

A Thread to Burundi — Cogges and the Church at Gasenyi

The thirty-year link between St Mary's, Cogges, in Witney, and the Anglican parish of Gasenyi, in the hills above Bujumbura — and the morning, in June 2026, I finally stood at its far end.

I. THE FAR END OF A THREAD

I went to Burundi to ride a bicycle. For a fortnight in June 2026 I was one of a ragged, generous band of about a dozen amateurs grinding a great loop across the country — a charity ride for Great Lakes Outreach, the organisation our leader, Simon Guillebaud, founded and has given the better part of his life to. We climbed a thousand green hills in the heat and the dust, and were met on every one of them by the astonishing kindness of a country the wider world mostly hears of only when it is bleeding. By the end the riding was done, the legs were wrecked, and I had two days left before the flight home.



A thousand green hills — the country we rode.

This is not, though, a story about the bicycle. The full story of those hills — the whole punishing, glorious fortnight of them, the climbs and the heat and the country that came pouring out of its houses to wave us up — is a book of its own, and not this one. This is the smaller, stranger story folded inside it: a thread — a quiet, thirty-year thread that runs between my own church, in Witney, and a single hillside parish above Bujumbura — and the Sunday, with the riding finished, that I finally got to stand at the far end of it.

It is Sunday, then, and the riding is over. No grease, no chain oil, no fussing with tyre pressures in the half-dark; no Simon in the courtyard with a clipboard, marshalling us into the day. The bikes are stacked and still, and my legs, which have carried me over the spine of a whole country, are this morning being asked to do nothing more strenuous than fold into the front of the Hilux, and are pathetically grateful.

The night before, Simon had set out the choices for our last full morning. The wider team would mostly stay close to base; for anyone who wanted it there was a church a short walk down the hill from the hotel, at the site of a street-children's ministry; or there was the simple, well-earned option of a slow morning and nothing much at all; or — for whoever fancied the drive — coming out with him to a parish called Gasenyi. He gave us a little context for that last one. He did not need to give me much.

Because I have known the name Gasenyi for years. The church there is a partner of *my* church — Cogges, in Witney, a mile and a half from my front door — and the name has come round on our prayer lists, and surfaced in the news the two congregations swap, for as long as I have been paying attention. I have never stood in it. Given the choice, this final morning, I am not going to do anything else.

II. THIRTY YEARS

My own connection to this country starts not with the bike ride, and not with Simon, but with Hilary. Hilary Warner, from Cogges — a supporter and encourager of mission since her teens — is the sole reason Burundi was ever a real place to me at all, rather than a shape on a map. She first went out there in 2006, with her husband Graham, and has kept going back ever since, drawn into the long, patient work of peace and reconciliation in a country only just then emerging from civil war. And it was Hilary, decades earlier, who had opened the door through which the whole thing first came.

For the link is older than my time at the church, and thirty years deep now. It began in 1996 — a year before I arrived, and married the year after — and I paid, I am a little ashamed to admit, almost no attention to the Burundian thread already running through the

congregation I had joined. It had begun with a single young Burundian: Pascal Bigirimana, an ordinand who came to England in the mid-1990s to train for the priesthood at Wycliffe Hall, in Oxford, and who did part of that training in our own parish. The college sent its overseas students out to preach in the local churches, and Cogges took Pascal; but the vicar of the day, Stephen Bessent, wanted the connection to be more than a guest sermon, and so Hilary took him in — a room and a home over the holidays, when otherwise he had nowhere to go. He was there, in other words, in my own first year or two at the church, and for the life of me I cannot picture him, which tells you exactly how much attention I was paying. He went home to Bujumbura, to his wife and three daughters, and rose in time to become Provincial Secretary of the Anglican Church of Burundi, the right hand of its Archbishop. From that one ordinand, hosted in a Witney spare room, grew all the rest of it.

A prayer link settled in behind him, and then the practical things that prayer tends to grow into. In 2003 — and here is the quiet joke of it, the thread brushing my own life without my noticing — my wife Rachel and I gave to a Christian Aid appeal at church to buy goats for a country I could not, afterwards, have named. I remember the appeal because it lodged: the plain, satisfying arithmetic of a goat — milk for the children, manure for the crops, the first kids passed on to the next family down, so that one gift kept walking from household to household. What I did not keep was the single detail that matters now. It was Burundi. Of course it was Burundi.

