We See from Where We Stand

By David Diggs, Director of Beyond Borders

When I was new to Haiti, half of what I saw made no sense, and the most important things I couldn't see at all.

One thing that made no sense was the fortress-like structure that stood outside the rural community where I lived. Most people lived in two-room mud huts. So this massive concrete edifice seemed conspicuously out of place. Its walls stood 15 or 20 feet high, and it had a single metal gate that was always locked when I passed by.

But then one day, while out visiting some neighbors, I noticed that the gate was left slightly open. I knocked, poked my head in, and announced myself. The only response was the echo of my voice bouncing off the walls. Inside it looked like an abandoned prison with the bars missing. The inner walls were lined with concrete cells that opened onto a central courtyard.

As I peered inside, a man who had been walking on the road behind me stopped to watch. As a foreigner, I was as much a curiosity to him as this building was to me. I turned and greeted him and asked him what this building was.

"Oh, that thing?" He seemed a little surprised, either by my question or by the fact that I was addressing him in Creole. "It's an orphanage," he replied.

"But where are the children?" I asked.

He responded with a hint of irony in his voice, "Oh, the children are here, but they never stay long." I nodded as if this made total sense to me. He smiled broadly, turned, and went on his way.

The next time I saw Toto, I asked him about this building and the man's enigmatic answer. Toto was a neighbor and friend. I had grown to trust his explanations. He was helping me begin to see the world through Haitian eyes. He had explained why our neighbor's twin boys were so revered in the community, why there were often bits of food and half-burnt candles sitting at the foot of a tree near my house, and why I should never tell a Haitian mother that her baby is beautiful.

Toto explained that what the man had told me at the gate was essentially true. The building was an orphanage of sorts, but children were only occasionally there. The building belonged to a Haitian pastor who had a church up in the mountains above our community. The pastor spoke English and would host short-term mission groups from North America. A few days before a group's arrival, the pastor would fill the orphanage with children who belonged to families in his community. The group then came for a few days to paint, build, or give things to the "orphans." When the group left, the children would return to their families. Toto said that the pastor had grown rich off money the foreigners sent each month for the orphanage.

"But why do people in his community allow him to get rich off of their children?" I asked.

Toto explained that the pastor was a powerful person in his community. Some people might be jealous, but they wouldn't risk offending him. They were probably trying to stay on his good side, hoping he would help them out if they had a problem or needed a loan. The parents were probably happy enough just to know that their children were well fed while at the orphanage.

I was still new to Haiti but had already heard similar stories. There were always three ingredients to these stories: well-meaning foreigners, people in need, and some clever intermediary who was supposedly serving his community.

Friends had told me of a Haitian pastor in a town in the north who owned a private school. He also owned another building that had the same layout as the school, but the walls weren't complete and the building lacked a roof. Visiting church groups would come for a few days and work on the incomplete school building, and leave the country eager to fund the remaining construction. The pastor would pocket the money they sent and send them photos of the already-complete school, full of smiling students. The foreigners were happy to have helped. And the pastor was happy too. My friends, who had been in Haiti much longer than I, cynically described it as a "win-win situation."

Initially when I heard these stories, it wasn't so clear to me what damage was being done. Certainly the pastors were greedy and the visitors gullible, but what real harm had been done?

Over time it became clearer. I began to see that the wealth and power these charlatans accumulated allowed them to build little fiefdoms. They kept the people in their communities almost like vassals. Any attempt the people made to improve their lives by organizing things like agricultural cooperatives, credit unions, or literacy projects was a threat to the feudal lord's control. These individuals, who were supposed to be building the kingdom of God, often worked to undermine the efforts of the poor to improve their lives. It was especially painful when the local lords bore the title of 'pastor.' They were a discredit to the Gospel and gave honest pastors a bad name.

My work brought me into contact with dozens of these visiting work groups. I always tried to be gracious. I knew they meant well, but I began to see these church groups and the money they sent to Haiti as a corrupting influence. I knew what Haiti looked like through their eyes. It had looked the same to me when I first arrived.

