

Haiti Mission Trip 2013

“Hey, you! Hey, you!” Children’s voices follow our tap-taps as we drive over ‘sleeping policemen’ (monster speed bumps that are the primary means of traffic control on paved roads in Haiti) and turn onto Rue David, the street where we will live for the next 5 days. Rue David is a narrow, dusty lane of giant potholes, teeming with life. Small stores, the size of packing crates, line the way. People of all sizes are everywhere. We pass the gate to the *Doctors without Borders* compound...during the daylight hours there’s always a line waiting for medical care. After sundown, people still wander about...often sitting at makeshift tables lighted by candles...right against the edge of the street. When we turn into the metal gate of Escole Le Chretienne Des Freres Unis, the chaos of daily life outside the compound wall gives way to calm, orderly activity.

At the time of our Saturday arrival, the courtyard is empty and quiet, until the church choir and musicians arrive for one last practice. Sunday morning, beginning as early as 6:00 AM, the compound begins to fill with families coming to worship. Early each weekday morning, children fill the compound. Standing in rows before their teachers, the young students sing, pray, pledge allegiance to their country’s flag, and hear announcements and encouragements from the headmistress, Madame Jacqueline Dorleans. These are the children from the slums that surround the compound. Some are still living in tents or makeshift shelters. Very few have enough of anything. At school they will receive a hearty meal, vitamins, medical care and an education. Because only 20% of school age children



have access to an education in this poor and disaster damaged country, school is a privilege that is not taken lightly. Parents bring the children to school, some walking or riding a bicycle several miles each day. Fathers carry smaller children on their shoulders to keep them out of the dust and mud of Rue David, and wipe their shoes clean before leaving them for the school day. The students must come to school in clean, tidy uniforms. Each wears a backpack with books and assignments. Older children look after their younger siblings. Children, being children, there is noise and laughter and movement, but there is also order and intensity of purpose.

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Inside this compound in Blanchard there is a church, a clinic, the elementary school (pre-k-grade 6), an adult/vocational education program with a computer lab and sewing room and a guesthouse for visiting mission teams like ours. Clean water, through a *Living Waters for the World* purification system, is dispensed each morning to anyone in the neighborhood who brings a container. This is a special place—a place of prayer and promise for people living difficult and complex lives of poverty and want. This is a community center that offers hope for the future and respite from

the stresses of the present. This special place is funded by Haiti Outreach Ministries (HOM), our hosts.

Since its humble beginnings in a Cité Soleil street, HOM has grown to minister in four communities around Port-au-Prince – Cité Soleil, Blanchard, Repatriote and Ibo Beach. Although there have been few improvements in overall Haitian living, HOM has been blessed to be the hands and feet of Christ. Today, HOM continues to grow to meet the spiritual and physical needs of the Haitian people. HOM is immensely grateful for the countless volunteers over the years who have not only gone to Haiti, but those here who have prayed, donated their time and money, and volunteered in so many ways.



www.haitioutreachministries.org

This February mission trip to Haiti was the fourth sponsored by First Presbyterian Church, the first being in October after the January 2010 earthquake that devastated the small island nation. Michael Baron, Mike Crout, Warner McNeilly, Susan Doughty Otto, David Otto, Bruce Ramsden and Mike Sowers joined a group of fourteen from Signal Mountain Presbyterian, which included several doctors, two dentists and two nurses. The medical team spent their days at the Cité Soleil compound, setting up shop in a new clinic, built through an HOM partnership with Samaritan's Purse. (Previous FPC mission teams had worked on this project and it was good to see it in use on this visit!) The rest of the group did construction work at the Repatriote compound, where the church was toppled by the quake. Repatriote is a community in the Menelaus area outside Port-au-Prince. When the Dominican Republic began to expel Haitian refugees in 2004 it was set aside as a place where they could find affordable land for homes. Much of this land was swamp and had been previously used as a garbage dump. Extra effort and expense are required to build on the site, but as is often the case, this place is where the people with great need live. The reconstructed church and a new school are growing on this unlikely ground, which first had to be raised to accommodate the weight of the buildings. The construction crew spent their time building the caretaker's house inside the compound walls, and preparing the ground to pour concrete foundation for the new church. Working outside, under a blue tropical sky, was certainly a change from the February winter that we left behind in TN.

