong to the Kikuyu ethnic group, which fought against the Luo and Kalenjin ethnic groups, to which the majority of other members of the same Reformed tradition as Presbyterians belong. Nearly one million people were displaced (300,000 of them



**The WCC Living Letters team shared prayers with members of the Kikuyu community in Kihingo. “The church in the world cares deeply about you,” said team leader Clifton Kirkpatrick (center), stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).**

Presbyterians) because of the violence, with a real fear that the situation could explode into one similar to the genocide in Rwanda.

Thankfully, the extreme unrest subsided because of a power-sharing agreement that was reached between the man who claimed to have won the presidential election and his primary opponent. But I would ask you to continue to keep the situation in your prayers because of the many layers of tensions that continue to smolder.

Back when the unrest was at its height, I had the opportunity to lead an international ecumenical group from the World Council of Churches—a “Living Letters” delegation—to Kenya to help with the mediation process and lift up the humanitarian crisis created by the violence.

We met with major leaders from both sides of the conflict, all of whom made their predictable, and some would say entrenched, cases for why their side was right and the other was wrong.

## Building Community

Then we met with a group of women leaders—similar to Presbyterian Women leaders here—who were a refreshing ray of hope in that tense situation. They were eager for real dialogue, for everyone to come to the table and to seek common ground.

The Kenyan women reminded me of you. As Presbyterian Women, you consistently and actively demonstrate your gifts for building community and showing hospitality in

countless situations, large and small, tense and otherwise. To put it in the words of one of the great ends of the church, you are faithful in the “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (*Book of Order*, G-1.0200).

As I finish out my tenure as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, I want to express my deep and heartfelt appreciation to you for who you are and for all you do for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the larger body of Christ. I also want to thank you for the many ways you have welcomed me and encouraged me over these past 12 years.

I look forward to future opportunities to watch you in action, and even to work side-by-side with you as we all seek to be faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for Presbyterian Women!

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