



Haiti Mission Inc., and St. Jude the Apostle Church

The Haiti Mission: Why?

Every year St. Jude Church asks its parishioners to support the mission in Haiti. The rough hand sewn bags offered to collect donations remind us that only a few hundred miles off the U.S. coast Haiti still remains far away from the trappings of modern civilization.

Why should parishioners of St. Jude be interested in Haiti and why should we support the Haiti Mission?

Louisiana has a natural affinity with Haiti as one of the few French speaking countries in the western hemisphere, one with a strong Roman Catholic tradition, and a strong Creole influence. Not surprisingly, both places have a special enthusiasm for Mardi Gras!

Beyond its history, the truly admirable and wonderful work of the Franciscan Missionaries is something in which every parishioner should be proud to support.



Franciscan Mission House

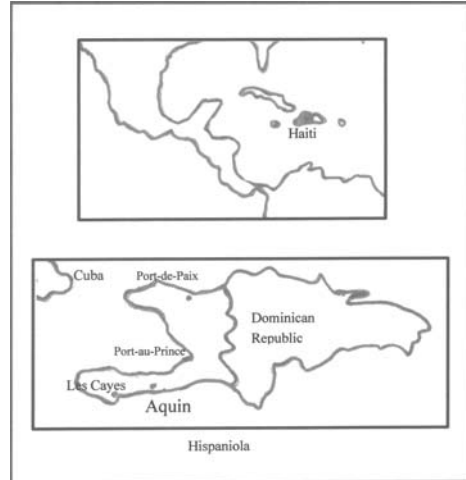
Haiti: History

Most of us know more about Haiti than we realize.

Christopher Columbus discovered the island of Hispaniola for the Spanish in 1492. The French eventually dominated the western half of the island, now known as Haiti. In 1791 during the French Revolution Toussaint L'Ouverture led one of the first slave revolts in the western hemisphere and ruled the island for ten years until it was reconquered by Napoleon. Toussaint declared Catholicism the official religion.

In 1911 during another revolution Woodrow Wilson ordered the occupation of Haiti (which lasted until 1934). Dictatorship came in the 1950s with Francois Duvalier ("Papa Doc") and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc") and lasted until 1986.

In 1990 a Roman Catholic priest Bertrand Aristide, was elected president in free and fair elections. But unrest continued and ultimately Aristide was overthrown four times. In 1995 a UN peacekeeping force arrived, and remains in Haiti. As of 2008 Rene Preval, a former ally of Aristide, continued to serve as president.



The town of Aquin (a'kwe) is named after Thomas Aquinas and faces a bay which lets out into the Caribbean Sea.



Flag of Haiti

Haiti: Today

Haiti, with 8.5 million people, is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. There is virtually no employment. About 10-15% of the population is employed, with about 40% of these working for the NGOs. Except for NGO services, nothing is free in Haiti. There are few government services, no health care, no free public schools. Medical care and education are privileges not rights. Many if not most rely on charity. As a result, over a quarter of the rural children are stunted for their age.

The WHO reports that “Haiti has the highest prevalence of HIV infection in Latin America and the Caribbean. It faces the worst AIDS epidemic outside Africa and bears the greatest burden of HIV in the Western Hemisphere.” Mother-to-child transmission is a growing problem. The disease is also aggravated by the tuberculosis epidemic. The good news is that HIV infection rates may no longer be rising. However, because information is so limited, data is difficult to accumulate and interpret.

The pictures to the right illustrate city life, wash day, and a typical house of the poor.



The Franciscan Missionaries and St. Jude Church

Franciscan Sisters of Calais came to Baton Rouge from France in 1921 and eventually founded three hospitals including Our Lady of the Lake in Baton Rouge.

In 1988 Sr. Althea Jonis and Sr. Martha Ann Abshire opened The Haiti Mission, Inc., and were soon joined by Sr. Marie Claire Revelard from France. They had learned about the needs of Haiti from a doctor at St. Martinsville Hospital. In the early search for funding Sr. Althea came to St. Jude Church to give a presentation on the mission, its plans and hopes for the future. The response was truly wonderful. Father Collins immediately became interested and supported the participation of St. Jude Church. Father David Allen has continued the tradition and strongly supports the Haiti mission not only with fundraising but also in his own visits to the region.



Picture of founders: Sr. Althea, Sr. Marie Claire and Sr. Martha with U.N. officer

Mission Work in Haiti

The mission focuses on three main areas to improve the lives for ordinary Haitians: medical, school, and reforestation. The mission runs on roughly \$125,000 a year. That dollar figure underestimates the amount and quality of work that goes on at the mission.

Several core principles guide the mission work. First, the poorest and most vulnerable in society are attended to first. Second, the sisters take care to make sure that they are not creating dependencies, but providing enough so people can begin to help themselves and work with what is locally available. The mission also works to provide a sense of community and well-being among the people.