And it went on growing. Cogges put a Burundian girl, Scheilla, through medical school. In 2014, at the request of the Bishop of Bujumbura, Eraste Bigirimana, the link became a formal partnership

with one specific parish — Gasenyi, a rural congregation in the hills above the capital — and a church I sit in on a wet West Oxfordshire Sunday began praying for, swapping news with, and helping a church I had never seen: exercise books and uniforms for the children who could not otherwise stay in school, a nursery of herb gardens to put the missing minerals back into the local diet. I had been holding one end of this thread, on and off, for most of my adult life. I had never followed it to the other.

And the Gasenyi link, I should say, is not the only thread between this small town and this country — nor even the only one running through my own church. Another belongs to Maria Skoyles, who worships alongside me at Cogges and is also a pioneer with the Church Mission Society. A few years ago she designed a simple, size-adjustable dress that could be sewn almost anywhere, even where the electricity is unreliable and good cloth hard to come by, and built a charity around it: the Dorcas Dress Project. The dresses are now made by women learning to sew their way out of poverty in Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria — and Burundi, where her partners include the very sewing co-operatives in Bujumbura, one of which I visited on this trip, that train women out of prostitution and abandonment and into a trade. The finished dresses come back to be sold in Oxfordshire and beyond, and the money returns to the women who made them. I am, as it happens, carrying two bagfuls of them home in my luggage even now — to hand to Maria, so that she can sell them through her shop, so that a little more of someone's dignity in Bujumbura might pay for itself. Another thread, then, running out from a few streets in Witney to the far side of Africa; another web of people I had half-known about for years and never thought to trace.

None of which, I should say, is as romantic as carrying a bagful of dresses across a continent makes it sound. A month before I flew, when Maria first asked whether I would bring some back, I said yes — and the two of us promptly disappeared down a rabbit-hole of customs rules and import forms and how a small charity even gets itself a tax reference, none of it easy to find online and all of it mattering if the thing was to be done properly. We had more than one call just to lament how hard it was to pin down. That patient, unglamorous, form-filling work, done where no one will ever see it, is as much a part of this as any morning on a hill.

III. FINDING IT

And so we are a small party this morning — four of us off a tour of thirteen. Simon is at the wheel of the Hilux, the same battered workhorse that has shepherded our luggage round the whole loop; I am in the passenger seat beside him, and Paul and Kath, two South Africans from the ride, are in the back. After a week of moving as a great ragged column it feels almost furtive to be slipping out of the city as a quiet carful, with no support van and no photographer leaning out of a window, going to be — for once — not the spectacle but the guests. We fall into the easy, unguarded talk of people with nowhere they have to be: about heights, of all things, and how the older I get the worse I am with them, and how on the climbs this week I had to keep my eyes off the drop and *stare back at the road*.

Nobody, it turns out, quite knows where the church is.

This is not the failing at home it would be. Out here you do not navigate by addresses — there are no addresses to navigate by — you navigate by landmarks and by phone, and so the four of us

settle into a happy collaborative muddle. Simon's phone keeps buzzing with directions from someone at the church, fed to us in instalments over WhatsApp — though I have no idea who is on the other end of it. I have Google Maps open on my knee, downloaded the night before to work offline, doing its honest best with a country it does not entirely have the measure of. Simon drives and interprets. And the agreed anchor for the whole enterprise — the fixed point all the directions hang off — is Adolphe's bar.

I have to ask who Adolphe is. Adolphe Nshimirimana was, until a decade ago, one of the most powerful men in the country: a general, Burundi's intelligence chief, the right hand of the president of the day on everything to do with internal security. In August 2015 he was killed in his car, here in the north of the city, in a rocket attack on an ordinary morning. He had owned a well-known bar-restaurant out on the main road at the edge of Bujumbura, and the bar is still there, and still goes by his name, and has settled into being a thing everyone knows — a fixed star you steer by. *Second left after Adolphe's bar.* There is something in that I cannot quite put down. A site bound up with a violent death, a flashpoint of the country's most recent convulsion, has been absorbed back into the ordinary business of getting about — not a memorial, not a warning, just the place you turn for church. I do not think the people giving the directions think about any of it. It is where you turn. Perhaps that, too, is a kind of recovery.

