

*Partnership Visit to Eglise Methodiste d'Haiti (EMH)-21 -29 January 2014*

*'Bon Dieu!'*

This is what Haitian Methodists say to proclaim the goodness of God whenever His name is mentioned. For those that know a thing or two about Haiti, and as I discovered on my very first partnership visit to the country, this is a powerful and challenging statement given what the nation has gone through in the last five years and the challenges still to be overcome.

My purpose for going was to represent the Methodist Church in Britain at the church's annual conference, to spend time with our mission partners, John and Sharon Harbottle and to spend a few days visiting some of the work the Methodist Church in Britain have been supporting.



**First impressions**

When asked about my first impressions of Haiti, I came out with 'hustle and bustle'. Life in Port-au Prince is bustling, with streets packed with informal street vendors, tap taps (public buses) picking up passengers, taxi motorcycles ferrying people around and cars navigating their way through heavy traffic. The roads are generally very good, there is much less rubble lining the streets than I expected and there are many new buildings being erected. Granted there are still tell-tale signs of the 2010 earthquake, but I was very impressed with the progress made in the city.

Statistics dictate that Haiti remains the poorest country in the western hemisphere. I saw obvious poverty in Port-au

Prince, and was told that many people here live hand to mouth. Food in Haiti is expensive, but American imports are cheaper than Haitian products, so many people have no choice but to support the American economy instead of their own. I witnessed extreme poverty in the Saline community on the outskirts of Port-au Prince, where there was what seemed to be a roaring market trade taking place, only it was taking place on top of decaying produce, and general waste from the community. It is an area that the *EMH* serves through a medical clinic, chapel and primary school. There remains a significant NGO presence in Haiti, and these continue to partner with Haiti to build a better future for its people. The issue is now about how Haiti can wean itself off donor dependency and use its vast resources, natural and human, to bring the nation out of poverty. This is why the Methodist Church in Britain continues to work closely with All We Can, UMCOR, the United Church of Canada and the *EMH*, in order to help the church work in a way that is sustainable and self-financing in its context.

Haiti is a beautiful, mountainous Island. Tourism to Haiti is being promoted extensively by the government and it has big potential as a holiday destination to rival other beautiful Caribbean islands.



## The Conference

The conference was conducted in Haitian Creole, which I naively thought I would understand, but it is a very different language! However some of the highlights of the Conference for me included:

- The re-election of Revd Gesner Paul as the District President.
- Discussions on improving transparency of circuit accounts and the outlining of the Financial Director's role, which is currently occupied by Andre Recourt, a former National in Mission Appointments postholder.
- Hearing about some of the serious issues facing Methodist Schools, including difficulties in paying teacher's salaries
- Discussions of the church's vision for 2017, the 200 year anniversary year of Methodism in Haiti and the church's vision for opening a university in that same year as part of the celebration.
- Hearing about the success of the 'predicateurs' training (local preacher training) organised in collaboration with the United Methodist Church's Florida Conference, the *EMH* and Sharon Harbottle.
- The opportunity to greet the *EMG* on behalf of the Methodist Church in Britain and outline how we have been recently working together through our Scholarship and Leadership Training Programme (SALT), the NMA programme and the sending of mission partners, and how I envisage us continuing to work together in the coming years, primarily through the strengthening of the church's personnel.



## CHURCH MINISTRIES AND PROJECTS



**SCHOOLS:** The *EMH* owns hundreds of schools across the country, so one of the highlights for me was to visit a few of these.

***Ecole Normale des Frères* Primary and Secondary Schools:** I got to chat to Haitian young people and find out what some of the challenges they faced as young people were and what they wanted to do when they were older. One girl aged about 15 told me that she wanted to become a doctor, because she was frustrated with the current medical system in Haiti and wanted to play a part in improving hospitals for her community. A young man wanted to become a civil engineer so that he could help in the ongoing reconstruction effort. The older students shared that the main challenge they face was that many of them could not afford to attend university, and there were very few scholarships

available to them in Haiti. It was sad to hear this because the students I met seemed very competent, intelligent and passionate about supporting their beloved country. This is part of the reason why the church feels called to open a Methodist University in 2017, with a view to bridging this gap for young people.

