

# THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF RWANDA'S FAMILY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS AFTER THE 1994 RWANDAN GENOCIDE

<sup>1</sup>Mukundane Robert, <sup>2</sup>Lukonge Modestus, <sup>3</sup>Lechion Kimilike

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Master's Student, Mission and Community Development, University of Iringa

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**Abstract:** The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda left over one million people dead and dismantled family and community structures across the nation. In response, the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) emerged as a key factor in national healing and reconstruction through its holistic family empowerment programs. Guided by empowerment theory, this study employed qualitative methods including interviews, focus group discussions and observations across selected parishes to explore how LCR's initiatives contributed to restoring dignity, hope and resilience among genocide-affected families. Findings reveal that LCR implemented integrated programs in trauma healing and reconciliation, spiritual and moral renewal, education and child support, youth mentorship, savings and credit cooperatives, agricultural projects, vocational training and housing reconstruction. These interventions addressed survivors' psychological, social and economic needs, transforming them from dependence to self-reliance and strengthening family and community cohesion. The study concludes that faith-based family empowerment, when aligned with national recovery policies, offers a vital pathway toward sustainable post-conflict transformation, to address persistent youth unemployment, the LCR should broaden its vocational training initiatives and establish entrepreneurship hubs that promote innovation and self-reliance and there is a need to continue investment in trauma healing and counselling is essential, especially for younger generations affected indirectly by genocide trauma.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, genocide, trauma, healing, reconciliation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Rwandan genocide of 1994, one of the most horrific mass atrocities in modern history, left a profound imprint on the social, spiritual and economic fabric of Rwanda. Within 100 days, an estimated 1,000,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally murdered (Clark & Kaufman, 2016). Genocide did not affect only Tutsi families, although they were the main targets. While the genocide was primarily aimed at exterminating the Tutsi ethnic group (that reason it is called The Rwandan Tutsi genocide), many moderate Hutus who opposed the killings or refused to participate were also murdered (Straus, 2006).

The international community largely failed to intervene effectively during the genocide. Despite warnings and reports of mass killings, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) had its mandate reduced at the height of the crisis (Power, 2002). The genocide ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group led by Paul Kagame, took control of the country in July 1994, restoring order and halting the killings (Prunier, 1995). The 1994 Rwandan Tutsi genocide killed over 1,000,000 people; destroyed family structures and livelihoods, survivors left with trauma, profound social and economic scars on the Rwandan population (Clark & Kaufman, 2016; de Vries, 2020).

According to Clark (2010), the aftermath of the genocide left Rwanda devastated socially, economically and psychologically. Millions were displaced, families were destroyed and the nation faced the immense task of rebuilding unity and justice through initiatives such as the *Gacaca* community courts and national reconciliation programs (Clark, 2010).

Survivors were left grappling with deep trauma, broken family structures, displacement and poverty. In such a context, rebuilding families and communities required not only government-led interventions but also grassroots, faith-based approaches that addressed the holistic needs of survivors.

The Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR), established shortly after the genocide, positioned itself as a key factor in healing, reconciliation and empowerment. Its programs have sought to restore dignity, rebuild livelihoods and instil hope in families traumatized by loss. Yet, despite its notable role, little academic research has comprehensively documented or analyzed LCR's family empowerment programs. This article addresses that gap by examining the key programs initiated by the LCR, exploring how they contributed to restoring broken family and community structures.

The article is guided by Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1987), which emphasizes the process of enabling individuals and communities to gain control over their lives. Using this lens, the study explores how LCR's interventions empowered survivors psychologically, socially and economically, allowing them to transition from dependency to resilience.

