

Forgiving After Genocide

✖ As the 15th anniversary of Rwandan genocide comes to a close this week, a documentary showing how some Rwandans are forgiving the unforgivable is reaching audiences in the U.S.

Narrated by actress Mia Farrow, *As We Forgive* debuted on PBS World this week and follows two women who are asked for forgiveness by the men who murdered their families during the genocide. The 100-day ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis left more than 800,000 Rwandans dead and hundreds of thousands widowed or orphaned.

In an effort to ease overcrowding prisons, the Rwandan government in 2003 released some 40,000 inmates who had murdered their neighbors and fellow church members, forcing communities to find ways to forgive and reconcile.

"I was just taken by this scenario: What happens when a killer comes home? When they ask you for forgiveness?" said producer Laura Waters Hinson, who decided to make the documentary after visiting the nation in 2005 with her Anglican church, which is aligned with the diocese in Rwanda.

"I think it was something that personally was incredibly challenging to me because I didn't know if I could forgive someone who raped or murdered my mother or my sister or her children," she added. "It was just an unfathomable situation."

The film follows Rosaria and Saveri, who had been friends before Saveri murdered Rosaria's sister and her children during the genocide. Rosaria said it was her faith that motivated her to attend reconciliation seminars and eventually forgive Saveri.

For Chantale, forgiveness seemed impossible. John murdered her father in 1992, during the birth pangs of the genocide. Before

the brutal attack, John and Chantale's father had been fellow church members.

At the end of the documentary, Chantale tells John that she is unable to forgive him. But Hinson said nearly a year after filming ended, Chantale had a change of heart.

"She had really lost her faith," Hinson said. "She told me at the time she couldn't even bathe herself, she couldn't regard herself as a human being anymore. Then one day she felt God was giving her the strength to forgive John, and she felt that she was getting this newness, this life. She had this whole public ceremony where she invited John and they drank from the same cup" to symbolize unity.

Hinson said the film, which releases on DVD in October, was originally intended for Western audiences to offer hope to people who have been hurt or victimized in some way.

"There are people who are capable of reconciling after genocide," she told *Charisma*. "If that's possible, then what's possible in our own lives here, dealing with most of the time much smaller issues?"

But the film is also giving voice to Rwandans who have been challenged to forgive by their government but not offered opportunities to dialogue about how that plays out in daily life, Hinson said.

Last week, the film was shown to 5,000 Rwandans during an anniversary event commemorating the end of the genocide. The screening is part of an ongoing outreach to foster dialogue and reconciliation efforts already under way in the nation.

During the next four months, Hinson said the Ministry of Education wants to show the film in Rwandan schools, and she has partnered with churches and nongovernmental organizations to show the film in universities, prisons and villages.

"The purpose was not just to show the film but to facilitate dialogue after the film and lead people to participate in some of the ministries and reconciliation programs that are out there," Hinson said.

U.S. audiences are helping Rwanda's rebuilding effort by participating in Living Bricks, a partnership with Prison Fellowship that provides tools to allow repentant perpetrators of genocide to build homes for their victims' families.

Hinson hopes *As We Forgive* will also provoke U.S. Christians to lead conversations about reconciliation in their own communities.

"I've really challenged the churches to not make this a film that kind of preaches to the choir, but to use it as an opportunity to engage their communities with the topic of reconciliation," Hinson said. "This should be our soapbox. This should be the thing that the church here in America is known for."