

Visit to the Partner Roundtable meetings Haiti: 11—18 September 2015

By Rachael Varney, Partnership Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Aims

- To participate in the annual partners meeting with Eglise Méthodiste De Haiti (EMH)
- To learn more about the context in which the EMH works, its successes and challenges
- To spend time with our mission partners John and Sharon Harbottle, witness first hand their lives in Haiti and learn more about the work that they do
- To meet with the Nationals in Mission which we support in Haiti

In my report I won't talk about Haiti's history and context as that has been covered very recently in previous reports. If you would like to learn more about the country and the aftermath of the earthquake in 2010, please refer to [Sandra Lopez's report from January 2015](#) and also [David Friswell's report](#) from the last partner's meeting in 2014.

I arrived at Port au Prince Airport in Haiti to intense heat and a warm welcome from John Harbottle in the luggage hall as I waited to pick up my suitcase! John and Sharon had just returned from their furlough in the UK to begin another term of service and had landed a few minutes before me. Along the way we met up with other international visitors who had also arrived for the Partners' conference. Following a winding path through teams of porters all trying to help with our baggage we finally all piled into the minibus sent from the Methodist Guest House to pick us up.

The guesthouse is located on a large compound in Petionville, above the bustling city of Port au Prince and about 30 minutes drive (depending on traffic) from the airport. It belongs to the EMH and along with the guest house there are various houses for EMH staff, offices and meeting rooms for the church, John and Sharon's house, the Ecole De Frères - a primary and secondary school - and the Ecole Professionnelle Methodiste de Frères. It is a very large compound, surrounded by walls to ensure security and safety. The guesthouse is run by the efficient and hardworking Brulan - a Haitian who has heeded the call to return to his country and play an active part in its future - together with a team of wonderful people. The food both in the guest house and during the conference was superb - we all ate very well indeed! Outside of the compound the streets are filled with people buying and selling all manner of goods on the footpaths, from clothes to food to mobile phones and household items. It is a heaving mass of people and I was amazed to see the amount of goods which the Haitian people carry on their heads with a smile on their faces!



During my visit I was struck by the joy of the people despite, for many, living in poverty and living with the effects of the earthquake physically, emotionally and psychologically. Sharon and John told me that many of the roads, though often no more than dirt tracks today, had not existed when they first visited Haiti back in 2012, so it is remarkable to see how far the country has come since those days following the devastating earthquake.

Partner's Conference

The partner's conference is a gathering of all those donors who support and partner with the EMH on a regular basis. These fall into 2 main categories, 1) international Church partnerships - UMCOR (United Methodist Committee On Relief) which is the relief branch of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church in the USA, The Methodist Church of Britain, All We Can and the United Church of Canada and 2) representatives from different United Methodist Church Conferences around the USA, mainly Michigan, Kansas, Virginia and New York. These Conferences have individual "covenant" relationships with the EMH and invest heavily in the Church in various ways, but often through sending teams of people (Volunteers in Mission-VIM) to go to Haiti on a regular basis to carry out construction work alongside the church, capacity training or medical assistance. The relationship is often long standing and is a commitment for many years. The partners conference is a regular activity, started after the earthquake of January 12, 2010 during which the EMH performs a critical analysis of ongoing programmes with its partners and defines, in the light of results achieved and lessons learned, new priorities and new directions for future action.



John kicking off our joint presentation

The theme of this year's conference, which was interspersed with devotions each day and 2 visits, was "Stewardship – What Can I do for my Church." We discussed a variety of issues such as education and health, development and Christian education. We also heard a summary from each of the partners, including ourselves of course from Methodist Church House, and a critical analysis from specialists about the refugee situation on the border with the Dominican Republic and the imminent elections in the country.

One main theme which recurred throughout the conference was the challenges that the church has with reporting for the grants it receives. Often the circuit superintendents with a whole host of things under their charge struggle to fulfil reporting duties and so this then leads to grants from partner churches being put on hold understandably until they receive the report – this mainly affects UMCOR who support a significant amount of projects in Haiti and the individual US church conferences. As partners we discussed ways to mitigate this and to work together with the Church to ensure they have the capacity and knowledge to deal with complex financial and reporting matters.

Another serious issue for the Church is the ongoing problem of not being able to pay teachers' salaries. EMH has many Methodist Schools under their charge and in order to meet the financial commitments for each school, the students are expected to pay a small amount each year. However, the Haitian Government has in the last few years decreed that education should be "free" at the point of use for all. As a result parents are not paying the fees, but do not want to send their children to state schools (where the schooling is free) since class sizes are large and the education is not as good as in the Methodist Schools. This has created a serious problem for the Church who has had to resort to relying on external donors to pay these salaries. The situation is not sustainable and the Church is going to need to find innovative ways of raising finance for their schools. If the schools are to survive they must find a way of enforcing some payment, however small, from the parents so their children can continue their education.