To most first-time visitors from North America, Haiti feels extremely foreign, and the material poverty is disturbing and disorienting. The visitors depend on their hosts to make sense of this new world for them.

As the visitors sweat and labor and pour themselves into the project, people from the community often come and watch. When no one from the community but the paid help is working along with the visitors, some group members conclude that the Haitian people are simply lazy. But as I began to see, the lack of community involvement is usually a sign that the people don't feel like the project belongs to them. They didn't initiate it, and it probably won't benefit them much. The work is being done for them rather than with them.

Half of what these foreign visitors see makes no sense, and the most important things they can't see at all. The important things are invisible to eyes that have not adjusted to the Haitian reality, and it isn't always in the interest of their hosts to help them see more clearly.

To the visitors, almost everyone in the community looks uniformly poor. The visitors can't see who calls the shots or how power is distributed. They can't see who is literate and who isn't, or who is in debt and who isn't. They have no way of knowing that the woman who begs from them lost all her land to a local big shot who produced fraudulent papers. She's just a beggar. They have no way of knowing that the nicely dressed man who speaks such good English just paid a big bribe to have a cooperative's grain silo destroyed and its leaders arrested.

The groups are kept busy working, doing, sweating. This makes them feel productive, self-sacrificing, and even heroic. Rarely is any time set aside to discuss the local social and economic structures that keep people poor and hungry. Rarely is any effort made to help the group reflect on the international economic and political order that favors wealthier nations and large multinational corporations. Group members throw themselves into their work in Haiti, but often return home to live like they've always lived, with no better understanding of the connection between the lavishly wasteful lifestyles of most North Americans and the hardships faced by the poor in places like Haiti.

Without guidance, it is difficult for visitors to see the hidden riches of Haiti's people and their culture. Groups are often kept so busy building or working that they have little time to interact with people in the community, to hear their stories, and learn about their resilience and resourcefulness. Because the groups are usually housed separately and not given the chance to stay in the homes of typical community members, the visitors rarely get a chance to experience the lavish generosity and hospitality of Haiti's poor.

We see the world through the lens of our culture, and many visitors come to Haiti wearing their culture's materialistic glasses. They often assume that the materially deprived must also be spiritually deprived. I've even heard short-term mission groups being told that Haiti is poor because it belongs to Satan. They forget the rhetorical question of James, "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

The visitors could learn so much from their Haitian hosts, who so often are rich in faith and tremendously courageous in their struggle for justice and dignity.

As the months went by and my understanding of Haiti increased, I was growing more and more cynical and even found myself arguing that Haiti would be better off if all foreigners left and all aid to Haiti was cut off. It wasn't just money from church groups that caused problems. Some of the greatest damage was done by large projects supported by huge international development agencies. These organizations often seemed to have more resources than they knew what to do with and dumped them almost indiscriminately on hastily designed projects that had little local participation. And anytime easy money was available, the opportunists would crawl out of the woodwork.

I was on the verge of complete despair, but then I had the opportunity to visit several communities in other more remote parts of Haiti. I went to the Central Plateau, where I spent time with a group of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteers. They were living in very simple conditions with the people they were serving. The very efforts that the local feudal lords were trying to crush were the efforts the MCC volunteers supported.

Progress was slow, and there weren't any large buildings to show off. But if you knew what to look for, the results of their work were truly impressive. With remarkably little money, they were undergirding the efforts of several hundred farmers' groups. The farmers were learning techniques that allowed them to produce more food and reduce soil erosion. They were learning how to free themselves from the control of powerful speculators and middlemen who kept them from getting a fair price for their crops, while driving food prices high. The MCC volunteers were clearly working with rather than for the people.

