

Family Health Ministries Medical Mission Trip with Westminster Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, NC October 2008

The following account was written by Meredith Barkley, from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, NC, who accompanied FHM Executive Director Kathy Walmer and team members to Haiti on a medical mission in October 2008:

Our medical clinic opened on a bright Monday morning high in the rugged mountains of southern Haiti. Patients began arriving well before dawn. Many had walked miles over the steep terrain. One 82 year old woman with high blood pressure and body aches had gotten up at 3 a.m. and walked three hours. She, like the rest, was eager to see a doctor.

By 8:30 there was chaos. Several hundred people jammed onto the veranda at the locked clinic door. They hollered at each other and struggled to move in closer. The throng was restless and in motion. We tried to push through so we could get inside and set up. No luck. Finally one of the Haitians stepped in front of us and took control. He yelled over the din, ordering people aside long enough for us to squeeze through.

Once inside, it didn't take long to prepare for patients. A steady stream flowed through the cramped, noisy space all day. Through translators, each person told what ailed them. Medical team members then assigned them a doctor or nurse practitioner. Patients complained of body pain, flu, blood pressure problems, diabetes, malaria. Many of the children had worms and scabies.

Treatment for most problems was routine – pills for pain, ointments for skin problems. But some patients arrived with problems serious enough that they'd have been sent to a hospital had they arrived at a doctor's office in Greensboro.

- A doctor treated a baby girl daily for third degree burns. She'd apparently fallen into an open cooking fire.
- A 13-year-old boy arrived with a machete cut, which a team member stitched up.
- One boy had an insect bite that had infected his entire leg. His parents were dispatched to a nearby city to buy a tetanus shot and bring it back to be administered. Doctors and nurses saw a number of patients who needed tetanus shots. None were available at the clinic.

David Bouska, a Greensboro family practice doctor, recalled how sad one father became when Bouska had to tell him there was no cure for his beautiful daughter's sudden deafness and loss of speech.

One mother brought in her starving new born. The mother's breast milk had dried up and she had nothing to feed her baby. A team member gave her infant formula collected by Westminster church members, and instructed her how to use it and nurse her baby back to health.

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Most of the infant formula and peanut butter sent down by Westminster is being used in Fondwa's infant nutrition program. That program is a lifeline for many children and their mothers in the community. Every child who came to the clinic got vitamins, some of which were also provided by Westminster.

The people in these mountains were hard hit by this summer's storms. The four storms that swept across Haiti in less than a month did more damage in other parts of the country. In the Fondwa area, though, they washed away gardens, killed livestock, blew down fruit trees and slung mud across roads and trails.

All that has made day to day life here more tenuous. Many were barely getting by as it was. Characteristically, though, the Haitians aren't offering up excuses. They're working harder to provide for their families. Our team helped them a little. That team included Butch Sherrill, Denise Estridge, Wally and Nancy Fox, Julie Long, Lisa Pierzchala, Mary and Roger Hartsell, Caryl Johnson, Bouska, Mary Burritt and Maureen and Meredith Barkley. Kathy Walmer, Family Health Ministries' executive director, led the trip.

In addition to the work described above, the team, with help from Haitian translators, took each patient's vital signs, jotted down their complaints, and assigned them a doctor or nurse practitioner, who treated them. Team members also manned a small laboratory to process medical tests and dispensed medicine from the pharmacy. One team member, Burritt, directed the clinic's flow so it ran as efficiently as possible.

The Stats –

- We saw 700 patients during the clinic's four days
- We exhausted supplies of antibiotics, Tylenol, Ibuprofen and blood pressure medicine, which we had brought.
- We handed out lots of vitamins.
- And we handed out smiles and words of encouragement – to the Haitians and to our team mates.

One on the team got very sick during the trip, and others pitched in to nurse her back to health. When people's hearts ached at what they saw, team members cheered them up. They sang to the babies and taught the Catholic nuns to give soy milk to a colicky baby. They showed Christ's love in a very poor place.

My lasting impressions and final thoughts:

- People walking for 5 hours to come to the clinic, waiting for hours to be seen, never complaining, smiling and thanking me for telling them both good and bad news.
- The bad news usually accompanied with the fact that there was nothing I could do to help them, except to offer a multivitamin and Tylenol for aches and pains, and

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the observation that their heart and lungs sounded REALLY GOOD. They would usually smile and thank me for offering the good report.

- The happiness and innocence of the children, who are born into unbelievable poverty and have limited opportunities for escape.
- The students at the school, who walk for hours to school each day, who know how vital education is to their future.
- The need for awareness in the US of the problems in Haiti