

Reflections on the UServE | Haiti Mission Trip

by Jon Rossman, NED Short Term Mission Trip Coordinator

On May 22, 2011 the first New England District short-term mission trip for college students entitled "UServE | Haiti" departed for Port-au-Prince. The week was filled with many contrasts, personal challenges, and new relationships as our group of seven students and leaders experienced daily life in Haiti while serving the *Hope for the Children of Haiti* orphanage (www.hfchaiti.org) and the surrounding community of Bolosse. This trip was part of our District's ongoing efforts to encourage participation in short-term mission trips as articulated in the "NED Blueprint for Missions" and embodies the LC-MS's new "Witness, Mercy, Life Together" emphasis based on Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but **to serve**, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The team was comprised primarily of students from Providence College (Providence, RI) and was originally scheduled during spring break. Concerns about potential political unrest during the March presidential elections caused us to postpone the trip until late May when college classes were finished. With a desire to take advantage of this delay, a posting about this trip on Facebook caught the attention of a high school classmate with whom I hadn't spoken in 30 years. I was surprised to find that not only did her daughter want to participate in the trip, she was also the classmate of one of the original team members from Providence College. This experience highlighted for me the powerful opportunity that exists for congregations to better leverage social networking for sharing information, building relationships, spreading the Gospel, and growing our churches in New England.

Preparations for this trip were marked by other surprises. I approached my youngest son's middle school French teacher about obtaining surplus English/French textbooks and school supplies for use at the orphanage's school. The teacher was very excited because her students had been making simple dresses as part of a "French fashion curriculum" and she couldn't find any aid organization that would accept them. In addition to bringing these dresses, old workbooks, and other supplies to Haiti, her students also wrote and illustrated stories which were given to the girls at the orphanage. I was offered the opportunity to present a slide show to her classes about this mission trip. Hands-on activities helped make tangible the realities of poverty, water insecurity, and lack of health care in Haiti and other developing countries. The teacher would not only like to make this an annual part of her classroom experience, she expressed interest in joining a future mission team.

Our trip was further blessed by a number of unsolicited donations. A member of my home congregation works for Quaker Oats and delivered several cases of food supplies. A parent who works for Johnson & Johnson provided medical supplies which were brought to a Christian medical clinic during our trip. Financial contributions made through personal sponsorship letters from team members exceeded our goal by over \$1,800. This permitted us to hire 10-15 Haitian laborers each day, offering them much needed income and an opportunity to have ownership and pride in the improvement of their community. We had the privilege of working side-by-side to assist in constructing a second story on a local church that serves one of the many tent cities. We were honored when the pastor requested that we pray for them and the future of their church at the end of our week together.

One of the hired workers, Martine*, gained our respect as she labored hard all day, continuously carrying 5 gallon buckets of sand, gravel, and debris – on her head – up and down the hill to the church work site in exhausting heat and humidity – all with a smile on her face. She became a model for our team and the other Haitian workers. A visit with her family subsequent to our trip revealed that Martine was a 28 year old Christian and had been forced to drop out of high school due to a lack of financial resources. Our team decided to sponsor her school tuition, uniform, books and supplies with the additional sponsorship funds raised. She is now enrolled at the HFC orphanage school where she will continue her education and spiritual development in a strong Christian environment.

In addition to assisting with the church construction project, our days were interspersed with being playmates for the kindergarten children during recess, teaching English language skills to the teens in the orphanage, and taking short excursions. A side trip to the highlands northeast of Port-au-Prince revealed the

extreme contrasts that coexist in Haiti – both geographic and economic – as we witnessed both the beauty of the rugged, green mountains and the wealth evident in the large homes and expensive cars protected behind gated walls. This dichotomy was further underscored when we joined Keziah, a Christian nurse who graduated from Northeastern University and now lives in Haiti, on her weekly rounds in the ravine of a Port-au-Prince slum caring for the "poorest of the poor" children.

The scriptural theme for our mission trip was 1 Corinthians 4:20, *"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal."* This verse garnered greater impact as we drove past stores, government buildings, churches, and homes damaged by the January 2010 earthquake. We were awed by the numerous tent cities with markings from UNICEF, USAID, UNHCR, Red Cross, and many other aid organizations from around the world. As our tap-tap (trucks used as Haitian taxis) maneuvered down rutted or unpaved roads while passing throngs of people and open markets on the daily 30 minute commute from our guesthouse to the orphanage, I tried to look past the palpable poverty and UN troops (*"what is seen"*) to the spiritual strength and hope (*"what is unseen"*) found in the Haitian people – or as former HFC intern Nate Lowe describes it, "The beauty of a people struggling to survive yet finding the strength to laugh and smile. The beauty of a people who recognize and appreciate life for every small blessing God bestows upon them."

** Martine is an alias used to protect this individual's privacy.*