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Former ADRA director speaks on social consciousness

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Jason Lemmon

Carl Wilkens was the only American to remain in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide; however, he was quick to point out that he couldn't have done it without an immense amount of help and support from his Rwandan friends.

Former ADRA director speaks on social consciousness

Andrews University held its first Summit on Social Consciousness from April 11 to 14. The theme for the Summit was "Lessons from Rwanda." Carl Wilkens, a former Adventist Development and Relief Agency director in Rwanda, was the keynote speaker. Organizers hoped to bring awareness to injustice in the world and seek healing and reconciliation through the Summit. The event included a prayer meeting with testimonies from survivors of the Rwanda genocide, a film showing an interview with Carl Wilkens and his wife, Teresa, and breakout sessions.

Wilkens was the only American to remain in Rwanda during the genocide. He lived in Rwanda from 1990–1996, with his wife and three children, and built schools and operated clinics. When the genocide began, Wilkens and his wife made the decision for him

to stay behind, alone, to try to protect the two young Tutsis who worked for them. During the genocide, Wilkens worked to bring food, water and medicine to stranded people around the city of Kigali, Rwanda.

In his keynote address on April 14, Wilkens recounted some of his experiences in Rwanda. An estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed during the 1994 genocide, which erupted between the ethnic majority Hutus and the ethnic minority Tutsis. He emphasized the importance of telling these stories because he believes that stories move people to service, which can ultimately change the world. His address included a particular call to action in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which had 300,000 members in Rwanda in 1994. "We need to talk about these things and consider how our infrastructure responds to these situations," he said, pointing out the need to learn from Rwanda to better prepare for similar situations in the future.

In spite of all the violence, Wilkens chose to look beyond the genocide. "Rwanda is so much larger than that three-month window of genocide," he said, describing the strong sense of love and community he saw in the Rwandan people. "Our losses and our sorrows do not dominate our lives. We have this hope that we will be together again one day." An offering was collected at the end of the service for Life Lifting Hands, a nonprofit organization that provides education to orphans and donates cows to poor families in Rwanda. The Summit concluded that evening with a concert by the Girls of Mercy.

On the final day of the Summit, university leaders and pastors made a statement about the genocide and led the congregation in a litany. "This Summit was a fitting gesture of affirmation and support from our University community to them," said Christon Arthur, dean of the School of Graduate Studies & Research and one of the main coordinators of the event. A large number of Rwandans live in southwest Michigan, and several were in attendance at the Summit. "By reflecting on their tragic loss, we affirmed their humanity and dignity, condemned the atrocity, and acknowledged their pain," he explained.

Wilkens' book, *I'm Not Leaving*, is based on records of his daily experiences during that period. He was featured in Frontline's "Ghosts of Rwanda" and the American Radio Works documentary, "The Few Who Stayed: Defying the Genocide." For his efforts, Wilkens was awarded the Dignitas Humana Award from St. John's School of Theology Seminary and the 2005 Medal of Valor from the Simon Wiesenthal Center. He is the co-founder of the nonprofit educational and professional development organization, World Outside My Shoes, and now works full time giving lectures on his experiences in Rwanda.

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