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HOW ONE YOUNG KENYAN HELPS HEAL HER DIVIDED COUNTRY

Stellamaris Mulaeh organizes dialogues and service projects as alternatives to violence.

By Jill Carroll | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor
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WASHINGTON - Kenya's political rivals announced a power-sharing government over the weekend, a move toward ending their battle for control that violently divided the country after a disputed Dec. 27 presidential election.

But healing the divisions among average Kenyans, hardened by months of violence that killed more than 1,200 and displaced 500,000 since the vote, is a tougher challenge – one that has become the focus of young Stellamaris Mulaeh's life.

"While the leaders are singing reconciliation, at the grass-roots level ... if you ask people 'What tribe are you from?' people will not tell you," says Ms. Mulaeh, a Kenyan conflict resolution activist visiting the United States this week as part of a fundraising summit for the Women, Faith, and Development Alliance.

It is up to people like her, she says, to help ease ethnic tensions triggered after President Mwai Kibaki and opposition candidate Raila Odinga each claimed victory in the vote.

Unwittingly, she started laying groundwork to help heal Kenya's divisions in 2003, long before the current crisis began.

That's when she headed to Maseno University to study economics, but got an education in conflict resolution the hard way. To air grievances about school policies, students at her public university would smash cars, hijack public buses, and beat up people in passing vehicles.

The violence so disturbed her that when an international Roman Catholic group, Pax Romana, offered a conflict-resolution training course on campus, she signed up. The class motivated her to start a movement of student "peace builders."

What began as a group of five people mushroomed into the 65-member Peace Working Committee of Maseno University, which continues to train youths in conflict resolution. They hold round-table discussions with administrators and students to talk through complaints, an alternative to violence. They do public-service projects to regain the trust of local communities.

Mulaeh eventually became Pax Romana's national coordinator for peace-building in Kenya and then became a mentor to youths in Nairobi's infamous Kibera slum. Later, she would take on several positions with the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP).

The positions connected her to a wide network of religious and youth leaders across Kenya, which would prove vital as the country began to come apart this year.

As violence from the contested election swept across the country after December's elections, "I cried because I couldn't believe this is my country," she says. "Youth were killing. Youth were raping. Youth were destroying property and I felt I needed to do something," she says.

Mulaeh's various roles as a youth leader "came to a dramatic test in the recent events in Kenya," says William Vendley, secretary general of the WCRP. "She grasped, as a youth on the scene would, that it was youth from all communities and tribes" involved in the violence, which also made them "extraordinarily positioned to take steps" to halt it.

With "stunning speed of action," they did, adds Mr. Vendley. "So much quicker and more nimble than other actors."

Young people are a key force in driving much of the violence in Kenya, says Jacqueline Klopp, a professor at Columbia University.

But, she notes that youth groups across the country also mobilized to stop it and will be key to preventing it.

"Just because there is an agreement and cabinet now does not mean this hard work on the ground has even started," Ms. Klopp adds. "I think everyone now is saying we have to do so much more and so much faster.... Now everyone is saying we need to invest in youth."

Some of the worst violence occurred in the Kibera slum, a flash point for ethnic clashes. The violence there had kept delivery trucks away; food had run out. So Mulaeh asked friends from her peace-building program for packets of maize flour and wound up with stacks of it.

"Before I left home [to deliver the food], my mother told me, 'Can you write down your will?' " she recalls.

Once in Kibera, youths from the mentoring program helped her unload the food. Mulaeh marveled that their section of the slum was an oasis of peace. After delivering the food, the diverse group gathered to talk. The program leader had urged unity from the first moments of the conflict, setting a tone that had sustained them even as friends died.

"They were sitting around from different communities" and talking about their views at a time when "it was just scandalous to see somebody from another community!" she recalls. "They were a story of hope for me that at least a some young people can choose to behave differently."

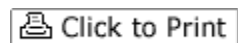
She went on to tap her vast network of contacts to hold a youth meeting to find a way to help the crisis. Six weeks after the elections, curfews were still in place. But some 120 young people turned up. They agreed to provide aid to the hundreds of thousands of displaced people living in camps, and to start a publicity campaign acknowledging the role youths played in the violence and calling for unity. Now she wants to hold a summer conference to promote further reconciliation. "I need to work more because right now the situation is desperate," she says.-

[Editor's note: *The original version misspelled Stellamaris Mulaeh's last name.*]

• *For more information, contact World Conference of Religions for Peace (www.wcrp.org) or Pax Romana (www.paxromana.org).*

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