We arrived in Haiti late Saturday afternoon. Sunday we worshiped at the church in the HOM compound at Cité Soleil, the great slum area of Port-au-Prince. The service started at 7:00 AM and lasted at least 2 hours. There was music, preaching, music, communion, and music. Order is maintained by uniformed ushers—church women with a no-nonsense attitude. The sanctuary was packed with people.

Monday and Tuesday were full work days. In the late afternoon after work on Tuesday, the team visited the HOM church and school at Ibo Beach, a suburb of Port-au-Prince that grew around a concrete factory. This site is not enclosed in a compound. It is a two story building, the church on the second floor and the classrooms on the ground level. There are two school sessions each day because so many students want to attend. The roof was lost to Isaac, the hurricane that lashed the already devastated Haiti in 2012, less than two years after the earthquake. Local residents continue to worship under the twisted rafters and tattered tarps. As a result of this visit our church has made a significant commitment to help



restore the roof. That day we also visited the modest monument that sits on the mass grave that is the last resting place for perhaps two hundred thousand victims of the earthquake. There was no time for counting in the aftermath of the destruction. The bodies had to be removed quickly to protect the health of those who survived. To stand in this place is sad and humbling. In the face of so much suffering, all descriptions are inadequate and all words seem inappropriate. We cannot understand.



On Wednesday the FPC group took a day trip up into the hills above Port-au-Prince to visit an orphanage and community school at Camatin. Both are sponsored by the Poor Children's Assistance Project (PCAP), which was founded by Haitian pastor, Nicolas Louis Juste. Juste was very ill as a young man. In his distress he prayed and promised God that if he were allowed to live, he would serve Him as a minister and that he would help the poor children of Haiti who were sleeping in the streets. He survived his illness and kept his promise. Pastor Nicolas passed away in 2009, but the work of the organization continues. At one time the PCAP had over 20 schools and orphanages scattered about Haiti. Mike Crout has been a supporter and advocate for this organization for many years. The Camatin orphanage is at capacity with 36 children in residence. When we arrived we were surprised to find a pediatrician from Knoxville who was visiting the daughter she and her husband are in the process of adopting. Several of the children from Camatin have been adopted by families in Knoxville and Nashville. It is truly a very small world. We climbed the hill above the orphanage to visit the church and school. FPC helps to pay the salaries of the teachers who teach in the open-air school, which serves the children of the

community as well as the children of the orphanage. We met the pastor and headmaster. He expressed his gratitude to the members of FPC for their generosity. The poverty here is rural, but just as real and encompassing. The orphanage children go 'home' for lunch. The community children do without. There is no money to pay for the meal that the school was once able to provide. The children laugh, the work on the blackboards is challenging and the students are engaged. Youth is hope and the students of Haiti's humble schools must find solutions to her problems. We cannot understand.

Our last workday was Thursday. After work we drove to Wahoo Bay Resort for dinner. This is another Haiti. The mountains walk right down to the sea. There are flowers and sea breezes and the soothing sound of surf against a sandy beach. The restaurant is open and looks out over the bay...the sun sets in a display of brilliant colors. The chaos, odors and incessant noise of Port-au-Prince seem a world away from this serene tropical setting. We have more food for dinner that night than most Haitians in Cité Soleil will see in a week. It is a contrast that dominates thought as we drive through the dark night, back into Port-au-Prince. We cannot understand.



We left Haiti Friday morning. Haiti leaves you with many unanswered questions. It is the story of Job repeated a million times over, except these people have always been poor...long before AIDS had taken its toll...long before the devastating earthquake and hurricane and cholera epidemic compounded their distress. These people have so little to lose, yet they keep losing what little they have over and over again. They've lost sons and daughters, parents, brothers and sisters. They've lost their homes and their possessions. The lives of survivors are complicated by intense communal poverty. There are no reliable government services and violence and crime are rampant. Even the most basic infrastructure is lacking. Some are so poor that they eat sun baked clay patties to fill empty stomachs. But the people we met at church and the children who came into the compound everyday were not impoverished in spirit. There is hope in the laughter of the children. When Haitian adults gather they often sing. Sadness and loss are in the harmonies, but there is also promise because singing is better than sobbing. Songs can be prayers set to music. Haitians sing and their songs travel home with us in our heads and in our hearts. We cannot understand, but we can tell the story. We can pray for our brothers and sisters in Haiti and perhaps help one child at a time.

Written by Susan Doughty Otto