Shortly after this experience I visited the island of Lagonav and met Kathy Zimmerman, an American with Brethren Volunteer Service (BVS). Kathy had lived for several years in a single room in one of the poorest and most remote parts of Haiti. With very limited funds, she was helping members of an association of community organizers develop a literacy program for women and men who had never had the chance to attend school. Kathy helped the literacy instructors find training and their students get reading material. No buildings were built for the classes, but what they lacked in facilities, they made up for in dedication. Classes gathered wherever they could—in a church, under a lean-to, beneath a shade tree with the chalkboard propped up against the trunk. The students pitched in to buy chalk for their teachers, and Kathy helped the instructors get more training. Together they were struggling forward on the arduous journey toward literacy and justice.

Unlike the "orphanage" in my community, this literacy initiative clearly belonged to the people of the community. They knew the difference literacy could make in their lives. To them, to become literate was to feel human for the first time. No longer would they be put to shame. No longer would people take advantage of them and fool them with false contracts. No longer would they bow their heads in shame when others read from the Bible or sang from their hymnals in church. Some among them would one day become teachers and even pastors themselves.

I've heard it said that a cynic is a frustrated idealist. The simple idealism that had taken me to Haiti had soured into cynicism. But visiting these communities where Haitians and foreigners were living and working together in simple solidarity restored my idealism—an idealism now tempered with the realization that good intentions could never be enough. The desire to help others had to be matched by a desire for ever-greater understanding.

There is a Haitian proverb that says, "We see from where we stand." Kathy on Lagonav and the MCC volunteers in the Central Plateau were successful while others failed, because they had invested the time and effort needed to begin seeing the world from the perspective of the people they were hoping to help.

The visiting work groups usually came to Haiti with a simple picture of what was happening. The Haitians were in need, and they could help.

The MCC and BVS volunteers I had met had a far more complex view of things. By living in the community with the people, they saw that many of their needs arose out of unjust structures that served the interests of the privileged, not only in Haiti, but in wealthier countries as well. These volunteers could see beyond the neediness of the people in the community and see their many strengths. Perhaps even more important, these volunteers were aware that they came to Haiti with real needs themselves.

Shortly after visiting Lagonav, I saw a quote hanging on the wall of a Port-au-Prince office. These words, spoken by an anonymous Australian aborigine woman, captured what I was beginning to understand. "If you have come to help me," she said, "you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

It was this understanding that was so painfully missing from so many of the groups that came to help Haiti. Like me, they had come to Haiti blind to their own poverty and need for liberation. We were trying to remove the speck of sawdust from our Haitian neighbor's eye, while blinded by a plank in our own.

Thinking back to the strange orphanage, I could see that the pastor didn't bear all the blame. Few North Americans would sacrifice a week of vacation to go to a place like Haiti without expecting to be immediately put to work helping. The pastor obliged them by putting them to work on something they could easily understand—an orphanage. This community clearly didn't need an orphanage. But building the orphanage was more about meeting the needs of the visitors than meeting the needs of the community.

The more time I spent with visiting work groups, the more I saw them as rich refugees from the material world who came to Haiti hungering for more meaning in their lives. A week of really being with the poor of Haiti could have awakened them to their neediness and opened them to seeking the deep changes that would bring lasting satisfaction. But they were always so busy "helping" the Haitians, that they never found time to be with them.

Jesus said that "the poor are blessed, for God's Kingdom belongs to them." (Luke 6:20) Why does it seem so radical to rich Christians that poor people would have something valuable to share with us and teach us?

When we are new to Haiti, half of what we see makes no sense, and the most important things we can't see at all. But the closer we stand with the poor, the more we can see from their perspective. Important things that were once invisible to us become clear.

We see that we are all in need, rich and poor. The poor know they are in need. By contrast, we, the wealthy and powerful of the world, are often oblivious to our needs. We frantically try to fill our emptiness with more and more stuff, more and more activity, but without satisfaction. Our endless

pursuit of material wealth is a sign of our spiritual poverty. But being with the poor—as opposed to merely doing things for them—can bring a spiritual awakening and be the beginning of our liberation. We see from where we stand, and, for many of us, to stand with the poor is to begin to see God for the first time.

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