

## Reflections on Haiti

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Two weekends ago I had the most amazing experience in my life. I did something I wasn't sure I would ever do. I went to Fond des Blancs and Villa, Haiti – small rural villages southwest of Port au Prince. I saw firsthand the work we are doing to help the people of these villages.

We had asked for and had received many donations for our trip. (Thank you!) A few days before we left, Dan Murphy brought a donation to the church office. His almost four year old son, Jack, skipped down the hall next to him. Jack was excited because he had something to donate, a cute yellow toy truck. I asked him if he wanted this truck to go to a special boy in Haiti. He grinned and nodded yes.

In Fond des Blancs, we asked Anita, our host, if she knew of a special boy. She thought for a moment and then said “I have just the boy.” So I got to meet Mitoldo, a young boy born in 2011. His mother was pregnant when she became paralyzed as a result of the devastating 2010 earthquake. She was fortunate to be treated at St Boniface Hospital's Spinal Cord Injury Center, the only spinal cord clinic in Haiti. St. Boniface Hospital opened the clinic in response to the overwhelming needs of earthquake victims. Prior to this center opening, the survival rate of someone with a spinal cord injury in Haiti was 6 months. Mitoldo's mother was able to carry to full term and deliver her baby even though she had no feeling from the waist down. To me, Mitoldo is a miracle.

When we gave Mitoldo the truck, he didn't know what to do with it and dropped it. It dawned on me that he had never had a toy before. I couldn't help thinking about all of the toys my children had. When we rolled it back to him, he smiled and kicked it like a soccer ball. So we showed him how to roll the truck, and basically taught him how to play with it. Later in the day, we saw him. He was hugging the truck to his chest. Last Sunday I asked Nancy Simms to take a picture of Jack and Dan for me and I sent it to Haiti. Jack is now connected to our work in Fond des Blancs.

This was a quick trip, just 4 days, and yet every minute was filled with incredible, heartwarming moments. I can't believe I almost talked myself out of going. Dave first asked me about 18 months ago if I would go with the church to Haiti. I could see how

excited he was. And yet, I was very hesitant. I had read and heard so many terrible stories about Haiti. That is was an impossible situation. That donated money and goods were not getting into the hands of those who needed them most, about the government being corrupt. Haiti seemed to be such a dangerous place. So, I made my excuses for not going on the trip a year ago – I wasn't working at the time and shouldn't spend the money, I was too busy with other volunteer work, I was already supporting other worthwhile charities - excuses. When I think back, I have to say that I was afraid. I had never done any hands on work in a third world country and was afraid of the dangerous conditions. I also couldn't see what value I could bring to the people in Fond des Blancs. I wasn't a doctor, EMT, dentist or other professional with skills that were desperately needed. I didn't want to take the spot of someone more qualified than I was. I was the moderator of the church at the time and I wondered how we, The Dover Church, could possibly sustain our support. At the time we were having trouble with stewardship and raising enough to cover our budget here. But after listening to Dave Melville, Barry Fougere, Beth Karlson, Jim MacDonald and Max talk over the past year I wanted to see for myself what was so great about this organization, the St Boniface Haiti Foundation. You do know that Dave and Jim are very persuasive guys. I wanted to see if they were telling the truth or were they exaggerating. Are we truly making a difference? While I was still concerned about the conditions there, I decided to go. I have to laugh because as I was getting on the plane, my parents sent me a message to "take all precautions possible".

So, let me share with you the positives about Haiti. Fond des Blancs is a breath of fresh air after the congestion of Port au Prince. I couldn't believe how bad it was. It was a bit of 'Shock and Awe.' But Max and Dave kept exclaiming about how much better things were in Port au Prince, less trash, fewer tent cities, and new buildings going up. Fond des Blancs is beautiful. People were out in large numbers on market day. They were incredibly polite and accepting of us. I was amazed at how well dressed they were. How do they iron their clothes when most have no electricity? (I found out they use hot rocks.) There are new buildings going up and people seem to have a purpose. There are new concrete roads and sidewalks being installed, replacing the dirt road to the hospital, making it easier for patients to be brought in. This was made possible by a grant St

Boniface received from the United Nations. While there are many, many poor dwellings, there are also some new houses and even an apartment building going up. There is a cyber café with state of the art computers donated by MIT and solar powered cell phone charging stations. The juxtaposition of high technology with the poor rural living conditions is hard to reconcile. The St. Boniface Hospital is at the center of this community and has helped to bring prosperity to the people of Fond des Blancs. Of the 200 hospital employees, 98% are Haitian. The hospital itself is building a new maternity ward. The men working on it are so very proud of their work. They tell their families “we are doing this for you, our women.” They have almost no crime in Fond des Blancs. While you hear stories of supplies being stolen in other areas of Haiti, the hospital hasn’t had problems. The people of Fond des Blancs know how much this hospital helps their community. It would hurt everyone if things went missing. And so they police themselves.