**Empowerment:** Empowerment refers to the process of enabling individuals or groups to gain control over their lives, make strategic life choices and influence the decisions that affect them. It involves increasing self-confidence, access to resources and participation in social, political and economic spheres (Zimmerman, 2000). In community contexts, empowerment is both a personal and collective process that enhances people's capacity to act for social change (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

**Genocide:** Genocide is defined as the deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group (United Nations, 1948). It is considered one of the gravest crimes against humanity, involving mass killings, forced displacement and cultural eradication (Staub, 2011). Genocide leaves profound social and psychological impacts that extend across generations. Genocide in this article used to explain 1994 Rwandan Tutsi genocide.

**Trauma:** Trauma refers to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, often resulting from exposure to violence, loss, or life-threatening events (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). In the context of genocide, trauma can be both individual and collective, affecting survivors' emotional well-being, social relations and even the identity of communities (Herman, 1992). In article the word used to explain deeply distressing or disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, often resulting 1994 Rwandan Tutsi genocide.

**Healing:** Healing is the process of recovery from emotional, psychological, or physical pain resulting from trauma or conflict. It involves restoring well-being, dignity and balance to individuals and communities (Herman, 1992). In post-genocide contexts, healing can be supported through truth-telling, counselling, memorialization and community support networks (Pham, Vinck, & Stover, 2009). In this research healing used to explain the process of recovering emotional, psychological, or physical pain resulting from trauma or conflict Rwandan people after 1994 genocide.

**Reconciliation:** Reconciliation refers to the process of rebuilding relationships and trust between former adversaries after conflict or violence. It involves truth, forgiveness, justice and the rebuilding of social bonds (Lederach, 1997). True reconciliation goes beyond coexistence it seeks transformation and restoration of relationships within individuals and communities (Bloomfield, Barnes, & Huyse, 2003). In this research reconciliation used to explain rebuilding the relationship of Rwandan community after 1994 Rwandan genocide.

## 2. EMPOWERMENT THEORY AND FAMILY RECOVERY

Empowerment theory provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing how individuals and communities gain control over their lives, acquire resources and exercise agency (Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment is both a process and an outcome it involves capacity building, access to opportunities and the psychological transformation that allows people to believe in their ability to act (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

In family contexts, empowerment entails the restoration of social and emotional stability, self-reliance and relational healing (Narayan, 2002). After traumatic events like genocide, families experience disempowerment through loss, displacement and poverty. Faith-based approaches to empowerment often address these deficits holistically combining spiritual, emotional and economic dimensions. Churches create spaces where survivors rediscover meaning, dignity and collective identity, thereby transforming trauma into resilience (Mutabaruka & Le Roux, 2021).

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in the Rwandan context, where genocide eroded social capital and trust. The Lutheran Church of Rwanda's programs ranging from trauma counselling to economic empowerment reflect empowerment's three levels: psychological (inner healing), social (community rebuilding) and economic (livelihood restoration).

### 3. THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN POST-CONFLICT RECOVERY

The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Post-Conflict Recovery Faith-based organizations (FBOs) have emerged as key agents in humanitarian relief, reconciliation and community rebuilding in post-conflict societies. Their legitimacy is rooted in their spiritual mandate and close connection to local populations, allowing them to respond effectively to both material and psychosocial needs (Haynes, 2017). According to Adogame (2017), churches in Africa have gone beyond evangelization to become actors in development, addressing issues such as poverty, trauma and moral reconstruction. Following genocides, wars, or civil conflicts, FBOs often step in where state systems are fragile, offering both spiritual and material resources. Their legitimacy within communities makes them unique agents of transformation (Cornwall, 2016).

In Rwanda, FBOs have played a vital role in national healing processes following the 1994 genocide. Churches, including Catholic, Anglican and Protestant denominations, have facilitated trauma healing workshops, reconciliation seminars and socioeconomic initiatives that rebuild community trust (Droz, 2007; Mutabaruka & Le Roux, 2021). These organizations often complement government efforts by focusing on grassroots empowerment where formal structures are weak. Cornwall (2016) emphasizes that empowerment through faith-based development must integrate spiritual transformation with social action to produce sustainable change.

