

A Chronology Haiti Visit January 12-15, 2010

Tuesday, January 12, 2010: The purpose of the 2010 mission trip to Haiti was to sustain and expand support for Harmony Ministries. To that end, a medical team of twenty from three churches (Shiloh Baptist Church, Trenton, New Jersey, Kingdom Church, Ewing NJ, and the Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville (NJ)) arrived in Port-au-Prince by air from JFK airport about 1:30PM. We had left Lawrenceville at 4:15AM in a bus and two mini-vans to travel to JFK with our personal carry-on luggage and 33 duffle bags filled with medicines, vitamins, supplies, reading glasses, cell phones, painting and medical equipment, sleeping bags, and air mattresses.

Late in the afternoon, after clearing immigration and customs, we were on our way to the mountain village of Thoman in a truck/bus with wooden benches climbing the switchbacks of a mountain road. We noticed rock slides to the side and ahead and rolling dust clouds in the dry river beds below. Joking that it was an earthquake, the “joke” soon turned into reality when our host, Pastor Luc Deratus, received a cell phone call that his church and school in Port-au-Prince had collapsed trapping people who had gathered for a prayer service, and that there were reports that the Palace and the Cathedral had collapsed. Then the phone went dead. As darkness fell, we ate a meal of rice, beans, and chicken brought up the mountain with us. Little did we know that this warm meal would be our last until Thursday night. We tried to get information from a radio, but heard only static, and the words “tsunami watch” and “Mexico.” We worshipped that evening with members of the Thoman church and slept on the floor of the school, awakening to several aftershocks.

Wednesday, January 13: Beginning shortly after dawn, following a brief reading and prayer that reminded us that “we are not alone,” we provided a scheduled medical clinic for well over 300 families. Anxious about members of the Port-au-Prince church, we abandoned painting, health seminars, and recreational activities we were prepared to give and focused on the medical clinic. As we were about to close early, people who had travelled up the mountain, they said because they knew we were there, brought a man and a youth with crushed limbs. For some of us, that is when the reality of a major earthquake set in.

Not knowing what to expect, and with the advice to be flexible and “to go with the flow,” we travelled to Port-au-Prince. On the way, one of the phones rang indicating there was service. A member of our group managed to get off a text message home before the phone went dead again that we were okay and to start the phone chain. Arriving in Port-au-Prince around 2PM we remained silent as we saw flattened buildings, and bodies and bodies lining the street, covered with white sheets and bedding. Hands and limbs protruded from the rubble. The parks and streets were filled with people. Twice, our security guard forcefully pushed men away who tried to board our bus. When we arrived near our hotel, we could see down the street that it had pancaked. Pastor Luc went to find a place for us to stay. On his return, he said, “There was no one at the hotel.”—his way of saying it was destroyed. It was then that we decided to head for the US Embassy. Seeing the great need of so many people, some in the group wanted to stay and offer help in the chaos, but we had no supplies or infrastructure. All the medicines, gear, and sleeping bags were on a second truck somewhere on its way to Port-au-Prince. To ensure our future effectiveness and not become victims ourselves, safety and security of each member of the group was paramount. We proceeded to the Embassy.

Wednesday-Thursday: The Embassy staff collected passport information and sent emails to our families that we were safe. We each signed a five page promissory note to pay the US government the equivalent of coach fare from Port-au-Prince to wherever we were to be airlifted in the states.

Since we had three doctors, an RN, and folks with medical experience, the Embassy asked us to set up a medical facility in a conference room to treat US citizens who needed to be evacuated by helicopter. Most of the injuries were broken and crushed bones and lacerations. Even though we quickly ran out of supplies the Embassy had given us as well as the pain killers and antibiotics solicited from those waiting to be airlifted by plane, we operated a clinic, with support from the Embassy staff, from Wednesday afternoon to Thursday evening when an Air Force medical team of doctors arrived. Each member of our group provided assistance—carrying make-shift stretchers, treating injuries, cleansing wounds, offering comfort, engaging in prayer, and giving shoes, clothes, and money to patients and their families. We “slept” each night outside on the grass and sidewalks and ate snack food we had brought with us. The Embassy Thursday night gave us MREs, the first substantial food since Tuesday evening. Early Thursday evening, the group paused for a moment of prayer.

One issue arose that the Embassy staff eventually resolved. One member of our group was a Chinese citizen with a US permanent resident card (“green card”). We were told that American citizens would be airlifted first, with green card holders last. We insisted that the twenty of us were a group and that all should be treated the same. Maintaining the integrity of the group was essential to the well-being of each member. Late Thursday morning, several of us were privately assured that we would be treated as a group and the Embassy staff thought our request to travel together would be honored. It was.

At the Embassy waiting to be airlifted, our group met two young Lutheran seminary students—a woman and her husband’s cousin. The cousin, the woman, and her husband, also a seminary student five months from graduation, had been trapped in the collapse of the St. Joseph’s Home for Boys. She and the cousin managed to crawl out from the rubble, but her husband did not. She and the cousin became part of our group and were airlifted out with us. (On return to the states, four members of our group went to Iowa for the husband’s memorial service that was broadcast over the internet.)

Friday, January 15, 2010: Thursday night around 11 PM we were given five minutes notice to load into SUVs to be taken to the airport where we were flown in an unmarked “special ops” turbo prop to San Juan, P.R. and then at 9:10 AM by commercial jet to JFK. We were greeted Friday afternoon by family and yes, the press. Our church staff did a superb job with our families, supporting them when they did not know whether or not we were safe, and helping them with our return.

The Embassy staff was terrific in supporting us and keeping us informed. We are grateful beyond words to Pastor Luc, our host, to our driver, and to our security guard, Solomon, who stayed with us through the ordeal until we arrived at the Embassy. They saw the destruction, feared for their families, but stayed with us. Pastor Luc’s wife survived; our security guard’s wife did not.

We have learned since our return that Pastor Luc hired a doctor and distributed the medicines, vitamins, tarps, air mattresses, and sleeping bags from the second truck to those most in need.

We are now organizing a consortium of seven churches (three Presbyterian, two Episcopal, one Baptist, and one non-denominational) to focus support on rebuilding and sustaining four schools, three churches, and a medical clinic. Additional churches and organizations are encouraged to join in support of Harmony Ministries in Haiti.

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