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Dear Haiti trip supporter,

Bonjou - Good Morning! (If you happen to read this letter after lunch, the proper Haitian greeting becomes Bonswa - Good Afternoon!) I have recently returned from my mission trip to Haiti and am eager to share some of my experiences and thoughts with you.

The 2009 Greenwoods Community Church team departed JFK International Airport for Port au Prince, Haiti on November 6 at 9:00 a.m. The flight went smoothly, and all 15 members of the team, as well as all of our luggage, arrived safely on the tarmac in Haiti shortly before noon. After proceeding through Immigration we started the challenging process of leaving the airport. I use the adjective "challenging" because that's what it was – a never-to-be-forgotten experience of propelling our baggage-laden selves through the airport doors and into a reception area mobbed by pseudo airport porters in grey suits with red hats. These "porters" swarmed around us as we walked in a straight line so as not to be separated, urging us to allow them the honor of assisting us with our heavy bags. We politely but firmly brushed past their outstretched hands with repeated "No, thank you's" or "I will carry my own luggage, THANK YOU!" As part of our pre-trip training we had been told that the majority of the uniformed personnel outside the airport have no official status and are most likely Haitians dressed up in mock uniforms in hopes of capturing bags from unwary travelers. Declining their aggressive offers of help felt hard-hearted, but we knew that allowing them to touch our luggage could put us and our mission at risk.

After pushing our way towards the pickup area, we were met by our host's driver, Maxim, in a Haitian vehicle called a "tap-tap". A tap-tap looks like a utility truck with a single row of seats on each side of the truck bed, and a roof positioned high enough overhead so that an adult can just move around inside. To board the tap-tap one climbs up a narrow 5-rung ladder and sits down on a narrow seat on either the left or the right side, facing your neighbor across the center "aisle". All the luggage is stowed on the roof with bungee cords to prevent slippage. After Maxim had piled our luggage on top, we jolted off on a bumpy ride to our hosts' house. The roads we took were unpaved and consisted of pot-holes of various depths. In addition to poor road conditions, there appeared to be no traffic regulations. We marveled as cars passed us on both sides, cut in front, or followed us so closely we could look directly down on the drivers. I have never experienced such a chaotic ride in my life, but Maxim guided the tap-tap through the Haitian streets with complete aplomb.

Somewhat to our surprise, we arrived in due course at our hosts' house safely and with all of our luggage still on the roof of the tap-tap. Pastor Martinez Jovin and his wife Emma welcomed us with warm Haitian hospitality, even though we were all very hot, sweaty, and joggled from our travels, and we settled in to get acquainted with our host and hostess and with all of our fellow team members. Ten of us were from Greenwood's Community Church with five others from Boston, making up a team that included three nurses, one dental hygienist, two seasoned construction workers, two artists, and one pastor - all of us with hearts looking forward to serving in any way possible.

We spent our first night at Martinez and Emma's home in Port au Prince. The next day, Saturday, we reloaded the luggage on the roof of the tap-tap and climbed on board for a trip to the village of Marbial, the home of Martinez's school. The trip to Marbial usually takes 3 hours, with a bumpy ride out of Port au Prince, winding ascents and descents through lofty mountains, jarring excursions through a never-ending river bed, and 5 suspenseful river crossings. Our trip took considerably longer due to the tap-tap getting stuck during our last river crossing. Fortunately our host was traveling in front of us in a sturdy Land Rover, and with the aid of his Haitian crew pulled the tap-tap out of the watery ruts we were stuck in!

We arrived at Marbial in the dark, and with the help of many friendly villagers unloaded our heavy bags. When we attempted to carry the luggage carefully across the stream below the village and up the hill to the school where we would be staying, our Haitian helpers blithely took it from us, balanced it on their heads, and trotted across the stream and up the hill as if it were nothing!

The school at Marbial, started by Martinez and Emma Jovin, educates 400 students from surrounding villages. It provides basic education for children of kindergarten age through middle school. With marginal funding and minimal resources, students are taught how to read and write, as well as learning trades such as embroidery, cooking, and agriculture. Lessons are taught with few books, no exercise paper, blackboards with large holes in them, and 1 or 2 pieces of chalk - for the teacher only. Class size averages about 30. Due to lack of funds the school is currently not able to provide hot meals for the children. Funds have been stretched enough to provide a snack of crackers to each student at midday. The lack of school meals is a real problem since most of the children live a 2 to 3 hour walk from the school and their families typically cannot provide adequate food from home. Despite the severe shortage of food and the great distances they have to walk, the children arrive promptly at school each morning in red and white checked uniforms, ready and eager to learn.

