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# Passport

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## Two meals, two Nairobis

Posted by Kenneth Kaplan March 9, 2008 09:20 PM

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In Kenya, forces that divide, and unite

*Martha Thompson, a resident of Jamaica Plain, is Rights in Humanitarian Crises program manager for the Cambridge-based Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Accompanied by UUSC program director Atema Eclai, she has been visiting Nairobi and Kenya's Western and Nyanza provinces, touring internally displaced persons sites and assessing the humanitarian situation for the UUSC.*

### Sunday, March 9

NAIROBI, Kenya -- We had lunch Saturday in one Nairobi restaurant and dinner in another. The dramatic difference between those experiences seemed to illustrate the almost surreal discrepancy in how the post-election violence, with its tensions and fears, has impacted the lives of different Kenyans in the same city and how they have responded to it.

Dinner was in a lovely Mediterrean restaurant specializing in pasta in a sparkling new shopping complex called Nakumat Junction. We could have been anywhere: people were grabbing lattes, going to the movies, choosing the right wine for dinner, bringing school teams out for a treat after the game.

Lunch was in a traditional style restaurant, with a thatched roof, eating roasted chicken and ugali -- stiff cornmeal porridge (a Kenyan staple) -- with a vibrant group of women volunteers. Full time teachers, and all mothers, they recently have been dedicating every spare minute of their time working to help internally displace persons they find in the camps and their own communities.

Called the Rock Women's Group, they originally banded together as teachers for shared faith and to see what they could do to help get slum children off the streets and into school. They realized many were being sent out to work, which led them to seek to help the children's parents start small businesses so the kids could go to school. First they used their

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own money, then they registered as an organization and began to receive modest aid. They took on specialties; Christine worked with disabled children and mothers, Mary Susan with early childhood education; another was in charge of counseling. The organization worked with between 75 and 200 families at any given time.

When the post-election violence hit their response was immediate. They looked in their neighborhoods for displaced families to help. They went to the IDP camps and arranged for children who were not in school to be put into boarding schools. They rented houses for women who wanted to leave the camps. When landlords refused to rent to women because of their ethnic group, the Rock women, who are multi-ethnic, took the families into their own homes. To expand their reach, the women recruited teenagers to help track down the families they had worked with, sending them to towns and villages to talk to people, see how they were, what help they needed.

These women saw what was happening, and they did not see ethnicity. They saw women and children, mothers, young boys, young girls.

Before we have even finished our lunch, they are outlining what they want to do next: train the youth in reconciliation, bring back families who want to return to their homes, help schoolchildren overcome the anger and fear they have of each other since the violence.

The Rock women's biggest concern, they say, is how to stop the divisions that are deepening in society as people go back to their ancestral homelands, refuse to return to multi-ethnic neighborhoods. In so many cases, it was neighbors and friends who burnt people's houses. Ethnic groups are drawing together for protection and support but they are drawing away from each other, and the wounds from the violence are still so raw. The women worry that unless people begin to talk and begin to forgive, unless people see that aid is distributed fairly, these wounds will deepen, no matter what political agreements are signed on paper.

In the restaurant that evening, which had uncanny echos of a dinner at an upscale suburban mall at home, my first impression was that the most these people had suffered was a shortage of milk or bread. But that was not a good read. Our dinner companion explained that professional friends, teachers, and nurses had decided they could not return to their jobs in security. Friends' children had not returned to schools, fearing their own safety.

Over time, these fears reinforce and harden feelings of ethnic difference. This distillation of identity is as much a threat to Kenya as is the explicit violence, and it is as present under the surface in the trendy restaurants as it is in the schools in the slums.

But while it is growing, so is the strength of Kenyans like the Rock Women's Group. They are lighting a path to something different, the construction of a peace based on the will to see humanity in one another across the smoking ruins left by the violence. Out of all our time in Kenya, from the IDP camps, to wrenching stories muttered by people whose lives had been shattered, to interviews with aid workers, it is those women who shine.

*For more information on the UUSC and its activities, please visit its website at [www.uusc.org](http://www.uusc.org). For information on how you can contribute to the Passport blog, please contact the Globe's assistant foreign editor, Kenneth Kaplan, at [K\\_Kaplan@globe.com](mailto:K_Kaplan@globe.com).*