- **Proclaiming the Gospel Through Education, Health, and Development**

The Kinyaga Conference of the Free Methodist Church in Rwanda (EMLR) takes a holistic approach to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ through education, health, and development. In 1942, missionaries Frank and Hazel Adamson established the first Free Methodist mission at Kibogora, laying the foundation for spreading the Gospel in the region and sparking a powerful revival with thousands of conversions as part of the larger East Africa Revival movement.

The first parish created by the missionaries later became the seat of the Kinyaga Conference of the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda, covering south-western Rwanda. Recognizing that spiritual transformation must be accompanied by care for the physical and social well-being of the community, the mission quickly expanded its focus. An elementary school and medical services were established, followed by the creation of a Bible school to nurture future church leaders at Kibogora.

Pastor Celestin Habiyambere, Superintendent of the Kinyaga Conference of the EMLR

Pastor Celestin Habiyambere, Superintendent of the Kinyaga Conference of the EMLR, emphasizes that true Christian mission goes beyond spiritual teaching. While proclaiming the Gospel remains at the heart of the church’s mission, it’s important to address the pressing needs of communities by combating illiteracy, disease, and poverty.

To achieve this vision of holistic transformation, EMLR has strategically focused on five key areas: evangelism, education, healthcare, economic development, and humanitarian activities. Through these efforts, the church continues to empower Rwandans, helping them improve their socioeconomic conditions and build a brighter future.

The foundation laid by planting a church in Kamembe in 1982 marked the growth of Kinyaga Conference, reflecting the success of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the church’s core mission. The conference has a presence in all sectors of Rusizi District and five sectors of Nyamasheke District – Karengera, Ruharambuga, Nyabitekere, Bushenge, and Shangi. Kinyaga Conference has 19 parishes, 97 local churches, and the churches have at least 460 groups.

Pastor Habiyambere explains that alongside the main pillar of evangelism, education has taken precedence in Kinyaga Conference as it is essential for spreading the gospel effectively.

Exemplifying the role of the Church in community development

Since its early days, the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda has played a significant role in community development. They constructed a school and clinic in Kibogora, marking their commitment to development.

Currently, the Kinyaga Conference operates 37 nursery schools, either within its primary school premises or at church premises. Additionally, there are 12 primary schools and 6 secondary schools in different areas.

The church collaborates with the government to expand access to education, working on infrastructure development, provision of teachers, and instructional materials. Pastor Habiyambere appreciates the Rwandan government for its unwavering support in the education sector.

In response to the need for higher education in the country's southwestern region, the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda, in collaboration with parents, founded Kibogora Polytechnic. This university has provided a local alternative for students who once had to travel long distances or cross into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for higher education. The Rusizi town campus, a branch of Kibogora Polytechnic, now attracts thousands of students and aims to increase access to university education for all Rwandans and regional students, not just Christians.

Josue Michel Ntaganira, the Principal of Kibogora Polytechnic Rusizi Campus, underlines that the campus was established based on the vision of His Excellency Paul Kagame and the country's strategic direction to turn the country into a knowledge- based economy. The university welcomes students from across the country and neighboring countries, mainly Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Josue Michel Ntaganira, the Principal of Kibogora Polytechnic Rusizi Campus

In addition to formal education, Kinyaga Conference has invested in adult education

programs aimed at improving literacy among adults. These classes, taught by qualified instructors, are held in church premises. Beneficiaries receive certificates upon completing the short courses.

Pastor Habiyambere notes, “We have qualified teachers, relevant modules, and facilities. Our adult education programs ensure that participants leave with both knowledge and certification.” Education at church- owned schools ensures that preaching the Gospel remains central where spiritual development is integrated into the educational experience.

Extending Healthcare access to the community

The Free Methodist Church of Rwanda believes that access to healthcare is essential for nurturing a well-rounded individual. In line with its mission to promote healthy living among its followers and the broader Rwandan population, the church has established several health facilities and launched awareness programs focused on disease prevention and nutrition.

Through a collaborative partnership with the government, Kinyaga Conference helped establish and now manages two health centers located in Ruharambuga and Gikundamvura, along with two health posts. Committed to enhancing healthcare access, the Conference intends to sustain and expand its support in the areas where it operates.

The role of the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda in the development of the country has increased over the last 30 years following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and the liberation of the country.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the Kinyaga Conference was still young and was equally ravaged, but managed to mobilize itself and support its community to rebuild in close collaboration with the government.

Seeing the plight of many due to lack of access to medical care, pastors from Kinyaga Conference used wood from the Church forest, their own labour and personal meager resources in 1995 to build the Ruharambuga health post, which would later be upgraded to a health center.

“After the genocide, there was no access to healthcare, yet many people were in

dire need of medical help. As pastors who cared for our people, we had to intervene to build a shelter with our bare hands and contribute any financial assistance to make sure we have somewhere where people could receive medical help," observes Pastor Habiyambere.

The efforts of the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda to enhance healthcare included training medical practitioners at the Nursing Institute.

Kinyaga Conference supports training programs aimed at fostering a culture of health within the communities they serve. The trainings emphasize proper hand hygiene, the importance of balanced diets, and the link between healthy eating and disease prevention.

The church's efforts in promoting hygiene and sanitation cascade from leadership down to local congregations and Christian fellowship groups in the villages, creating widespread awareness.

The Kinyaga Conference has been addressing various challenges faced by the local population, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of shelter, and food insecurity. In response to these issues, the Church has actively promoted savings groups within its communities. As these groups grew financially, members were encouraged to form a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO).

The SACCO allows all residents, both Christians and the general public, to access loans and improve their financial standing. This initiative has greatly enhanced financial inclusion, helping members meet everyday needs such as paying school fees, accessing health insurance, and purchasing household items.

To combat food insecurity and poor harvests, EMLR mobilized its members to launch an agriculture project focused on organic farming. The initiative promotes the use of liquid organic fertilizers, an affordable and effective alternative to industrial fertilizers. By applying these locally produced fertilizers, farmers have seen significant increases in crop productivity, promoting sustainable agriculture.

Despite these successes, Pastor Habiyambere acknowledges that progress varies across individuals. Some Christians and residents are still struggling, with some lacking basic needs such as access to healthcare, education, or housing. The principle is to ensure that no one is left behind.

In collaboration with local authorities, the church supports the most vulnerable residents in the community by paying for their health insurance and building houses for them. Local leaders, from village to district level, play a critical role in selecting deserving beneficiaries for these programs.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Kinyaga Conference performed humanitarian activities by distributing food to vulnerable households.

The Kinyaga Conference of the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda encourages residents to explore alternative economic activities beyond farming due to limited land resources.

The role of the Free Methodist Church of Rwanda is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ through a holistic approach. This is to ensure sustainable development of communities where people are fed spiritually, physically, and socially.