We take the second left, and it is wrong. Or rather, we take a second left, and within a hundred yards the tarmac gives out and we are nosing the Hilux down a steep red dirt track, bucking over ruts, the houses leaning in, the road getting less like a road with every yard. Simon stops and asks a woman walking the other way; she does not

know the church. We press on, lose a little more faith in ourselves, and he tries again — a man, this time, who listens, and then waves us firmly back the way we came: *up, up, onto the road*. Somewhere in the to-and-fro it resolves itself — we had turned too early, counted some tiny side-spur as a junction and jumped the gun on the real second left. Back up on the main road, the correct turn at last and there, on a rough apron of scrub that does duty as a car park, stands a man in full clerical kit, dark shirt and white collar, calm in the morning sun, waiting for us.

And here the morning turns strange and lovely. The man waiting steps forward, both hands out, warm and entirely unhurried, and for a long, stupid beat I cannot place his face. I know that I know him. I cannot think from where. And then it lands: Witney. A few weeks ago, in a sitting room back home in Witney — Hilary Warner's house — when he was over in England for a leadership conference. This is the Revd Félibien Ndintore — who, I will learn, was for years the Provincial Secretary of the whole Anglican Church of Burundi, its nine dioceses, and who now leads its aid-and-development arm, the Service Anglican pour le Développement Communautaire; and who this morning is serving a small parish on a hill as our guide and our translator. Provincial Secretary is the office Pascal Bigirimana went home to fill all those years ago — so the thread that began with one Provincial Secretary of the Burundian church, trained in my parish, runs now through another who has held the same chair, waiting in his collar on a patch of scrub to wave us in. And he is the unseen voice on the other end of Simon's phone, the one who has been texting our directions in instalments the whole bumping way down — I had no idea, all that time, that the man steering us in was someone I had already met. I hadn't recognised him, for the simplest of reasons: I had only ever

seen him *out of context*. And the context is this — his church, his hill, his country. There is a neatness to it I could not have invented: the man guiding me in to Burundi is the man I first shook hands with at the house of the woman who gave me Burundi in the first place.

The service, we can hear, has already begun. We are late — properly late — and at home that would carry its small freight of embarrassment: the slipping in at the back, the apologetic wince. Here it carries none of that. Lateness does not mean here what it means at home; the morning is long and elastic and no one is keeping score. We are shown, with great courtesy and no hurry whatsoever, where the toilets are, and then brought in through a door near the front of the church — no slipping discreetly into a back row here; we are delivered more or less straight to the front, in full view, and the whole congregation turns to take us in. So much, then, for not being the spectacle. We are given a row of chairs kept for us, and the man who pulls his chair across to make room beside me — Appolinaire — will spend the rest of the morning leaning in to murmur a translation in my ear, the kindest running commentary I have ever been given.

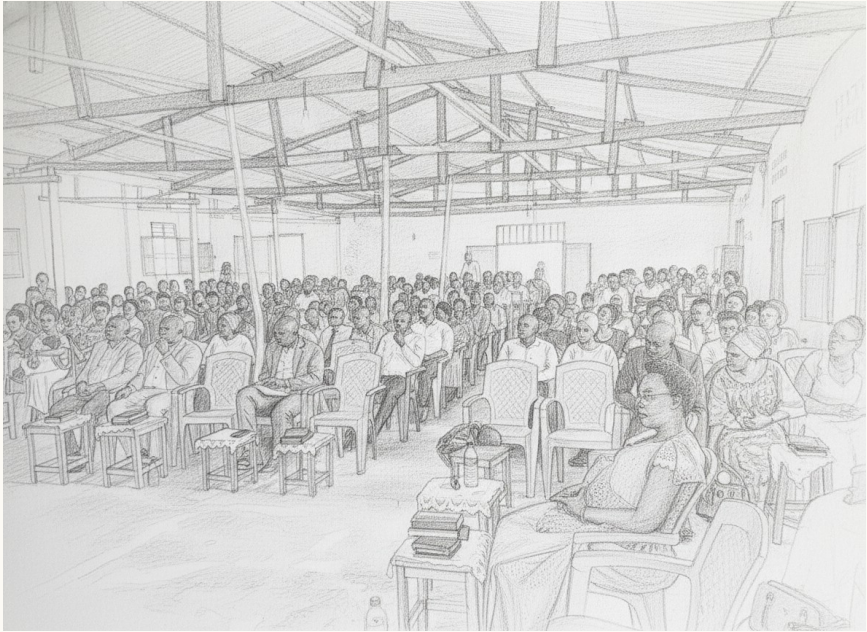
IV. THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

You hear it before you see it.