However, despite their extensive involvement, FBOs in Rwanda have faced criticism for their historical complicity during the genocide, which has pushed them toward accountability and genuine reconciliation work post-1994 (Hinton, 2002). The Lutheran Church of Rwanda, founded after the genocide, represents a new faith institution shaped entirely by the context of recovery and renewal. Its emergence provides a case study in how FBOs can model restorative approaches that blend theology and development in a post-conflict nation.

### 4. CHURCHES AND FAMILY EMPOWERMENT IN RWANDA

Post-genocide Rwanda has seen churches take leadership in addressing trauma and promoting reconciliation. The Gacaca courts, although state-led, often worked alongside faith communities that provided moral and emotional guidance to participants (Clark, 2010). Churches established peacebuilding committees, trauma healing groups and savings associations that supported widows, orphans and ex-prisoners (Uwineza, 2022).

Empirical studies show that faith-based initiatives enhance family stability by integrating moral education, livelihood training and community participation (Droz, 2007). However, the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR), though less documented academically, has pursued family-centered strategies such as vocational training, cooperative development and youth mentorship. These programs mirror other African Lutheran models, such as those in Tanzania and Uganda, which link gospel teaching with socioeconomic empowerment (Adogame, 2017).

Such LCR's interventions resonate with broader trends in faith-based development, while also reflecting unique post-genocide dynamics specifically, the integration of trauma healing, moral reconstruction and livelihood restoration within family empowerment programs.

### 5. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, relying on case studies from eight LCR congregations (Matimba, Bugaragara, Kayonza, Kirehe, Rukira, Gasarabwayi, Rwanteru and Kigali). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with LCR leaders, survivors and local officials; focus group discussions (FGDs) with widows, youth and orphans; and observations of schools, savings groups, agricultural projects and reconstructed homes.

A snowballing sampling technique was to selected representation across different congregations and categories of beneficiaries. Thematic analysis was used to interpret findings, aligning them with empowerment theory and existing literature.

## 6. FAMILY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS INITIATED BY LCR

The findings from interviews, focus group discussions and observations reveal that the LCR introduced a range of programs that addressed both the psychological trauma and socio-economic challenges faced by families. These included trauma healing and reconciliation programs, spiritual and moral renewal, education and child support, youth programs, savings and credit cooperatives, agricultural interventions, vocational training and housing reconstruction.

The interview excerpts highlight the multi-dimensional role of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) in family empowerment after the 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide. Several initiatives were identified: Provision of scholarships to orphans and vulnerable shows LCR's investment in long-term empowerment through human capital development. Construction of primary schools addresses both immediate and future needs of the community, ensuring sustainable access to education. Programs in welding and sewing enabled beneficiaries to acquire practical skills, contributing to self-reliance and reducing dependence on aid. Distribution of agricultural materials and livestock targeted the rebuilding of rural economies, promoting resilience and food sustainability for affected families. Building houses for homeless families addressed one of the most pressing post-genocide needs, restoring dignity and stability to displaced survivors. Pastoral training to counsel and walk alongside traumatized survivors' shows that LCR recognized healing as not only material but also emotional and spiritual.

On respondent A, who is the a member of staff in the LCR summarized the initiatives initiated by LCR to empower families after 1994 Rwandan Tutsi genocide in this way;

LCR initiated many programs to empower families after 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide helping orphans to study by providing scholarships, vocational training (such as welding and sewing), agricultural materials and livestock. The church also built primary schools, constructed houses for homeless families and trained pastors to support traumatized survivors. (Interview with A, Kigali, August 2025).

### 6.1 TRAUMA HEALING AND RECONCILIATION PROGRAMS

One of the earliest interventions of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) after the genocide was the establishment of trauma healing and reconciliation programs. These included seminars, fellowships and workshops designed to help survivors' process grief, restore emotional stability and rebuild trust within communities. All participants from group discussion and individual discussion testified how LCR helped Rwandan families for healing and reconciliation.

