

A Second Trip to Haiti

by Lucy Cassells, Haiti Committee

After my first trip to Haiti in 2003, I have attempted to live with gratitude for all that I have in my life; the many things that I am inclined to take for granted. These are not the frivolities you would expect, like vacations and shopping trips. They are such things as clean water, access to a job, education for my children, health care, food in overabundance and relative safety. I don't live without these things that we all consider necessities. I live in the comfort zone.

After yet another period of tumult in Haiti's troubled history which is rich with oppression of the poor and, at best, disinterest from the world, it became evident that members of our church who were interested in the trip could once again travel to Haiti during this time of relative calm. I was enthusiastic about the prospect, though, I admit anxious about deciding to once again to leave my comfort zone to travel to an area still seen as having significant safety concerns. Did I really want to go? What would I find? Would it be disheartening and could I bear it? Would my presence make a positive difference? These are all things I contemplated before finally committing myself fully. In retrospect, I should not have doubted.

To arrive in Port au Prince and be met by Kelly Gallagher and her family along with Francoise Villier marked the beginning of a joyful reunion with friends and partners, as well as affording the opportunity to meet many of those who are palpably helped by our efforts along with the considerable efforts of other congregations in the US through Global Ministries.

Our time was filled to overflowing with a 'road' (this is a euphemism) trip as we journeyed to see new construction at a site near L'Aritbonite, to the north of Port au Prince where efforts made by the group from a Wisconsin conference of the UCC are coming to fruition with a new regional center for CONESPEH. We were met by many Pastors and others who will benefit significantly from this project as they can now house a school and other programs in the multi-purpose building. We visited the Hospital Albert Schweitzer, also in the north, and got an inkling of the possibilities for new medical/health mission work.



On Sunday we worshipped, Haiti style, which is a blessing in and of itself. This is truly an uplifting experience. In the afternoon we returned to CONESPEH headquarters for the nursing school "coiffe" ceremony whereby the first year students move up into their second year. This was attended by parents, friends and relatives of the students and it was a privilege to be a part of it. There were songs, speeches, poems and ceremony. It was so very moving to see these young people having their achievements recognized. To see them able to work tangibly towards a goal...this was very rewarding.

Monday afforded the opportunity to tour CONESPEH'S building in its full glory. There are about 600 students, from ages 3 up to and including adult nursing and seminary students, all studying simultaneously within the walls of this place. We saw enthusiastic preschoolers right through to seniors in the College de St. Andre

who will sit the second baccalaureate exam in the spring. This is the high school equivalent. The pass rate for their school is about 90%. I had the privilege of lecturing the nursing students about infectious diseases; Kelly Gallagher and Liza opened a significant dialogue with the seminary students about HIV/AIDS; Jim Torbenson, our friend from Wisconsin, worked tirelessly with a large group of teens in the computer lab for hours on end. It was a joy to be an active participant.



On Tuesday, Nancy Marshall again worked with the nursing students and taught them how they could provide basic OT services in the community. Jim T spent all day with the students in computer lab again and still left them wanting more. Kelly and Liza returned for round two with the seminarians, and Mark, along with our good friend Andre St. Louis, held high level meetings to discuss a

potential land purchase that would allow expansion for CONESPEH. In the afternoon, we visited the General Hospital in Port au Prince where we saw several of the nursing students doing a practicum placement in a post op ward.

CONESPEH's headquarters have improved a lot since I last saw them four years ago. There is paint on many walls, tile flooring, a much larger and more functional computer room (though internet access remains a challenge we have yet to solve reliably), and a large and really quite beautiful library on the top floor with an increasing inventory of books, due at least in large part to the efforts of Nancy Marshall.

The feelings of fellowship I have for my band of travelers are intense, as was the feeling of genuine friendship with Patrick and Françoise Villier. These are good people, doing God's work tirelessly. Patrick spoke of 'l'esperance' when asked, on our final evening, about how he views the future. He says there is no good English translation for this term; but it is more than hope, he says, it is the hope that comes in knowing something wonderful will really happen. It is also pretty much the feeling I have in me now when I think about our work with CONESPEH.



I hope to be able to return to Haiti in relatively short order to teach again with the nursing students. I, too, might like to further the dialogue with the seminarians regarding HIV/AIDS. I hope others take advantage of the opportunity to share knowledge and skills with our partners in Haiti. Without exception, I have assuredly received in measure greatly beyond my gifts. I am grateful for the support of this congregation towards CONESPEH...you do good work that makes a real difference. How cool is that?