The church at Gasenyi is a long, plain rectangle of brick, and on a Sunday morning it is full to the walls and singing. The building is honest and unadorned — bare, unplastered brick, a corrugated-iron roof laid straight across the rafters, the light coming in hard and silver at the eaves. It is plainly loved, and plainly full; and the congregation has its eye on the future, on a bigger, better church it

dreams of building one day on this same ground — a project for another year, which they will, before the morning is out, ask us quite happily to pray for. For now they worship in what they have, and fill it to the walls.

And they have dressed it for the occasion. The front of the church is draped in green and white — green being the Anglican colour for this ordinary stretch of the year — with white crosses appliquéd onto the cloth, and there are real flowers, arranged with great care, set against all that raw brick. An electric fan stirs the warm air. Row upon row of chairs — plastic, mismatched, packed in tight — and every one of them taken: women in the most magnificent printed cloth, headwraps in colours I do not have names for, babies asleep across laps, children packed onto chairs and laps and the floor and the edges of everything, men in their best shirts. When I look back down the length of the room from the front it is a wall of colour and faces, and the noise of it — the singing, the answering, the sheer crowded human warmth of it — is the most alive thing I have stood inside in a long time.



The congregation at Gasenyi; the front chairs stood empty for the visitors.

V. WELCOMED

For a few minutes I let it wash over me and find the shape of it — a shape I know in my bones. Then, as it would at home, comes the confession. The words are in Kirundi and I do not need the translation to know them: *we have strayed from your ways like lost sheep* — the oldest sentence in the Anglican book, said on a hill in Burundi exactly as it is said in Witney, and the recognition of it goes through me like a small electric shock. The same words. The same wandering sheep. The same mercy offered back. Whatever else separates the church I left and the church I am standing in, the prayer book does not.

Then they welcome us, and they do it properly.

Félibien explains to the congregation who these *abazungu* are, because word has already got round; people are gathering at the doors, he says, asking who the white visitors are and why they have come. And then Simon does a thing I had not expected. He recites the route. Not as a list of places — as a litany, a roll of honour, each name landing with its own small weight: Matana. Ruyigi. Cankuzo. Musinga. Kirundo. Ngozi. Gitega. And home to Bujumbura. The whole loop of the country, every hill of it, named aloud in a church by the man who led us up every single one of them — and the congregation murmuring, because they know exactly how far that is. *These ones*, he is telling them, *rode all of that*. He adds, to general delight, that we look extremely tired. We are.

There are greetings to pass on — from a Pastor Silas, who could not come; from families; the small diplomacy of the African church, where a greeting is a gift and is handed over with both hands. Paul and Kath are introduced and welcomed by name. And then there is the thread I came in on. Félibien explains it to his people: the visitors are tied to a church in the United Kingdom that has a partnership with Gasenyi — *they pray for us as we pray for them*, he says, and they support this church, and the children of it, with school books and materials so that some who could not stay in school have stayed. *We want to keep this partnership growing*. He says it simply, as a fact, and I sit there holding the Witney end of it with my eyes stinging, because I had not quite grasped — not really — that the modest thing my home congregation does on a noticeboard and a standing order reaches *here*, into this room, onto these particular chairs, into the hands of children I am now looking at.

When it is our turn I bring the greeting back the only way I know how, which is to read to them — from the opening of Colossians, because it is the letter for exactly this moment. *We always thank God for you, it goes, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all God's people — the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it.* A line at a time, English then Kirundi, the translator's voice following mine like an echo with the meaning in it. *All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing.* I have spent a week watching exactly that, hill after hill, and here it is written down two thousand years ahead of me.

VI. ANOINTED

And then they sing to us, and I run out of road for describing it.