After a good night's sleep on Saturday, we were wakened by the resident roosters. The village church service started at 10:00 a.m. Haitian time (meaning long after our watches indicated that 10 o'clock had come and gone) in the small concrete church. The service started out with a beautiful solo sung from memory (and most definitely from the heart) by an 8 year old girl. Our pastor preached in English with pastor Martinez translating into Creole for the Haitians. Unlike most Sundays, the service lasted only 90 minutes. Last year's team reported that the Sunday service was 4 hours long!

Most of our team stayed in Marbial through the following Thursday. A three-day dental clinic run by our team's dental hygienist and an assistant (with supplemental help from me) provided 140 students and teachers with cleaning, extraction of problematic baby teeth, fluoride treatments, and complementary tooth brushes and tooth paste. The dental hygienist reported finding not only large cavities but tartar buildup so severe it had descended to the level of the tooth's root. She also found sand between many of the children's teeth, which we later discovered comes from "dirt cookies" often consumed by children who don't have enough food to assuage their hunger.

Team members not involved in the dental clinic worked on murals for the walls of the kindergarten. Two of the ladies were talented painters and supervised those of us who were not. I am truly a novice painter, and enjoyed getting the chance to learn from real experts. We painted a Noah's ark scene, a picture of the school, farm animals, and (at the special request of Emma) Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse! I was put in charge of painting Donald Duck, and (with considerable help from my mentors) produced a very creditable result.

While the rest of us worked in Marbial, the four young men on the team undertook a real adventure. On Monday they left Marbial at 5:00 a.m. with two Haitian women as guides and cooks and with a burro as luggage carrier, and hiked for 7 hours across a valley and over many mountains to a remote village on the highest mountain in Haiti, where no white person has been for almost 30 years. Their job was to put up the concrete frame for a church building for a congregation that has been meeting without a building for years. Over the next two days they were able to make good progress on the structure as well as getting to know the villagers. They have great memories of the trip up the mountain and hope to make a similar visit again next year.

Aside from what we did, I imagine you would like to know something about my reflections on the trip as a whole. First, despite what everyone knows about the desperate economic conditions in Haiti, I very much enjoyed my time there and the people I met and worked with. Prior to the trip, I had very mixed feelings about the wisdom of going. First, my life was (and still is) in many ways up in the air, with lots of unknowns competing for my attention. I had just finished a 2-month dairy farming internship in southern Pennsylvania, and wasn't sure I was ready for the transition from 3:30 am milking to traversing rivers and conducting myself properly in a foreign culture! Also, since committing to the Haiti trip in early spring, I had decided to take an extended break from nursing and had resigned my job at Dartmouth-Hitchcock's Cancer Center. The idea of flipping back to health care for a week, even in a very different context, was a challenge. In short, I was feeling emotionally very much unprepared for the trip. Nevertheless, thanks to the prayers and support and counsel from my family and so many of you, I was able to go to Haiti, to truly enjoy my time there, and to return home feeling that I had accomplished something meaningful, both for those I went to serve and for myself as well.

When one is in the middle of any difficult transition, it is all too easy to be consumed with the details of one's own internal stresses and strains. I think the trip to Haiti was important for me in large measure because it took me outside myself, and reminded me powerfully of my dependence, and my need for relationship with others, in order to be able to serve effectively. Our Lord handled the worst possible pain and tribulation by giving of Himself for us. He is my example for holding body and soul together in times of personal challenge, not just in a place like Haiti but in every area of life. By living in the closest possible contact with my fellow team members, observing my Haitian hosts, and interacting with a variety of other Haitian adults and children, I experienced vivid examples of dependence on God's gracious love, and the freedom that dependence provides for serving others. In the world's eyes the Haitians have very little, but when you live and serve beside them you draw strength from the direct simplicity of their understanding of God's love for all of us.

I am reminded of Hebrews chapter 13:11-14: "For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here, we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come."

I certainly did not find a "lasting city" in Haiti, any more than I have found (or will find) a lasting city here. But I did find some of the elements of the city which is to come – the city whose prince is Jesus.

Thank you so much for your prayers and support!

Love,

Janet