**Nouveau College Bird:** This is the oldest School owned by the *EMH*. Prominent Haitians have graced its corridors, including Jean-Claude Duvalier, President of Haiti between 1971 and 1986. It is one of the best schools in Haiti and was certainly impressive in structure, resources and quality of teaching. The 2010 earthquake devastated a part of the school, and funds sent from the Methodist Church in Britain's Haiti appeal supported its reconstruction. There are still some temporary classrooms being used, but these have come a long way from the tents that students had to study in after the earthquake.



**La Saline primary school:** La Saline Methodist School is a good example of the diverse range of schools that the



Methodist Church has to offer. Whereas Nouveau College Bird is situated at the heart of the city and is one of the top schools in the country, the school in La Saline is situated near to the slum area, and has far fewer resources to use. However the children I saw seemed happy and loved and the church is obviously meeting an important need in the area.

One common aspect across all the schools I visited was the uniforms. All the children I met had very clean, neatly pressed uniforms on, and the little girls had matching ribbons in their hair. Haitian families take great pride in their children's education, regardless of the community in which their school is situated.

## HEALTH CLINICS

Education and healthcare are the primary focus of the church's ministry in Haiti. The *EMH* health programme clinics are all over the country, and Dr John Harbottle, one half of our mission partner couple in Haiti, has done a marvellous job in helping local health clinics work more efficiently for the benefits of patients. He has been involved in the following work:

- Helping clinical staff keep more accurate records of patient visits, thus improving the health service they are able to offer and ultimately, helping to improve lives.
- Supporting volunteer in mission medical teams from the United Methodist Church so that their contribution can be maximised
- Helping clinics work towards a standard of hygiene and essential medical supplies
- Supporting nutritional awareness
- Working with *EMH* staff to draw up a three year strategic plan for the Health programme in collaboration with UMCOR and All We Can.
- Supporting the Health Coordinator, Dr. Benjamin Soledade, in her role to ensure continuity in the work being done when John eventually finishes his placement in Haiti.

One of the health clinics I visited was at la Saline in Port-au-Prince (right), and is carrying out an important service to this impoverished community. Some of the major ailments affecting the community include diabetes and health problems arising from poor sanitary living conditions. The clinic itself is working in challenging conditions, with no running water and frequent power cuts. But medical staff are committed to their patients and continue to work diligently on their behalf under these circumstances.







## HOME FOR THE ELDERLY

The *EMH* runs a residential home for the elderly in Fermathe, a town in the mountains a short distance from Port-au-Prince. The home currently houses 10 people and about 4 staff. They had been moved into new premises refurbished by the church with support from the Methodist Church in Britain's World Mission Fund because the old premises were in a hotter climate and this was having a detrimental effect on the resident's health. One of the ladies I spoke to told me the heartbreaking story of losing her family during the earthquake, so it the church is being the hands and feet of the Lord Jesus as they look after these precious older people.

## NATIONAL IN MISSION APPOINTMENTS PROGRAMME (NMA)

As mentioned earlier, Haiti has some very capable and professional people helping to rebuild it, not least in the *EMH*. One such person is Mr Desroches, the church's Civic Education writer (and former Education minister) whose post is currently being supported by our NMA programme. Mr Desroches (right, with his wife) shared with me how his Civic Education textbook is continuing to attract interest among NGOs in Haiti who wish to use it in their programmes, and significantly the Haitian Ministry for Education wishes to use it in the national curriculum. The church is currently piloting its use in one of their schools and is training teachers on how to use it with their students. This is a wonderful example of how local work by local church members can be effective and bring great benefit to the community, which is what makes the NMA programme so successful among partner churches all over the world.