The respondent B explained as follow;

I remember we were being called by church leaders to different seminars about trauma healing and reconciliation. It helped us so much. Now there is no longer discrimination based on tribes or places of origin, as was common before. We are now living together in peace. (Interview with B, Matimba, August 2025).

Another respondent C, also testified how trauma healing programme changed her life as follows;

I lived in fear, angry and isolated. But through LCR's prayers, teachings and support, I forgave everyone. Now I live happily with my neighbours. (Interview with C, Bugaragara, August 2025).

Another respondent genocide who is a genocide survivor also testified how her life was and how she is now because of trauma healing programme she said;

I was living with fear, angry with people, no happiness, I used to ask myself "why am still living, isolating myself, no sense of living"; but LCR church prayers, pastor visiting me many times, encouraging me, comforting me, even supporting in my basic needs, I'm now free, I forgave but all people, I'm happy. (Interview with D, Rukira on 23 August 2025)

Furthermore, the testimonies underscore the broader impact of LCR's ministry in rebuilding social trust and strengthening unity among survivors and their neighbours. By enabling individuals to forgive and live harmoniously with others, the church contributed not only to personal healing but also to community reconciliation and social cohesion. This finding suggests that LCR's initiatives went beyond material support and played a critical role in addressing the psychological and spiritual dimensions of post-genocide recovery

### 6.2 SPIRITUAL AND MORAL RENEWAL PROGRAMS

Beyond trauma healing, the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) placed a strong emphasis on spiritual and moral renewal as a pathway to both personal and national healing. Through sermons, Bible study groups, Sunday school and youth

fellowships, the church promoted values of forgiveness, love, unity and compassion countering the hatred and division that had fuelled the genocide.

Respondent E, testified how spiritual and moral renewal programs restored love in her life and give her freedom as follows;

I didn't love to come to church or read the Bible. I was isolated, with no happiness or interaction with others. But when LCR opened a church in our area, they taught us to love God and our neighbour. Now I feel joy, I love God and my community and I read the Bible most of the time. (Interview with E, Matimba- Ntoma, August 2025).

Also another respondent F, explained the work of spiritual and moral renewal initiated by LCR and how it helped the people know God and live in peace and harmony as follows;

LCR preaches the word of God, in the Church, house to house and pastoral counselling, this help people to know God and live in peace and harmony. (Interview with F, Bugaragara August 2025). And this testimony aligns with all other participants from all eight parishes.

### 6.3 EDUCATION AND CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Education emerged as one of the most impactful areas where the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) supported family empowerment. After the genocide, many children were orphaned or came from families too impoverished to afford school fees. The LCR responded by establishing schools, offering scholarships and providing school materials to vulnerable children. These initiatives not only restored access to education but also gave hope to families whose futures seemed uncertain.

The Respondent G, a widow explained how LCR education and child support programs helped her children's studies as follows;

After my husband died, I remained with children and I couldn't pay school fees. The church paid for them and now they have completed their studies. (Interview with G, Matimba, August 2025).

Similarly, Respondent H, testified how LCR education and child support programs helped him and his son's studies as follows;

I'm a product of LCR. It trained me and ordained me as a pastor and even gave a scholarship to my son, who has now graduated and is employed at a bank. Our family life has changed economically because of LCR. (Interview with H, August 2025).

Another respondent I, applicate the LCR education and child support programs by saying;

I thank LCR to support the studies of my daughter, she is now graduated and able to be employed, for me I was ready stuck but the church helped for her to continue her study. We are now have hope of life. (Interview with I, Matimba-Ntoma August 2025)

Other respondent like J and K confirmed how LCR offered them scholarship through LCR education and child support programs. They said;

LCR offered me scholarship when my family was already failed to pay for my university studies, now graduated University and I'm employed (Interview with J & K, on phone August 2025).

These testimonies are supported by field observations of LCR-established schools such as Rwanteru, Bugaragara, Rukira and Bwera Primary Schools and graduates received scholarship by LCR. By investing in education infrastructure like building schools and scholarships, the LCR directly reduced barriers for orphans and vulnerable children, allowing them to access not only formal education but also psychosocial stability.

