

January 18, 2009

The Church on the Green

From The First Church of Christ in Longmeadow, United Church of Christ



“Embraced by the love of God in Christ, our mission is to love and serve our world. We seek to grow in Christ’s family through our journey—inward toward faith and knowledge, outward toward love and justice—always rooted and nurtured in worship.”

Going to Church in Haiti

by Mary Friedman

We, “the missionaries,” ride in the van on our way to church. The air is hot and thick with diesel fumes and smoke from charcoal fires and burning trash. Mountains beyond mountains of garbage spin by in a blur. Painted murals on the crumbling concrete walls along the boulevard trace Haitian history and a flock of painted doves rises from the rubble. Wildly decorated “tap-tap” vans whirl by in a kaleidoscope of colors. Each of these little buses is packed beyond capacity with passengers and each has a message such as “Eternal Father” or “Jesus is Lord” painted in bold letters. Women are walking erect by the side of the road, carefully balancing their burdens on their heads...baskets of bread, fruit, chickens, and grief. We turn up a rutted and narrow street, squeezing through throngs of people, pyramids of mangoes, and bright umbrellas that shade the stalls from the relentless Haitian sun. Looking through window glass and camera lens feels safer and once removed from the human tragedy streaming by.

Curious eyes peek in to see the “blans.” There is a certain watchfulness. We are an oddity. We climb the narrow steps to the church over the market’s hubbub. The service has already begun, and a hymn is in progress, facilitated by a keyboard, trumpet and drum set. Haitians in their Sunday best pack the simple concrete room and the balcony above. We look into the sea of waving black arms and white doily head-coverings. The hot air in the sanctuary seems to throb. The vibe is palpable. We are escorted to the front and are seated on the dais, feeling self-conscious. We sit through a two hour service in Creole which is relatively short as Haitian services go. (Haitian tradition dictates that prayers are never translated, whether in Creole,

French, or English since it is assumed that God can speak and understand all languages.) There is much spirited preaching by a number of persons, including our own Reverend Kelly Gallagher

who is translated by our Haitian “shepherd” from Global Ministries Daniel Gourdet.



A group of young men and two small groups of young women stand in circles on the dais to sing. The women wear crisp white cotton shirts, black skirts, and black heels. They put their arms around each other and sway as their voices find their home in verse after verse of such closely blended harmony that we are mesmerized. I cannot understand a word and yet am in tears. We look out on the congregation, most of whom probably have no electricity, plumbing, or running water wherever they sleep. Their faces are upturned and lit by some internal incandescence. Across the chasm of our mutual but contrasting neediness, we see them raise their arms in praise and gratitude to God. And, awkwardly, (we are New Englanders after all), we raise our hands and arms to join them in hope and thanksgiving.

It is sometimes said of Haitians that they do not have enough to eat so they “eat God.” It is clear that church is their best thing, and that the congregation must fill up for the whole week during these precious hours. They are soaking up spirit food in this place.

And we all are filled.