The singers are a group of all ages mixed together — children, teenagers, grown men and women, grandmothers — no robes, no tidy rows, and they do not just sing: they *dance*, a swaying, stamping, whole-body kind of singing that lifts the entire room, and the room lifts back. It is not performance. There is no stage between the singers and the sung-to; the sound rises up off the floor and out of the packed rows in that close, many-voiced way that no recording I have ever heard has managed to carry out of Africa intact. I will say to them, later, that it is *anointed* worship — and I mean the word in its plain, old sense, not as a polite superlative for music I happened to enjoy. Somewhere else, in another church, I might have watched the same singing more guardedly — weighed it, kept a little of myself back. Here I cannot. I know the rational account, and I do not despise it: a roomful of people singing in close harmony, the

rhythm, the heat, the contagion of a crowd that means every word — of course that moves you, of course the body answers it; you could write the whole thing up in the language of psychology and a sceptic would miss nothing he was looking for. And yet the explanation, true as far as it goes, simply slides off the thing itself. The anointing of God's Spirit is palpably present in the room — you could no more argue it away than argue with the weather — and naming the mechanism dissolves it no more than explaining the optics of a sunrise makes the sunrise less worth getting up for. It is not the musicianship doing it, extraordinary though that is. It is a congregation that means every syllable, in a plain brick church on a hard hill, with every reason in the world to sing about something other than joy, and choosing joy at the top of its voice. I am wrung out by it before a word of the sermon has been preached.

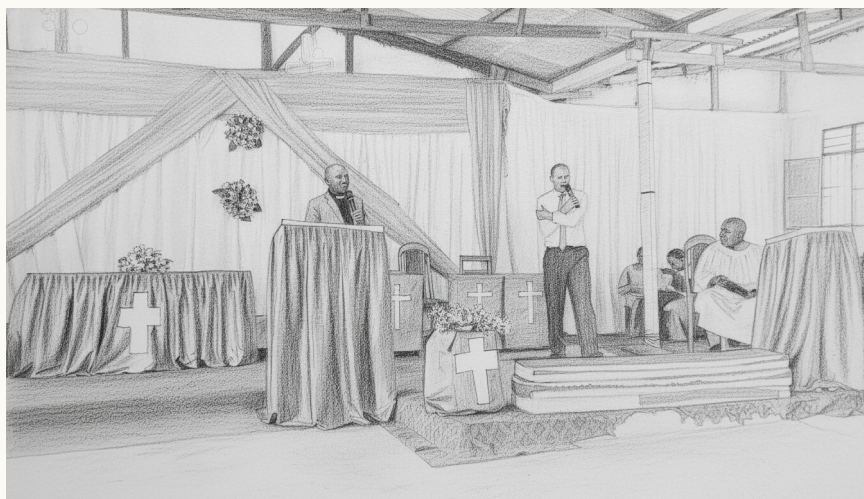


The worship band, mid-song.

VII. THE SERMON

Simon preaches.

By now I have heard Simon preach more than once — a full sermon only the day before, at an outreach out in the bush, and the quick, ardent mini-sermons he would give on the hoof whenever we stopped at one of the partners' projects. But there is something else again about hearing him in a parish pulpit on a Sunday, through a translator, to a church packed with the people his life's work is for.



Simon preaching at the front, line by line through Félibien.

And there is a weight to it beyond the man himself. Simon's own great-grandfather, Harold Guillebaud, came out to this part of Africa the better part of a century ago and helped to put the Scriptures into the local language, dying with the work unfinished and lying still in African ground; the Bible Simon is opening on this hill is, in a real and traceable sense, the one his family helped to bring. Simon

came back into Burundi himself in the middle of its worst years and stayed, and the whole web of work I had spent the fortnight glimpsing grew, in the end, out of that returning. And here he is at the front of a plain brick church, doing the oldest thing his family does in this country: opening the book, and explaining it.

He takes John chapter thirteen, the upper room, the last week of Jesus's life — the night Jesus eats with his closest friends and tells them, to their horror, that one of them will betray him. And out of it he draws three things, he says, that we all have to do if we are going to *bear much fruit and last the race*. Three things. He is a list-of-three preacher, and the congregation settles in, because they can feel a structure they can carry home.

Stay close to Jesus. Not, he is careful to say, close to *church*; not close to the choir, however glorious; not religious. Close to *Jesus* — a relationship, he says, not a list of rules and regulations, and the danger is that you can come to church for years, for decades, and still have a heart that is far from him, like the Pharisees, who knew everything *about* God and did not know him. He tells them, against himself, about a Bible study he was in at school, six of them, and how someone had warned the group that in time only one of them would still be following Jesus — and how, all these years on, he is the one, and he says it not as a boast but almost as a wound, naming the godly ones who fell away, the missionary who left his family, the friend whose faith did not survive his wife's cancer. *Knowing about is not the same as knowing*, he says, and gives them the joke that lands the hardest: that the Queen of England once invited him to her house, and what an honour, and do you know what he said? *Thank you — but I've already seen her on the television*. The church roars. We have all turned down the invitation

that mattered while keeping the souvenir. And then, more quietly, the boy of thirteen who fell in love across a school playground and followed her about and found out everything there was to know about her and *never once spoke to her* — and she had a boyfriend anyway, bigger and stronger than him. You can know every fact about a person, he says, and not know them at all.

