

HAITI MISSION TEAM RETURNS

First, on behalf of our mission team to Haiti, I hope you have had a wonderful Christmas, and wish you a Blessed New Year. Our travels and experiences were varied, exciting, heart-warming, and eye-opening. We all returned to the Christmas rush, and had much to process over the last couple of weeks. Now that we, as individuals, have had the opportunity to come home and tell our stories to our friends and families, I would like to summarize some of the many emotions we felt during our stay in Haiti.

Night had fallen on us before we left the airport, and we were driven via “shortcut” to the guesthouse. This trip took us a little over an hour, although geographically, it wasn’t extremely far away. Our first views of Haiti were those of people everywhere. The streets were crowded with people walking, moving, carrying things in baskets on their heads, people sitting along the sidewalks, leaning against walls. We passed by many tent cities along the way, illuminated only by an occasional glow of embers from fires built to cook over. The smell of charcoal made from a native wood was pungent and permeating. Buildings were greatly distressed with age, and lighting was poor. The roads were paved sporadically, and many were broken apart by potholes and trenches seemingly carved out by rushes of water. A layer of soot covered everything, as though a volcano had erupted only days before, but we soon realized that the soot is a part of the makeup of the land, as charcoal fires are the main source of energy for cooking for hundreds of thousands of people.

We rode in our “paddy wagon,” as we affectionately named it. The potholes and bumps tossed us into each other, and our leaning tower of luggage was held up by Lyle and Kent’s weary arms. Cars and “tap-taps” weaved and jockeyed for position on the road, narrowly missing each other as they moved through tight places like thread through the eye of a needle. We gaped through the cage at the poorly lit streets, and the faces of the people we passed by. In the darkness, it was difficult to see the landscape, or damage from the earthquake. But, the poverty stood out like neon signs. The endless, little dilapidated storefronts were dressed in bright-colored Creole words. And, all I could think of was “painted poverty.” What a message it sends: vibrant, lively colors in a place filled with millions just barely surviving. But, they do, as does their hope and their faith, and their thankfulness to God. They proudly display it everywhere you look: “Merci Jesus” spray-painted on walls, and on decals fixed to windshields. We come with a pile of luggage filled with just a small portion of our belongings, and carry with us more than most of these people own. Yet, they are in a state of gratitude.

Our assignment in Haiti was to help with the repairs being done to the parsonage soon to be occupied by Pastor Jacob and his family. This parsonage is located in Carrefour, a town

described as a “rough area.” After our hour long drive to the guesthouse from the airport, it was hard to imagine that there was a rougher area. We set out Tuesday morning in the daylight, and were nearly silent as we absorbed the immensity of the poverty. It was widespread. It was everywhere we looked. It was thousands of people peddling their wares side by side on the side of the road. They were selling fruits and vegetables, sunglasses, motor oil, and sandals, breads, and sugar cane. Each time we passed a basket of sugar cane a swarm of flies would rise up from it, then settle back down upon it. People sat on rocks, and pieces of crumbled cement, their feet immersed in puddles of water gray with soot. They stepped over trash piled knee high in some places. Children ran across the trash piles like ours run across a playground. The conditions were as deplorable as most of us have ever seen. Yet, the Haitian people exuded hope and gratitude.

As we arrived in Carrefour, conditions did worsen, much to our disbelief that they could. We saw a mother bathing herself and her child at the bottom of a street, in water that ran downhill through the trash, and was blackened with soot. We saw children sitting with their parents and other adults, helping to prepare vegetable and fruits to sell. They were not in school, since there are no public schools. Each family must be able to pay to send their children to school. Occasionally, we would see a small group of children dressed in school uniforms walking down the sidewalk. They were the fortunate ones.

Our first day at our worksite was also our last. We hand sanded cement walls until they were as smooth as sheetrock. They were prepped for painting, which was to be the next assignment for us, but did not come to fruition. The Haitian work team began as a handful, but by lunchtime, had mysteriously grown to 9. We fed 18 people with 3 loaves of bread, a large jar of peanut butter, a large jar of jam, and plenty of chips, and bottled water! We worked for several hours at the parsonage, but we were told it was important for us to be back before dark, so we left the worksite in time to adhere to that rule. The ride back was just as jaw-dropping as the ride there. The poverty filled every street along the way back to the guesthouse. The alley leading to the back of the guesthouse was lined with men who set up their makeshift workshops. One man makes cement pottery, and decorates them with a mosaic of colored glass. A young man welds iron pieces together to make gates, chairs, and other items to sell. Another man cuts and planes rough pieces of wood into lumber, all by hand.

