

I. Early History 2011-2012

God of Mercy, of Wisdom and Mystery, where do we need to be led now to come to both a deeper response to our Critical Concerns and a radical embrace of our identity?

A notice posted on the message board at the 2011 Institute Chapter in Chicago read “Focus group on Haiti at Table 24, lunchtime on Thursday, for conversation around a response to Haiti.” So began the first informal meeting of a group that has been come to be known as *Mercy Focus on Haiti* (MFOH). The group includes, at present, Sisters of Mercy, Associates in Mercy and friends of Mercy.

MFOH is a committee who have come together a result of many conversations and a common desire to respond in an effective way to the ongoing human crisis in Haiti. In sharing our common concerns for the people and communities in Haiti, we were convinced that together, given our diverse experiences and access to resources, we could network to partner more effectively to support those who are suffering in Haiti. The goal was to establish a partnership with an existing organization (not initiate a new program) in Haiti that meets criteria for the mutual benefit of all.

The criteria that FOH used in identifying potential partners were the following: consistent history in Haiti (>10 yrs.), a religious community, reasonable capacity for goal-setting and project implementation - if fluency in Creole was required, if English was spoken - desirable and safe location, diversity of Community based ministries, opportunity for short or long term volunteer ministry (hands-on-practical), housing availability, work for Haitian empowerment and systemic development of quality of life and interest in a collaborative relationship.

Over 30 organizations were identified and using the criteria the list was culled down to six organizations. In November 2011, three of the FOH committee members, Betty Scanlon, RSM, Robert Greene and Andrea Healy, traveled to Haiti to visit the six organizations, and after that visit recommended to the total committee discernment around two of the organizations.

In January 2012, just after the second anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti, a group of Sisters of Mercy and friends traveled to Haiti for an immersion experience and to further explore potential partnership with two religious communities: the Religious of Jesus and Mary and the Salesian Sisters. The delegation included Sisters of Mercy: Beth Dempsey, Dale Jarvis, Eileen McDonnell, Anne Marie Miller, Karen Scheer, Karen Schneider, Rita Valade and Mary Waskowiak, and friends: Robert Greene, Andrea Healy, Sarah Healy and Laurie Olson.

The group arrived on January 22nd in Port-au-Prince (PAP) and settled into Matthew 25, a guest house in the Delmas section of the city run by Sr. Mary Finnick, GNSH. The first night we met to discuss the upcoming week and Sr. Mary provided a brief talk about Haiti and her experience of this resilient country before and after the earthquake.

The first morning, we spent some time with an NGO, called Partners in Development, in the Blanchard section of PAP. We wanted to get a sense of how a grassroots NGO functions in Haiti. They provide free medical care, child sponsorship programs, midwife training, construction of housing and micro financing in this community.

In the afternoon of the first day, we went to the *Musée du Panthéon National Haitien* (National Museum) which took us through the history of Haiti and a photo exhibit of the time of the earthquake. We walked along the street to the ruined Presidential Palace which is in the process of deconstruction. Directly across the street from the Palace is a park that now contains a tent city. In fact, in any available open spaces, there was a community of tents in which people had been living since the earthquake. It is estimated that there are still 500,000 Haitian citizens still living in tent cities without the benefit of running water, proper sanitation systems or electricity. We finished our tour of the capital stopping at both the skeletal remains of the Cathedral and the site of St. Francis de Sales in which one building out of 20 was left standing after the earthquake.

Over the next few days we visited the Salesians Sisters based in PAP and then traveled up to Gros Morne, a small city about 4 hours north, where the Religious of Jesus and Mary and their ministries are located.

The Salesians Sisters have a community of 80 Sisters scattered throughout Haiti and are part of an international presence of over 15,000 strong. Their primary work is education and housing for children. We met the Sisters who escorted us to Cite Soleil and a visit to their school. The school (one of 14) is situated in Cite Soleil, a section of PAP which contains the largest community of poor people in the Western hemisphere – numbering over 400,000. We were greeted by children singing, welcoming us with their beautiful smiles in the midst of extreme poverty. The school is an oasis of hope for these 350 children – 2 to 16 years – who are not only educated but taught to have self-respect, to hold themselves with dignity and to believe that they have potential and a future.

We then drove out of Cite Soleil to visit to Croix des Bouquets – the future site of an orphanage for 2000 children. The ground has been cleared and broken open – and now receiving the foundations for a future for the children – new life and hope.

The Sisters hosted us for lunch and showed us their Motherhouse and orphanage located in PAP. They took in 44 girls who were left without family after the earthquake. When we asked how we could connect/partner with them – their responses were: medical and psychological care for their orphans; trauma/ PTSD therapy; school twinning/pen-pals; and the new orphanage will need: clothes, sheets, school supplies.

The next couple days saw us traveling to and spending time in the “country” visiting with the people and ministries in Gros Morne. The Religious of Jesus and Mary (RJM) sisters have ministered in Haiti since 1997. Today, their commitment to serving the needs of the Haitians is in three areas: Port-au-Prince, Gros Morne, and Jean Rabel. Their community based partnerships

are focused on medical care, education, socioeconomic and agricultural development. In Gros Morne, the RJM Sisters support a population of 30,000 folks in town and 140,000 in the outlying regions. Gros Morne Parish contains 15 chapelles (churches) and we visited two – Corail and Fon Ibo. To travel to Corail, we loaded into all-terrain vehicles and took an unpaved, rock strewn and creek/river transected road to reach the church and school. We walked with parish staff and RJM volunteers, who with great pride, showed us many of their environmental projects including ravine development to correct water flow resulting in erosion; reforestation, terracing for farming, composting, animal husbandry and water purification.

We were also able to tour the schools in these communities and meet the children who were as curious about us as we were about them and their hopes and dreams for the future. Most children hoped to go on to secondary school, but the lack of opportunity and finance puts that dream out of reach for almost all the children. We learned that many of the children walked 2-3 hours to school each day, spent 4-5 hours at school, and then took the long walk home- all without any food.

We also visited a RJM run shelter and hospice for homeless, physically/mentally ill persons. This is the only such structure providing this needed service in Gros Morne. The RJMs are very closely affiliated with Alma Mater Hospital which provides a pediatrician, gynecologist, general surgeon and general internists as well as 24/7 emergency support. There are also three clinics in remote areas of the parish.

At the end of our stay in Gros Morne, we met with the community/parish leaders and asked what they dreamed for their community? They responded: programs to help people develop life values and prepare leaders for the community; construction of earthquake safe housing; micro financing for small businesses so families can send their children to schools; expansion and updating of the convent buildings (built in the 1880s) and of the school, then housing 557 students (preschool-6th grade) 14 teachers; computers for the school; and resources for school food programs (only 8 of 15 schools, then had such programs).

The FOH committee plans to meet over the next couple of months to discern next steps and decide how best respond to the needs in Haiti. As we traveled through this mountainous country, we talked about and reflected on our Chapter Declaration and Critical Concerns. FOH asks for your prayers and support as we continue to listen to the call that we are hearing from our God who is Mercy and “respond to unmet needs in solidarity with impoverished people”.