Sr. Rosevania with babies



Sr. Marie Claire with neighbor

i. Mission Work: Medical

Healthcare needs are the most basic. At first mobile clinics traveled to various sites to see patients. In 1992 a dispensary (or outpatient clinic) began serving the Aquin area. It now averages 5500 patients a year. The focus is on basic medical needs, such as treating tuberculosis, malaria and other tropical diseases. The dispensary has become a center for vaccinations and serves as an official T.B. diagnostic center for the Health Department.

The Nutrition center opened in 2000 and has become one of the shining successes of the mission. The center cares for about 300 children a year (or about 6500 patient days). Babies often come sick and malnourished and are nursed back to health. Mothers (sometimes even fathers or siblings) stay with the babies and are taught the basics of childcare. Once the baby or child is well enough they are released but asked to return for follow-up visits. They can be re-admitted once only, and while maybe harsh sounding, the policy is a necessary one in the ongoing effort to discourage dependency.



The Nutrition Center



Women sitting in waiting room with kids ready to be admitted

Stories from Haiti

The inner beauty of this young mother Betty is untold (see middle photo). A young teenager, raped and left on her own, she gave birth to twins. She was found walking toward the mission with 15-day-old babies, premature and only 2 pounds. After a series of treatments and education classes for mom, the twins improved. Here, Madoche and Manasse, are almost three years old at a follow-up appointment but are doing very well, as is the young mother.

Many stories tell of care and compassion. Women often walk for days to reach the Nutrition center with the hopes of saving their newborn. Most are lucky. At the center a doctor and aides will quickly diagnose the problem, often one of several forms of malnutrition. Fathers bring their children, especially if the mother is too sick or needs to take care of others. A family member must stay with and care for a baby admitted to the center. Sometimes even young siblings take on the responsibility to allow the mother to find food for the day ahead for the family. The values these young boys and girls are taught as they care for their sibling inevitably makes a lasting impression.

Toys often make the children's stay even more rewarding. With nothing like them at home Haitian babies and toddlers at the center learn basic colors, coordination, matching, and many other skills.

To the right: Children with toys brought in to stimulate development

*Below: Before and after :
mother with twins*



ii. Mission Work: Reforestation

It has been reported that 95% of Haiti's forests are gone and farming lands are largely depleted. Many international efforts have failed. Why? Because of poverty and instability. People use the trees for charcoal (that is, cooking/ heating energy). The problem is compounded by soil erosion and flooding has become endemic. Planting trees and restoring the lands are essential to the future of Haiti and a farmer's ability to make a living. The Mission has had some success, in part by convincing the locals through their own hard work and re-planting that reforestation is necessary and works. As even the most skeptical have come to see the rewards (and overcome their fear that the project was simply another form of thievery). As a result the mission's reforestation project has gradually widened itself. The juicy mangoes can be eaten as one of the rewards.



Above, top two: Before and after pictures of reforestation,



The rewards of reforestation,

iii. Mission Work: Education

One of the most important things for the future of Haiti is the education of its young. Education will not only offer the hope of a more skilled labor force and employment, but also strengthen the fiber of society. The mission began with the goal of supporting 125 students, and they are now wanting to fund 250 children. It costs about \$125 / year to send a student to school with enough to cover books, tuition, travel and others costs. Supplies for the school itself are also important and include everything from buildings and upkeep to chalk and paper.



Typical school children



Recess

iv. Mission Work: Other

The mission has become so involved in community life that its efforts have extended into other areas of development. For instance, it has brought together the community of Monsejour to rebuild the road leading into their community.

The sisters have also begun to provide basic health care for prisoners. A Canadian sister has helped set up several buildings in Aquin to care for the elderly.

Sr. Martha also hopes to re-start a women's cooperative program that had shown signs of success. With few other places to turn, Haitians often come begging for help. A few years ago Sr. Martha devised a program that help set up women as street vendors. Not a gift, the women worked hard to re-pay half the set up cost. The program eventually helped about ten women, but ran out of money.



A view of the roads



Women's marketplace supported by the cooperative program

Haiti: Hope for the Future

Life is hard in Haiti, but has its moments. The beautiful setting is peaceful and reinvigorating. St. Jude has a special place and in the hearts of all those who work at the mission. In the chapel, with windows to the beautiful landside, is the statue of Our Lady of Divine Vocations donated by St. Jude Church.

St. Jude Church continues to contribute to the Haiti mission and is proud to be associated with such a well run organization and such venerable work for the poor.



Statue donated by St. Jude the Apostle Church in chapel

Special thanks to Sr. Martha Ann Abshire for outlining the work of the mission, sharing what she has written and some of her most memorable photographs. Thanks to her, the other Franciscan missionaries and all others for all their work in Haiti. — Lisa Namikas