Worship/Inauguration/Nationals in Mission

We worshipped on the Sunday morning in the Port au Prince New College Bird Church. There were, not one, but two choirs involved, who were amazing! A partner's meeting is the ideal time to celebrate something new and so we also attended a service of Inauguration at the Puits Blain



Methodist School (ages 3-17/8 years) to celebrate the building of a new extension block which has recently been completed with funding from the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). After the service I had the privilege of meeting with Prof Rosy Desroches, whose work producing a Civic Education Book for students in secondary schools we have been supporting through a National in Mission grant.

Left to right – Prof Desroches, Edzaire Paul, Revd M Depestre, Bishop Gesner and Jim Gulley (UMCOR)

Before I left Haiti I met with the lead staff members - Francois Louisma Jean, Goin Evens and Dany Jean, (seen in the picture below in that order left to right) - who together are managing the Ecole Professionnelle Methodiste de Frères, an adult vocational school for anyone from 16-60 years old! We have been supporting the school since 2014 with a National in Mission grant and I had a tour of the school and got to practise my very rusty French! The school teaches vocational classes in mechanics, electricity, plumbing and welding. In August this year a dozen students graduated. The next school year begins in October. We will be supporting this position for the next four years and I look forward to hearing more about it as it develops and grows.



Methodist Mission Partners in Haiti/Furcy and La Saline

Of course one of the highs of my visit was to visit **John and Sharon Harbottle**, spend time with them and visit the projects they are involved in. As we travelled around they taught me so much about Haiti, the recovery post earthquake and the Haitian people.

I went with John and David Kalete from All We Can to visit one of the church's clinics in Furcy up in the mountains above Port au Prince. Here there is a doctor who visits once a week to treat people from the community and there is a nurse who is there 5 days a week. John also goes there about 4-5 times a year to help out, as well as his other duties.



The surrounding countryside at Furcy and John in front of the clinic

Another day I visited La Saline Clinic and School near the docks in Port au Prince which serves the poorest parts of the city. Over 300,000 people live nearby in a slum area with virtually no sanitation, electricity, waste collection or clean water. Nurses attend every day and a doctor attends several days a week for about two hours a time. The clinic staff are highly committed to their patients and work hard despite the challenges. Read more about the [clinic here](#).



a) examining the store cupboard with staff from the clinic and b) the waiting room



The church, school and clinic were refurbished with assistance from Methodist Churches in Britain, initiated by the congregation of Westminster Central Hall in London. I met and talked with the head teacher of the school who showed me around. The biggest challenge for her and her staff is the fact that their salaries are often paid in arrears, a serious issue which,



as I referred to previously, was debated at length during the partners' conference in order to find a way to combat this. I was struck by the commitment of the teachers in the school, who despite these obstacles continue to teach – I wonder how teachers would react to this situation in the UK! I observed a class with older children learning Creole and also some of the younger classes who were all on their best behaviour. You can see them in the pictures all looking immaculate and the girls with yellow ribbons in their hair!

The Future

Following on from Sandra's discussions with the Bishop in Jan 2015 and recommendations for ways in which we can partner with the EMH by investing in their personnel and members, I continued discussions with the Bishop about applying for a Scholarship and Leadership Training (SALT) group training grant. As a result I have now recommended a SALT application from EMH to train a large group of stewards and worship leaders which, if it is successful, will involve Sharon. I hope that in November at the SALT committee meeting the application will be approved.

We are of course continuing to support John and Sharon Harbottle as mission partners in Haiti and they plan to serve there until 2019. They are doing an incredible job, often in challenging circumstances and frequently do over and above what their "normal" day to day jobs require of them. I saw firsthand how pivotal they are – John to the medical work there and assisting the VIM teams from the US who periodically go to offer medical assistance. He is doing a sterling job ensuring that the teams are coordinated and they value his work greatly. Sharon too is often busy preaching on a Sunday or called on at a moment's notice to play the organ as she was the Sunday I was in the congregation! John and Sharon are truly cherished and respected by all and I witnessed the warmth and love extended to them as they returned after their time in the UK and were greeted by everyone as they arrived back on the Methodist Compound, in the churches, clinics and schools.

Please continue to pray for Haiti and the Methodist Church there, for John and Sharon and for all the people involved in the diverse and huge amount of work connected to the church. Pray for the Haitian people as they live in the shadow of the devastating effects of the 2010 earthquake which shattered so many lives in unimaginable ways, but who, despite this, demonstrate a real hope in the face of adversity.

You can read more about John and Sharon's role in Haiti [here](#) and through [their newsletters here](#).

John and Sharon outside their house on the compound

