

The Internet, the Weekend and Haitian Kids

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Over the headphones came the words in Haitian creole, "*Jezi te di, mwen se limyè a nan mond lan. Tout moun ki fe konfyans li pral gen lavi etenel. Jezi di: Si yon moun vin jwenn mwen, mwen pa refize'l.*" (when translated, "Jesus said, 'I am the light in the world.' Everyone who trusts him will have eternal life. Jesus said, "If a person comes to me, I will not refuse him.")

I watched on my computer screen as three teens struggled a full 20 minutes with the words that I dug up from the Internet, piecing together parts of the Bible, removing complex words, and then used Google translate to help me form intelligible sentences in Creole. At the end of a loud and vigorous debate, the students emerged, ready to share their translation of the sentences into English. Sure, they had consulted some of their teachers standing nearby, specifically on words like "eternal" and "refuse," but the dawning of epistemic clarity on their smiling faces was unmistakable. And I clapped my hands, laughed—and fought back tears.

SHORT-TERM TRIPS WITH LONG-TERM RESULTS

Three years ago, we started a remote teaching ministry for middle schoolers in Haiti—the culmination of short-term trips dating back six years. A group of physicians, nurses, medical students and others like me first went to parts of Haiti that had been affected by the devastating January 12, 2010 earthquake. This earthquake leveled buildings, took lives, disrupted public services and rendered hundreds of thousands homeless, bringing cholera

and other diseases in its wake. This group helped operate clinics and then adopted the communities, helping to build schools, churches, homes, soccer fields, cisterns for clean water as well as create bakeries to feed people and sell delicious baked goods to sustain local economies and keep orphanages running. When on short-term trips, medical professionals and students would open temporary clinics to treat pregnant women, people with disabilities, eye problems and other ailments. They also began their clinics each day with impressive, unrehearsed street theater, declaring to the crowd that had gathered that faith in Jesus compelled them to come to their community to sing and pray for everyone there. On a single short-term trip, it wasn't uncommon for the group to treat 1,500-2,000 patients.

STRANGE AND WONDERFUL

Among the large contingent of Haitians who accompanied the group were translators, paid \$50 a day, a means to supplement the seasonal work that they engaged in as security personnel, handymen or mechanics. Though the translation work lasted for just 10 days, the money added up to a cumulative income that helped the (mostly) men care for extended families numbering in double digits throughout the regions of La Gonâve, Ansavo and the mountain south of Morne de l'Hôpital, near the capital, Port-au-Prince.

Personally, these trips were both strange and wonderful. The flashes of insight that accompanied apparently ordinary events were legion. Haiti blessed me in

more ways than I could count. Consider this vignette from one of our teams.

Two young boys were around a fire and a pot was on the fire and the older boy was tending it. After a little while, I saw the older brother scoop out some noodles and place them in a tin can and he then gave it to his little brother. He did the same for himself, and after a few minutes, they disappeared into the surrounding vegetation. I never saw them again. I thought what a basic expression of love this was to share the necessity of food for the one he felt responsible for.

Or, this high point of my very first trip, in which my wife's, Alma, cousin Joyce, an OB/GYN and a director of the organization of physicians, also participated.

A pregnant mom came to the clinic and presented herself to Dr. Joyce, who diagnosed her with preeclampsia. The baby needed to be delivered as soon as possible. This started around noon. The whole team rallied around the mom, gathering whatever instruments we could find to help in the delivery. I think the dental clinic contributed a hemostat and a sickle-shaped cleaning instrument and some sutures. Everyone sat around after the clinic closed waiting for the event, and we were blessed with a healthy boy about eight pounds named Frank. Connor, a young 20-year-old on our team spent the entire day assisting and was so excited to be a part of this. His emotions were pure joy. This is the mom's tenth child—only four of them have survived. More sobering were the comments from the nurses that, in the

U.S., the decision may have been to abort the baby.

NO SHORT SUPPLY OF STUDENTS

About four years ago, Patrick, the coordinator for the team of translators and a Haitian pastor's son, introduced me to a California-based elementary school teacher who also served as the education counselor for a U.S. nonprofit that worked with a Haitian school. At the time, I had been thinking about helping more people earn a decent living through translation services for the visiting physicians. As things frequently happen in Haiti, discussions quickly began in earnest about teaching young middle schoolers English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as a long-term project.

In Haiti, for any subject one may want to teach, there are always people who are interested. Our goal was to find students who might need a helping hand to tide over difficult circumstances. Patrick took us to a school operated out of Fontamara in the Port-au-Prince area. It was funded by the Power of Education Foundation, a nonprofit registered in Grand Rapids, MI, and staffed entirely by Haitian teachers and administrators. The PEF School, as it was known, began as a grassroots project in highly vulnerable communities susceptible to gang violence and activity. Many students were gang members' kids, typically whose mothers wanted to keep them in school for as long as possible and out of gang activity. Over time, the school won the respect of the community and even the gang leaders. The principal, Joseph Geordanie (Jordan), an orphan raised by a nun, had worked for years to educate these children at great risk to his life.

The foundation had been looking for a school to partner with after the earthquake and had started working with Jordan to create a safe space in a rented, gated building. The school now accommodates more than 200 students, Kindergarten through ninth grade. Besides the teaching, the school serves the students nutritious breakfasts and lunches.