Stay close to the word of God. He talks about scripture the way a soldier talks about a weapon — Ephesians six, the whole armour of God, every piece of it defensive except the one, the word, that is not. He tells them how his own children learned a verse a week, how you store it up in your head so it is *there* when you need it, and how the Pharisees memorised more of it than any of them and missed the Messiah standing in front of them, because their hearts were hard and they only wanted to show off what they knew. Light to my feet, he says. A lamp to my path.

Stay close to each other. This is the one he builds the longest, and the one I think about most on the drive back. He talks about Judas — how, when he went out to betray, he went out *alone*, into the night, isolated; how sin almost always wants the dark and the solitary, the secret done where no one can see. And then he gives them an image I will not lose. Take a single coal out of the fire, he says, set it on its own, away from the others — and in half an hour it is cold enough to pick up in your bare hand. On its own it dies. Only in the heap does it stay alight. *We need each other*, he says. If you know someone who has stopped coming, who has stopped following, who got discouraged because something happened in their life — go to them this week. Visit them. Carry them. Be the heap that keeps the coal warm. I think of being carried up a hill myself, days before, by a

man half my age who dropped back to ride at my broken pace, and I understand the sermon in my legs as much as my head.

He ends on his knees. Literally — he gets down, there at the front, and he calls people. *Karibu*, he says, again and again, the word for *come, welcome, come close* — *karibu, karibu, karibu*. He does not make it gentle or vague. He names the things that hold people away from God, out loud and without flinching — the sexual sin, the witchcraft, the pornography, the rumours spread, the revenge nursed, the forgiveness withheld — and he tells them that this morning, any of them, all of them, can be set free of it and walk out of this plain brick church forgiven. *The Lord is calling you*. And the room answers him — *Ndio, ndio*, yes, yes — and the translator's voice and the preacher's voice and the congregation's voice braid together into something I could not tell you the denomination of, only that it was real, and that I was inside it.

And then they come. Not a handful but what looks like half the church, more — rising from their chairs and coming forward, until the whole front of the building is full of people wanting to be prayed for. The leadership team spreads out among them; and so, it turns out, do we — Paul, Kath, Simon and me, four tired cyclists suddenly enlisted as people who pray.

I have never felt less equipped. I have no Kirundi; whatever I say, the man or woman in front of me will not follow a word of it, and there are far too many of them for a translator to reach. For a moment I just stand there, self-conscious, an Englishman with empty hands. And then I do the only thing left to do: I rest a hand on a head, or a shoulder, and pray a simple blessing over them, quietly, in my own language, knowing they probably cannot understand it. It feels like nothing. It feels almost presumptuous.

But somewhere in the middle of it the self-consciousness lets go, because I realise this was never going to be about my words, or my eloquence, or the language I happen to have been born into. The prayer is not mine to get right. I am only a hand on a shoulder; the rest was never mine to carry.

VIII. THE GIFT, AND THE GOING

Afterwards, the service over, we are invited back in — not to worship now, but to sit down with “the committee.” It takes me an embarrassingly long time to work out who “the committee” are, and when the penny finally drops I almost laugh, because the answer is the *PCC*. The Parochial Church Council — that most unkillably Anglican of institutions: the elected band of lay people and clergy who, in every parish from here to Witney, actually run the place — the budget, the buildings, the rotas, the endless practical business of keeping a church on the road. Gasenyi has one. Of course Gasenyi has one.

I have history with PCCs. I have served on the Cogges one, on and off, since somewhere around the turn of the century — I am not on it at the moment — and they have, in fairness, got a good deal better over the years. But the phrase “church committee” still drops me through a trapdoor into a particular kind of evening: the strip light, the agenda, the “any other business” that is never quite any other business. I once sat through the best part of an hour — I am not exaggerating — on whether, and how, and when a single churchyard tree ought to be pruned. I was, in those years, working at Amazon — a company with a near-religious horror of the slow meeting, where “bias for action” is more or less one of the commandments — and it had not prepared me for that depth of

horticultural deliberation; somewhere around the fortieth minute, I remember wondering whether I might quietly die.