But, as you know, election results were announced on the night of our first day of work at our assigned jobsite. At 10:00, when the results were announced over the airwaves, screaming and yelling could be heard through the dark of night. People, so desperate for change in their country, were angered that their voices were not heard, or worse, ignored.

The outcries of election fraud had been going on since before the election even began. Without going into the politics, suffice it to say that this is a nation of people who have endured way too long a life of poverty, lack of infrastructure, and lack of common basic necessities that are taken for granted in the developed world. Many, if not most, of these people have never experienced a hot shower, or running water, for that matter. Many of them live in shacks of rusted corrugated tin walls, leaning against each other like a house of cards. They tie them together with rope, wire, whatever they can find, to form some sort of shelter. They sit in darkness at night, on weathered chairs that are torn, and rotting and rusting.

The election results, and the subsequent rioting, altered our week tremendously. While tire fires burned, and barricades were built on the streets, we were confined to the guesthouse, and the Methodist school grounds. But, there was work to be done there, too. And, while it felt as though we had missed our opportunity to serve out our mission, it became obvious that God had other plans, and this was perhaps, His mission. The staff at the guesthouse, and particularly the Haitian staff, stays quietly behind the scenes each day. While teams go out to worksites, they cook for us, they clean the guesthouse, they clean the school grounds, and they do laundry. And there were repairs needed in their environment as well. As we looked around, we found ways to help make their workplace better.

Gerard and Lyle helped to rebuild a cistern, and retile around a leaky sink in the kitchen. Tom became the worksite foreman, heading up two UMVIM teams. Kent inventoried and prepared a plethora of medications donated by his company. Alan, Mark, and Patrick sanded and painted walls. Broken plumbing was fixed. Cement walls were repaired. After all was said and done, a new coat of paint was put on several walls throughout the guesthouse and school grounds. We cleaned up the grounds, burned trash, painted the dining hall at the school. Mira and I, along with women from the other team, sorted and inventoried piles of luggage filled with donations brought down by the teams – donations that came down with us from all of you. There were hundreds of health kits, birthing kits, and a multitude of school supplies and clothes. They all needed to be inventoried and packed for distribution. This was a task ordinarily taken on solely by the 3 member staff, and was very time-consuming. There were so many ways the two confined teams were able to contribute to the people of Haiti.

Still, there was a sense of disappointment that we were not able to contribute to the project we were initially assigned to. But, then, at Friday's prayer circle, Pastor Jacob joined us, and his words made clear the meaning of our trip, and perhaps, the most important mission of UMVIM. Pastor Jacob thanked us for being there. And that is what was most important:

BEING THERE. He said “Despite, the earthquake, despite the cholera, despite the extreme poverty, and deplorable conditions, and the political unrest, you never turn your back on us. You still keep coming. You still keep coming to help us and work with us. We thank you so much for caring about us, and wanting a better life for us, and coming here to be with us.”

Our mission of Christian love in action means to not abandon those in need, even when their struggles seem insurmountable. Yes, the conditions in Haiti are so grave that it would be easy to draw a line at what lengths we would go to, and what conditions we are willing to subject ourselves to. It would be easy to see our efforts as futile. But, as Christians, we have a duty to spread God’s steadfast love, and let the people of Haiti know that we will not abandon them, especially now, in their greatest time of need.

When we attended the service in Carrefour on Sunday, in a cement building standing directly across the street from a collapsed building, the spirit of the Haitian people rang loud and clear. Their hymns of praise were sung so loud, and with such great gratitude, and shouts of “Merci Saviour,” that it was humbling. We all fought back tears as we witnessed people thanking God and singing His praises at a higher and deeper level than we do, and yet, they have so little to be thankful for in comparison to us. It is clear that God’s Grace and Salvation become far more meaningful when it is the center of all hope.

I want to leave you with words from Mira, as she reflected upon our return:

What is Poverty?

Poverty is looking for food everyday unsure when the next meal will come.

Poverty is bathing in water running in the street gutters.

Poverty is living in a tent, with a family, in any season.

Poverty is sorting through trash heaps hoping to find something of value to eat, use, or resell.

Poverty is living with disasters, natural and human made, that kill loved ones, some of which is possible to avoid.

Hope is communicating across languages and cultures, love, appreciation, and kinship.

Hope is living focused on your family and building memories, no matter the situation around you.

Hope is putting your kids in school knowing the future (and your country) depends upon them.

Hope is trusting in God’s control and living day by day.

Hope is a smile, a twinkle in the eyes, praying hands, and a grateful heart, always.

(Written by Jill Peters, St. John’s UMC, Dover, N.H. on behalf of the Mission Team that included Gerard Piscitelli.)