It visually confirms that the Church's support went beyond short-term aid to produce tangible outcomes educated individuals who contribute to Rwanda's development. It highlights sustainability and intergenerational empowerment through education.

#### 6.4 YOUTH PROGRAMS

The Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) invested heavily in youth-focused initiatives, recognizing that young people were among the most vulnerable groups after the genocide. Many were orphaned, traumatized, or left without direction, yet they represented the generation that would determine Rwanda's future. LCR therefore established youth fellowships, vocational projects, mentorship programs and moral formation activities to instil values of peace, unity and responsible citizenship.

In the focus group discussion FGD 1, the respondents shared how youth programs help youth to responsible citizens one of participants said; "my son studied welding at the Kirehe youth welding project. He now makes windows, doors and gates in the community. From that work, he earns money and supports himself." (FGD 1, Matimba –Ntoma August 2025).

#### 6.5 SAVINGS AND CREDIT COOPERATIVES PROGRAMS

In addition to education and youth initiatives, the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) implemented savings and credit programs as a means of strengthening family economic empowerment. These programs were primarily organized through cooperatives and small savings groups, enabling vulnerable families especially widows and orphans to gain access to financial resources and build sustainable livelihoods.

The respondents from FGD 2, testified to the transformative impact of these initiatives and one group member in Bugaragara congregation as they were discussing how Savings and Credit Cooperatives programs transformed their life economically they testified that; the church gave us 5 million Rwandan francs, but now we have more than 25 million. Every family has changed economically through this support. (FGD 2, Bugaragara, August 2025).

#### 6.6 AGRICULTURAL PROGRAMMES

Lutheran Church of Rwanda initiated various livelihood recovery programs. The Church distributed farming tools, seeds and livestock to families whose agricultural livelihoods had been disrupted. These programs boosted the economic status of families. The researcher observed the documents of LCR in different parishes and field observation and revealed what the LCR staff said was true

To restore rural livelihoods, the LCR distributed cows, goats, seeds and farm tools. Families reported that livestock provided milk, manure and income through sales. The researcher viewed project's document and observed photo distributing cows to beneficiaries and these documents confirmed by field study.

Respondent L, shared how agricultural programmes initiated by LCR provided her a cow which became the source of her life to change. She said;

The church gave me a cow. I sold one of its calves and bought land where I now grow maize and beans. My family is healthier and more stable. (Interview with L, Matimba Ntoma, August 2025).

#### 6.7 VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

The Lutheran Church of Rwanda established vocational centers offering courses in, carpentry, tailoring. Here we can say Kirehe youth welding project, Gasarabwayi and Munini tailoring projects. These programs targeted youth and single mothers, groups most affected by unemployment and marginalization. Graduates became self-employed or contributed to local construction projects.

Respondent M, a local leader confirmed the contribution of LCR to the youth of Kirehe through its vocational training programs. She said;

Many youths who had dropped out of school were trained in welding and tailoring by the church. They now sustain themselves and their families (Interview M, Kirehe Sector Social Affairs Officer August 2025).

Also the respondents in FGD I, witnessed how church helped their through vocational training. They said;

Some of our youth who studied at Kirehe youth welding project are ones who make the windows, doors, gates of our houses, even there one who made the windows and doors of this church you are seeing (Interview with FGD I, Matimba-Ntoma August 2025)

The researcher also viewed the documents of the vocational training observed photo youth in sewing training at Kirehe where the LCR train youth and single mothers.

## 6.8 HOUSING RECONSTRUCTION

Lutheran Church of Rwanda also played a role in housing reconstruction. The mobilized volunteers and external support to build or repair homes for families who had lost their shelter during the genocide. This material support was often accompanied by other basic needs like food, mattresses and other home materials.