## SCHOLARSHIP AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING (SALT)

Revd Chrisnel Lelievre is the SALT student coming to study at Queens in Birmingham-the first Haitian Methodist student to come to the UK in many years! He will be studying a Masters in theology, ministry and mission. It is hoped that he will be one of many future SALT students from Haiti to study in the UK, as masters courses there are shorter than at the other nearby places of study use him as a resource on understanding the current Haitian context.

### STRATEGY MEETING WITH REVD GESNER PAUL

During our meeting, it became obvious to me that the best way in which MCB can support *EMH* is to capitalise on its best resource-its personnel and faithful members. The church is facing the challenge of becoming self-sustainable and financially independent from donor partners, which is why I believe it is both in the *EMH* and MCB's interest to invest in its people and help those that have or can develop the necessary knowledge and skills to make a way for the church to become sustainable in its operations. Therefore we are going to concentrate on the following things in the next few years:

**NMA posts:** staff with existing skills and knowledge can be supported by an NMA grant from the World Mission Fund to enable key mission posts to be developed and supported. This will increase the church's capacity to get important pieces of work done which will strengthen its operations and allow it to work effectively in mission.

**SALT programme:** Revd Gesner is open to considering SALT group training grants as well as individual SALT grants. This will enable the church to train a wider number of personnel in areas that are crucial to its effective running, for example in management, in basic accountancy, in administration, etc. I believe that any church needs all manner of gifts and graces, and we cannot expect the ministers to also be good administrators, accountants, managers, etc as well as shepherd the flock! This is why I encouraged the church to think as widely as possible in terms of its training needs.

**Mission partners:** Currently, our greatest demonstration of love for the *EMH* is through our investment in John and Sharon Harbottle as mission partners there. They have been doing a sterling job, John with the Health programmes and Sharon working alongside Christian Education department colleagues. I have already shared some of the work John is doing. Sharon's work has included planning and training seminars for local preachers, preparing training material for local preachers, men and women, and youth, preparing material for Sunday school, preparing special Sundays resources

for Superintendents and local preachers, preparing training manuals on Wesley's sermons and more! Mission partners often find that their roles in a partner church evolve over time to meet the needs of their context, and this has certainly been the case for John and Sharon. They have become 'greeters' and often 'meeters' of many volunteer mission teams

coming from the US, and have provided valuable orientation to them during their stay in Haiti.

One of things I love about the Harbottles is that although they may be involved in vital church work and are at the forefront of many things, they do not forget about their immediate neighbours, and those who are in need who are at their doorstep. When the Chikungunya virus hit Haiti as it has done with most of the Caribbean, most of the workers on the Methodist compound were affected by it, and John offered them advice and treatment, which they would have found difficult to access elsewhere. This is the love of Christ in action. Conversations are currently being held with the Harbottles and Revd Gesner Paul concerning a possible extension to their mission partner placement in Haiti.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

There is a Haiti that is portrayed by the media, and there is the real Haiti that one can only experience in person. This is not to say that the issues we hear about back home do not exist, but I quickly began to realise that there is much hope in Haiti, and a major part of that hope lies in the very capable, professional Haitian people that I met during my visit. These included doctors, human rights activists, economists, accountants and more, all of whom have a deep love for their nation and are very passionate about investing themselves into its rebuilding, through their service to the *Eglise Méthodiste d'Haïti* (EMH). Despite the significant brain drain from Haiti to the US and Canada, there are also Haitians who have felt the call to return to their beloved country and play an active part in ensuring a brighter future for it. Many of these capable people were present at the Conference and throughout my visit I met people serving the marginalised, the weak and the poor, and doing it with the grace, love and strength of God, amid some very challenging circumstances. It is important that the Methodist Church in Britain continues to support Haiti by empowering the EMH to become self-sufficient and maximise its existing resources.



A view of a slum area built up on the mountains surrounding Port-au-Prince