So there is a particular comedy in it, and a particular tenderness, to be welcomed now by the Gasenyi committee — the very same office, the same earnest, faithful, occasionally over-thorough work of keeping a church going, transposed to a brick room on a hill above Bujumbura. They are introduced person by person — Pierre Nimpagaritse, the parish's own pastor; Appolinaire Hacimana, the chair, the man who has been translating in an undertone at my elbow all morning; a teacher and his wife with their two small children waiting outside. Each is named, each is honoured. The Cogges partnership is raised again, warmly — *you have been of great use to this place*, Félibien says, and means the people in Witney as much as the people in the room — and then they bring out a gift for us. It is small, and they say so themselves, with a dignity that makes the smallness beside the point: *it is little*, he says, *but it comes from a heart that loves you*. I have been given more expensive things and felt them less.

I say a few words back. I thank them, again, for a welcome none of us had done anything to deserve. I tell them — because it is true and because it gets a laugh, which a church on a hard hill deserves — that where I live in England the land is very *flat*, and Burundi is very *hilly*, and my legs are extremely sore. I tell them that my own church has had pictures of theirs on the wall for years, and that it is a strange and wonderful thing to be standing inside the photograph at last. And I thank them for the worship, which was anointed, and which I will not forget — and for the thing that matters more than partnership or money or any of it, which is that we are, the whole improbable lot of us, brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Pierre prays us out. They pray for the road home, for travelling mercies, for our families waiting on the other side of the world. And they pray — this is the part that stays — over the *seed sown here*, asking that whatever has been planted between us in this parish would go on growing after we have gone, in their people, until it bears fruit they can see. Then they ask us, one more time and without a flicker of awkwardness, to pray for what comes next: for the new and bigger church they long to build here one day, for the gravel and the sand and the money it will take, for the house of God they hope, in God's time, to raise on this hill.

Outside, blinking in the light, there is the slow, warm business of leaving — handshakes that go on well past any awkwardness, photographs, the committee walking us back to the Hilux with a tail of children behind, more goodbyes than there are words for in the languages we have between us.

You could call all of this coincidence, and you might be right. I know how it works: string enough days together and the overlaps are bound to mount up; sit and toss a coin all morning and sooner or later you will throw a dozen heads in a row — which, to anyone who saw only those twelve throws, would look like a small miracle, and to the patient statistician is no more than a morning of coin-tosses doing exactly what it should. The honest, A-level part of me knows a life is simply full of these rhymes, and that we keep the ones that chime and forget the thousand that don't. Maybe that is all it is — Pascal and Félibien, the goats and the spare room and the hard name on the prayer list, a handful of flukes I have knotted into a story because the human mind cannot leave a loose end alone.

And yet. I have noticed that when you apprentice a life to Jesus — take him as your teacher and your master, the one you actually try

to learn how to live from — this sort of thing seems to happen rather more often than my A-level statistics ever said it should. So I keep the other possibility open: that the overlaps are not random at all — that there is a master craftsman at the loom, and these Burundian connections are stitches in a tapestry whose pattern I am much too close up to read; and that I am not the one standing back to admire the design, but a single thread in it, being drawn through the cloth and sewn quietly into place.

Even the coffee, I learn later, was one of the stitches. Back home in Witney, Hilary had arranged for Burundian coffee to be served at Cogges — beans from these very hills, poured in an Oxfordshire church hall, simply to bind the two places a little closer. (I don't drink the stuff myself, as it happens; the gesture was always the point, not the cup.)

And there is the thread, gone all the way taut at last. A Burundian ordinand in a Witney spare room; a tin of goat money my wife and I gave without thinking; a woman who kept going back; a hard name on a prayer list, week after week, for thirty years — small, unspectacular faithfulness at both ends, and somehow it had reached from my own ordinary church all the way to this extraordinary one, and drawn me down its whole length, over a fortnight of hills, to find out at last what it was tied to. It was tied to people. It is always, in the end, tied to people.

Words by James Webster, with Claude · Illustrations: pencil sketches drawn from the trip photographs with Google Gemini (Nano Banana), in the style of the Burundi 2026 book