Respondent N, who benefited the LCR housing reconstruction programme testified with happiness and joy by saying:

My house was almost to fall down, it was very old and I had no capacity to repair it or building the new one, but LCR build me a new house, I'm now safe and happy with my family (Interview with N, Rwanteru, August 2025).

The same way respondent O, a widow share her happiness and peace due to the LCR housing reconstruction programme. She said;

I had no house after my husband died. The church built one for me and my children. Now we live in peace. (Interview with O, Bugaragara, August 2025).

The findings reveal that LCR adopted a holistic empowerment approach that integrated education, economic development, housing and psychosocial support. This strategy was essential in a post-genocide context where families were not only economically vulnerable but also socially and emotionally broken. The emphasis on orphans' education suggests a recognition that the future of Rwanda depended on rebuilding the younger generation. Vocational skills and agricultural support reflect practical strategies to reduce poverty, rebuild livelihoods and prevent long-term dependency on humanitarian aid. The focus on housing addressed a basic human right, contributing to stability, safety and family cohesion. By training pastors, LCR linked material support with emotional and spiritual healing, crucial in a society struggling with trauma, mistrust and reconciliation.

In essence, these initiatives demonstrate that LCR went beyond charity to empower families for self-reliance, resilience and dignity. The church acted as both a provider of material aid and a catalyst of social healing, aligning with the broader national agenda of reconstruction and reconciliation.

## 7. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATION OF EMPOWERMENT INTERVENTIONS

From a theological perspective, LCR's family empowerment embodies a missional approach expressing faith through service and justice. This reflects the biblical notion of diakonia, meaning ministry through compassion and empowerment (Adogame, 2017). In the post-genocide context, this theology becomes incarnational, God's love is demonstrated through the restoration of broken families and communities. Thus, LCR's work affirms that faith-based recovery efforts can be both spiritually grounded and developmentally effective.

### 7.1 INTEGRATION WITH NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY

Finally, the LCR's empowerment programs complement Rwanda's national policies on unity, reconciliation and poverty reduction. The Church's initiatives align with the Vision 2050 framework and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1), both emphasizing social inclusion and community resilience (Government of Rwanda, 2017). Faith-based organizations like LCR serve as local partners that implement these policies at the grassroots, translating national objectives into lived community realities.

## 8. CONCLUDING REMAK

In this article we have demonstrated with data, that the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR) has played a pivotal role in post-genocide reconstruction through its holistic approach to family empowerment. Grounded in the principles of empowerment theory, LCR's programs addressed the spiritual, psychological, social and economic dimensions of recovery. The Church's initiatives in trauma healing, reconciliation, education, youth mentorship, agricultural projects, savings and credit cooperatives, vocational training and housing reconstruction restored dignity and hope among survivors.

The findings demonstrate that the LCR not only met immediate humanitarian needs but also laid the foundation for long-term resilience and sustainability. By integrating moral renewal with material empowerment, the Church transformed survivors from passive recipients of aid into active agents of change. This integration contributed significantly to national unity, reconciliation and development. Theologically, LCR's interventions reflected a practical expression of Christian mission embodying faith through service, compassion and justice. The evaluation in this study points to a commendable contribution by the LCR in restoring survivors of the Rwandan genocide into a life with dignity.

Ultimately, the LCR's post-genocide family empowerment programs illustrate how faith-based organizations can complement state efforts in rebuilding social cohesion, strengthening family structures and promoting sustainable peace and development in post-conflict contexts.

Within the preceding finding it is the LCR should continue partnering with government institutions and development organizations, so that future activities are in line with the vision and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1). This will ensure possibilities for greater policy coherence and resource mobilization.

Also in order to address persistent youth unemployment, the LCR should broaden its vocational training initiatives and establish entrepreneurship hubs that promote innovation and self-reliance.

In addition there is a need to continue investment in trauma healing and counselling is essential, especially for younger generations affected indirectly by genocide trauma. Training more pastors and lay counsellors who would ensure sustainability.

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