

1. Humans of New York, series on Rwandan Genocide

“First came the meetings. They were openly advertised on community microphones. Their stated purpose was to discuss ‘current issues,’ but everyone knew that killings were being organized. These things were being openly discussed on the radio at the time. I was always invited to these meetings, but I never attended. I was a pastor. I wanted no part in those discussions. But when the killings finally commenced on April 7th, people came running to my church for sanctuary. The first of them arrived early in the morning. They were trembling and too scared to speak. All they could say was: ‘Hide us, hide us.’ I told everyone to go inside the church. I said: ‘If our God is true, we will be OK.’ Finally a young man arrived who was able to talk. ‘They killed my parents,’ he said. ‘All of us are being hunted.’ I was also terrified but I tried not to show it. I just kept bringing people inside the gate. By the time the sun went down, there were over three hundred people hiding on this property.”(Kigali, Rwanda)

(2/4) “We filled every hiding place with a person. Some were in the ceiling. Some were in the cupboards. Some were under the floor. There were even two people in this toilet. That very first evening the militia came to my front gate. Some were carrying guns. Others were carrying machetes. They’d been told that I was hiding people. They demanded to come inside and search the property. I stood in the doorway and told them that they’d have to kill me first. ‘We’ll be back,’ they said. ‘And thanks for gathering the cockroaches into one place. Because it will be easier to kill them here.’ Days passed by. We were an abandoned, dying group. Our food ran out quickly. Thankfully some church members answered my call, and agreed to sneak us food after dark. The nights were the worst. We could hear gunfire and screaming in the surrounding hills. Always we thought we were next. Nobody was sleeping. My wife and I lost so much weight. All our friends abandoned us. They pretended not to know us. Only one pastor stood by our side. He came to me one night and warned me that there was a plan to attack the church. I told the news to my wife, and we both agreed that we were ready to die.”(Kigali, Rwanda)

“The next time the killers came, there were fifty of them. All of them had guns or machetes. They pushed straight past me and entered the pastor’s residence. They began pulling people out of the ceiling. They were kicking us and dragging us along the floor. I knew this was the end. I could see our death clearly. Some people were shivering and wailing and screaming for mercy. Others were completely silent. They’d already lost so many loved ones and they were ready to die themselves. We were dragged to this very spot and put in three lines. We began to say our last prayers. I scanned the mob of killers for recognizable faces. Many of them were Christians. Some were even from my congregation. Every time I recognized a face, I called to him by name. I said: ‘When I die, I am going to heaven. Where will you go?’ Then I pointed to the next man, and asked him the same question. Then the next. Then the next. Some of the killers grew nervous. They began to argue amongst themselves. Nobody wanted to be the first to kill. Soon they were threatening to shoot each other. And they began to leave, one by one, until all of them had run off.” (Kigali, Rwanda)

(4/4) “We didn’t lose a single person. After hiding out for three weeks, we were rescued by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Everyone came running in from the fields. All of us were cheering.

In the end, over three hundred people survived the genocide by hiding in this church. I can't remember all their faces. Life has taken us to many different corners. And some of them have left the country to begin new lives. But many of them still call me father. I've given away the bride in several different wedding ceremonies. Occasionally people will randomly show up on my doorstep with drinks. I'll say to them: 'You were with us in the church, weren't you?' And we'll embrace. When I look back, I believe the genocide could have been stopped if more pastors had taken a stand. We were the ones with influence. The killers belonged to our congregations. And we could have held them back. But instead we did nothing. And every pastor had a different excuse. Some said they didn't know things would get so bad. Some said they were too afraid. And some said the government was too powerful to oppose. But when you're standing aside while people die, every excuse is a lame one." (Kigali, Rwanda)