A RELIABLE, IF CHAOTIC, CONNECTION

After a year of planning, we procured a reliable broadband Internet connection for the school and computers. We landed on a model that would source volunteer teachers and pair them with two or three students to teach for an hour on Saturdays, September through May. With assistance from then-missions pastor Bruce Wilson at College Church, Wheaton College professor Jeff Greenberg and World Relief, we put together material for a curriculum and reached out to Wheaton College students to join the initiative.

We recruited five volunteers to teach 10 students. None spoke Creolophone. The Haitian kids spoke little English. Our first day was chaotic to say the least. Once I my first question "How are you?" was asked and answered, "I'm fine, thank you, and you?" The English gave out. I was discouraged, but Jordan let me know that the kids were truly excited, and we were doing much better than expected.

Many of us in College Church have experience teaching ESL classes and know the challenges involved in teaching English to students unfamiliar with it. All this becomes trickier over the Internet. We started teaching through video calls using Facebook Messenger. Haitian helpers who spoke some English were on hand and could be relied upon to help when needed. Many of us found ways to express our thoughts creatively through actions, sketches and sheer tenacity. Some of us learned a little Creole along the way!

IN REAL LIFE

After two years of teaching, I traveled to Haiti in 2018 to put our most promising students to test in a real-life environment. A girl and boy, ages 16 and 14, traveled with me to the clinic set up by the visiting physician team. There these young students received the most intense training of their lives, among people whose lives depended on them. They ran around the clinic, translating, running errands, performing triage for waiting patients, spending 12 hours on their feet, skipping meals. Though they

still had a long way to go before they could help as full-fledged translators, the experience had changed them.

I have had several conversations with the kids about their hopes and aspirations. We have had stragglers, perhaps with long undiagnosed learning disabilities, who nevertheless walked a couple of hours every Saturday to get to the PEF school building to attend our classes. Some aspire to be physicians; others want to learn a trade from a parent or close relative. Some have not thought beyond school yet. Many are devoutly religious, if with an imprecise understanding of God. Several have shown signs of real change—from the words they speak to the company they keep.

Each year we need new teachers as college students graduate and move away or our Haitian students increase in number. In 2018-19, we taught 20 kids with eight teachers, some who have been with us from the beginning, both students and teachers. We had a stall at Wheaton College's ministry fair last September to invite college students to volunteer their time. We also have three other College Church volunteers who teach the Haitian kids. For these teachers, the experience has proved meaningful.

This year was eventful in Haiti. Due to economic challenges and many socio-political issues, Haiti saw widespread rioting in early 2019. For several weeks we couldn't hold classes because the kids and their teachers in Haiti were waiting out the riots, remaining home with doors bolted tight to keep out miscreants. The school had stockpiled food and other supplies for several days. Cash was scarce because the banking system had shut down. After four tense weeks, we resumed, but one could hardly tell that these students had just come out of what was surely a harrowing period. The kids were indefatigable and eager to learn.

EARTHY PARABLES

We want to add more students for the upcoming school year, and I'm hoping to add more teachers as well to help build up this initiative. In this venture,

I'm often reminded of the parable of the yeast:

And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Luke 13:20–21)

Yeast, flour, seeds, a lost coin, a pearl hidden in a field. Strange parables, so intimately earthy and so familiar in the smiling faces I see in Haiti each time I travel, moving about the streets of Port-au-Prince or the mountain tops in Morne de l'Hôpital.

For years before my first trip to Haiti, I had read about that country's political

challenges and the heavy social, relational and economic toll they took on her people. My first contact with Haitians helped me appreciate their ingenuity, creativity and deep faith much more. Indeed, I have been shaped by this contact with the gospel at work as I hope they have been over the years. An Indian pastor, Christopher Coelho, once wrote, *"Reading, speculation, investigation and the rest are apparently safe areas, but things like unction, devotion, admiration, piety, love and gladness bring you to slippery ground. You make yourself highly vulnerable. But that is the risk you have to take."*

If you are interested in finding out more about this ministry or would like to help, please reach out to Vijai John at vijai.john@icloud.com

We are especially looking for volunteer teachers for the next academic year starting in September. If you are a native or fluent speaker of English and can spare one hour on Saturdays to teach using your own computer and a reliable broadband Internet connection, you meet the required qualifications! There are no age or foreign language-related considerations. The knowledge of French or Creole is not necessary.

REFRESH

The College Church Logo Through the Years

You may notice in the days ahead that we have a new College Church logo showing up in our print, on signs around church and on our website. It's new, but it's not new. It's still a ship. We've used a ship for our logo for many years.

So, people ask, "Why a ship?" We aren't near the ocean. We aren't located in a Great Lakes harbor town. So why a ship in the heartland?

Throughout the Bible and church history, the ship has served as a key image of our faith. From Noah's Ark to Jesus with the disciples in a boat, calming the sea, the ship stands as an image, a refuge of safety against a storm or a vessel of deliverance. The early church images of a ship, sometimes with a cross in the sails, also depicted a way we journey from this world to the next.



College Church's ship began with an image that referenced our congregational heritage and the Christian faith of the Pilgrims that took them on a journey—a story of faith, bravery and heroism to the new world. Metaphorically, the ship can also picture the church sailing into the seas of the world with the gospel.

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