

## Patience and Perseverance

*A personal reflection by Jim Hodgson, The United Church of Canada's regional program coordinator for partnerships in the Caribbean, Central America, Colombia and Pacific, on the history and resourcefulness of the people of Haiti. January 2010.*

There is something about Haiti, its people, and their struggles, that gets right inside of those who choose to get involved.

The first time I went to Haiti was in 1984. The country's greatest problem then was the dictatorship of the Duvalier family. I rode in a bus from the capital city to the north coast, and for many hours we followed a *tap-tap*—a brightly painted truck adapted for passenger and cargo transport—that had painted on the back the slogan “Patience et Persévérance.” That became my approach to solidarity and development.

The second time I went to Haiti was in August 1987. By then, the Duvalier dictatorship had collapsed, but the army kept intervening to block the people's drive for democracy. I joined the people of the grassroots church movement *Ti-Legliz*, who had seized the Roman Catholic Cathedral to press their demands for democracy and respect for human rights. I also visited trade union, church, and development workers, and came away feeling that things could and would change for the better.

I wrote then: “Getting involved with Haiti becomes a roller coaster of emotions. When things in Haiti start to look better, it's easy to get caught up in the exuberance. But when the death toll mounts from civil strife or natural disaster, the pain is so intense that mourning, for a time anyway, seems to block action.” Now the cathedral lies in ruins.

The third time I went to Haiti was in December 1990, when I joined an election observation mission of the Caribbean Conference of Churches. We met Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide in a basement room of the Hotel Christopher (which now also lies in ruins). The *Ti-Legliz* movement drove Aristide to victory. But the struggle since then for citizens' participation in the decisions that most affect their daily lives has been painful: a military coup, two foreign interventions, severe divisions among people of good will in Haiti and abroad (in part because of the failure of the international community to live up to promises made after Aristide was returned to power in 1994, and in part over the conduct of Aristide during his second presidency after 2000). Now the national palace is in ruins and the structures of governance seem weak in the face of a new, perhaps necessary, military intervention.

In the past decade, since I have been working with The United Church of Canada, I have gone back to Haiti almost every year. Now I have friends who work among the churches, in the non-governmental organizations, and in the Canadian embassy. In the past decade, we have worked together to rebuild in the wake of natural and political disasters. After the 2008 food riots, Haiti disappeared from



international headlines—and that was a sign that things were getting a bit better. Today we wait in hope and prayer for news of friends: I know some of those who are dead, and many more who are missing.

I am stunned by consecutive nights of almost non-stop television coverage of events in Haiti, but the flow of rescue stories is devoid of useful information. Why are there no building codes? Why are Haitians impoverished? Why do people seem annoyed by the growing foreign military presence?

A few voices seep through. Haiti's exclusion goes all the way back to the sheer audacity of the 400,000 Haitian slaves who rebelled against 30,000 European landowners. They won their freedom and independence in 1804. The poet Joël Des Rosiers told CBC Radio on January 17 that Haiti had to pay 150 million gold francs to France, equivalent now with interest to 10 billion euros (\$14.7 billion). Haiti's isolation continues through the blunders of policy-makers who would rather keep Haitian migrants out of the United States than invest in development that would create the conditions for Haitians to live well. Haiti's neighbours seem happier to send in more soldiers for the sake of security than to figure out how to hear and respect the people and their aspirations.

After surviving the earthquake, the Montreal-based writer Dany Laferrière returned home and called for an end to stereotyped discourse about Haiti being cursed. "They should talk instead about that incredible energy that I saw, of men and women who, with courage and dignity, help each other.... They should speak of grace."

Indeed, from the time of the revolt against the French slave-holders, the people of Haiti have always had a political vision that is different from that of the masters. Even while subjected to dictators who modelled themselves on Napoleon, the Haitian people (as opposed to the state or the economic elite) have constructed their own ways of relating to each other. They organize in religious movements, peasant associations, student unions, women's organizations, credit unions, and co-operatives. That engagement generates the most compelling alternative proposals for a better future.

Patience and perseverance.

The task ahead will be to continue to strengthen the organizations and voices of the poor as they seek real and lasting solutions, and to hold the international community to a vision of authentic development that includes all Haitians.