We had the opportunity to talk with several members of the St Boniface team. One thing that strikes you is the passion of everyone on this team. One member, Efua Gyan, a 24 year old, who is so fluent in Creole, she is often mistaken as a Haitian, was handpicked by St Boniface to help with measurement and evaluation . She wants to be able to quantify the improvements they see as a result of their work. She told us this amazing story. Her third day in Haiti, Efua and her colleague grabbed their scale, their bag of supplies and medicine, climbed into a jeep and off they went, driving an hour and a half up twisty, windy, rutted dirt roads. When the driver stopped and said this was the end of the road, Efua jumped out, picked up her things and began the hour walk further up a dirt trail to a clearing. And everyone was there waiting. Women and children had walked several hours to get to this meeting place. Every week they make this trip, hoping that St. Boniface will show up, wanting to make sure their children are growing and thriving. Malnourishment is a big problem in Haiti. Through these visits the visiting nurses identified some children who are thriving. They interviewed the families to see what they do to help their children grow and thrive. What is the small behavior or strategy in these families that makes a difference? It could be as simple as a mother sitting and feeding her children while others just put the food on the table and let the children feed themselves. Efua call this the positive deviation. The nurses ask these

“good” mothers to share what they are doing and are creating a network and a community for these families. St Boniface is helping them learn how to help themselves and is a beacon of hope for the 50,000 people who live in this rural area.

I thought we had seen poor in Fond des Blancs and then we went to Villa, a small, even more remote, mountainous village at least another hour or so uphill from Fond des Blancs. I can't tell you how far it is, because people there measure everything by how long it takes to get there, not how far it is. Villa is the poorest of poor. Most families have no running water or electricity in their “homes”. I use quotes on the word homes. Many have only a shelter or something they can go into to get out of the sun. Most have dirt floors. The rich have metal roofs. The medical clinic here is a lifeline to the 10,000 people in this area. When it was damaged beyond repair, the group running it decided to pull out. This left the people of Villa with no access to basic medical services. St Boniface Hospital was asked to take over the medical coverage for the people of Villa. How could they say no? So, a makeshift clinic was set up. Unicef tents are used for waiting rooms. The doctors are amazing. They accurately make complicated diagnoses without the benefit of the high tech equipment our doctors use here. The lab technician works out of a plywood building, a shack, slightly larger than a closet. The pharmacy, only slightly larger, is proudly staffed by three women. Incredibly this makeshift clinic provides all of the medical services for the 10,000 people living in and around Villa. People walk for up to two hours from their homes to get to this clinic. And it is this clinic that we, The Dover Church, are supporting. St Boniface was looking for a partner to help cover the annual operating expenses for Villa. Last year, we raised the \$50,000 needed to fund operational costs for one year. And I am incredibly proud that we did this. Think about it. It costs only \$50,000 to provide basic medical coverage, including doctors salaries, medicine, lab work, and vaccinations for 10,000 people, more than the number of people in Dover. That's \$5.00 a person for a year of medical support. Think about it. My co-pay for one office visit is four times that amount.

We also saw the new clinic that is being built and it is much further along than Dave and Max thought it would be. We were really excited to see this. Next year at this time, it will be up and running. With this new clinic they will be able to help even more

people. I can envision one day concrete roads with sidewalks being built in Villa, as this clinic becomes the center of hope for the Villa community.

I sometimes think about what legacy I will leave behind. I have raised three terrific children, but beyond that, what will I be remembered for. How will I have made a difference? As a member of the church I think about how I can contribute to the Dover Church's legacy. My original thoughts that Haiti was an impossible place to help have been completely blown out of the water. When I left for Haiti, I wondered how I could help. Now that I am back, I can't imagine our church not helping. We are making a tremendous difference in the lives of the people of Fond des Blancs and Villa. I can't describe how this trip has impacted me. I hope all of you get to share in this experience, by either going on our next visit, listening to more of our stories and most importantly supporting our efforts financially. Our Easter offering is designated to help the Villa Clinic. I am worried because Easter Sunday is during school vacation and I know many families will be away. And this worries me because the people of Villa, who I have met, are counting on us.

Everyone returns from Haiti with a story to tell: Jack and Mitoldo, Efua and the thriving children, the Villa Clinic and the people we are helping. These are our people. And this is our story, our legacy. Amen.