

## Hinde Street. London. 4/10/15

What a joy to be back in Haiti where I once lived and worked as an agriculturalist with the Methodist Church. It was there that I did my first preaching, in Creole, in 1991 and it was there that my call to ministry began. This time I was back with a wonderful team of twelve people from all over Ireland. As well as facilitating a building project at a church-run teacher training college, we ran children's clubs in various places. These turned out to be sanctified chaos and were much enjoyed by over six hundred children! Some of our team facilitated medical clinics and we also had seminars with Haitian preachers during which we learned much from each other about mission in our respective contexts. I could talk for hours about Haiti but let me try to summarize the country and the church in six words.

**History.** Columbus himself arrived in Haiti to begin its colonial history. Within a very short time all of the indigenous peoples were wiped out either intentionally or by European disease. Haiti subsequently became France's richest slave colony and at least one million people were taken from Africa to Haiti to work the sugar plantations in horrendous conditions. However, in 1804 Haiti became the world's first independent black republic after the only successful slave revolt ever recorded in history. The problem with this was that all the other world powers still had their slaves and so they ostracised this new nation. There was a complete trade embargo against Haiti from its beginnings and the new nation was forced to pay compensation to France for over a century until 1925.

**Poverty.** Haiti's poverty is rooted in its history. There's an official minimum wage of US\$3 per day but 70% of the people have no formal employment and many of those who do don't get the minimum wage. Most people live on \$1 per day i.e. in absolute poverty. It is also estimated that approximately half the population are not properly nourished.

**Earthquake.** Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western hemisphere when on the 12<sup>th</sup> January 2010 an earthquake killed approximately a quarter of a million people across an area that would fit inside the M25. Five years later the rubble is finally cleared but there are still vast amounts of rebuilding to take place.

The above three words are all rather negative and words that you may already have associated with Haiti. These words describe the harsh reality of life for most Haitian people. But there is another set of words which are equally true of Haiti.

**Energy.** The one thing you will almost never see in Haiti is anybody sitting around waiting for anything. Everyone is up and at it – buying, selling, working,

making – doing whatever they can to survive. Walking down the street you're likely to see a lady with a block of ice on her head selling small pieces, a man with a wheelbarrow (that he has hired for the day) carrying home big bags of charcoal which somebody has bought at the market, a man sitting on the footpath with a pile of wood and a machete making chairs, someone else with a welder making metal beds on the side of the street, groups of ladies sitting on the ground surrounded by fruit and vegetables that they've grown on their farms up in the mountains and have travelled to the city to sell – they will remain there until it's all sold even if that takes several days. Haitian people are industrious, energetic and doing all that they can to help themselves.

### **Godliness.**

In Ireland we often talk about the theological concept of depending on God for everything. For most Haitian Christians this is a daily reality. In Haiti you will meet lots of people with a deep faith which is intrinsic to their everyday life. We were there for the fifth anniversary of the terrible earthquake and on that day I sat in awe as I watched a group of women fervently praying for each other and for their nation on that difficult day.

My mind went back to the first anniversary of the earthquake to a 4 hour service which began around 7am in the open air right in the city centre beside the ruins of the Presidential Palace and surrounded by thousands of people who live in tents. We expected it to perhaps be a solemn, mournful and sad experience but not a bit of it! The theme of the service was "Celebrate life". Thousands and thousands of people gathered, each one vocal and enthusiastic in their worship and determined to thank God and lift up His name. I had been invited to address the crowd which was an incredible privilege. I was glad that I did not have to speak till about three hours into the service because by then I was able to get myself composed again a little bit having shed a few tears.

In addition to long periods of Congregational worship, there was a choir from Cite Soliel a district which is the worst slum in the country, a mens choir of people who had lost limbs a, group who sing on radio and a policeman in full riot gear who had a fantastic voice. They were all praising God for their lives.

During the service one of the prayers went something like this:

"Even though we have a terrible history of the 12th January 2010. Even though we have lost limbs, lost family and friends, lost houses. Even though we sometimes lack water and have been battered by storms and cholera, never the less we come to say thank you Lord for life. We are here to celebrate life. The only thing we want to say today is thank you for life."

One of the most memorable songs proclaimed "Jesus, you may come now." As we sang it I felt like Jesus had just come! He is certainly there in the midst of these incredible people. We left the service at 10.00 a. m. and spent most of the rest of the day travelling and the most noticeable thing was that every single Church which we passed was packed with people and worship services going on. In fact in many places there were roads partially blocked or even completely closed because there were so many people overflowing out of the Churches! We

passed church after church, some in ruins some in tents but all packed and flowing out into the street, everywhere people dressed in their best clothes and going to church, many carrying their own chairs.

Cf Job 2:10 “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

I’ll never forget the four hour church service high up in the mountains bringing to an end to a weekend convention and after which some of the people would walk home for eight hours across the hills. Such was their commitment to be there.

**Generosity.** Haitian people have a strong instinct to help each other. One of our team was deeply moved by a ten year old boy in a church run children’s home who, on meeting a rich lady from Ireland, immediately began to pray God’s blessing on her and her family.

Then there was the leader of a small home fellowship group which is part of a church in a very poor area of Port-au-Prince. The group meets every week to study the Bible and pray but they are also saving up so that they can buy a grinder and make it available to the local community for a very small charge so that their neighbours can grind their own coffee, peanuts etc.

At every level of the church there’s an automatic instinct to reach out to do what they can to meet the social needs of their community as well as proclaiming the good news of Jesus.

The Methodist Church in Haiti is as poor as the nation but, with help from partner churches around the world runs over a hundred schools (mostly in areas where there would be no school otherwise), numerous health clinics, a forestry project, a goat breeding project and small micro credit initiatives to help people access the tiny amount of capital that they need to get a kick start in generating their livelihood.

Their motivation is that they have met Jesus and they want to share Him and, in His name, to do what they can to alleviate the needs of the people around.

So as we continue to pray for the nation of Haiti and our Christian brothers and sisters there let us also allow ourselves to be encouraged, challenged and educated by the Haitian people.