



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Love in the Time of Ebola

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“We covenant to affirm and promote The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

This is the Sixth of the Seven Principles adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1985.

We'll hear a lot about peace this holiday season. It has been part of holiday greetings since an angel appeared to shepherds near Bethlehem to announce the birth of Jesus, saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

But 2,000 years later, we still have no peace. Terror, injustice and deprivation continue.

We UU's take this peace thing seriously, so seriously that we have actual "boots on the ground" working for peace and justice through UU Service Committee internships in the US, England and Ghana, and dozens of UU College of Social Justice service-learning trips in the US, Mexico, India and Haiti. And just last month, the UUA and UUSC announced an Ebola Epidemic Crisis Response partnership to build health centers in West Africa to combat this frightening disease.

This spring, I joined a dozen fellow UUs for a UU College of Social Justice journey to Haiti. Part voluntourism, part spiritual retreat, we worked side-by-side with members of the Papaye Peasant Movement building eco-villages for Port-au-Prince refugees displaced by the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake of January 12, 2010. It was a lesson in how peace is really constructed – carrying one bucket of dirt at a time.

The population of Haiti is just over 10 million – a little less than Los Angeles County's. More than 200,000 Haitians died in the January 2010 earthquake and 1.6 million were left homeless. That's one of every 50 Haitians who died in the earthquake, and one of every six who lost their homes. Their suffering didn't stop there. UN relief workers from Nepal brought cholera with them, infecting more than 700,000 earthquake survivors. At least 8,200 of them died.

It would be safe to say that every Haitian has lost a family member, friend, or neighbor due to this disaster. Some witnessed slow, agonizing deaths of their loved ones while trying to dig them out of the rubble. They lost others to untreated injuries or diseases weeks after the shaking stopped. Some simply lost their loved ones – literally – separated by the chaos, and never able to find them again.

It is an entire nation suffering from PTSD.

The 12 of us who signed up for this service trip prepared for four months like a chalice circle on steroids. We read about Haitian history, watched cultural sensitivity videos and did self-

reflection exercises, meeting in biweekly conference calls to discuss, question, and share our hopes and fears. A key point drilled into our heads from the start was that we were not going there to “fix” Haiti or show them a better way to accomplish their rebuilding. We were going to serve, to respectfully help in the ways *they* defined for us, not the other way around. We were going to bear witness, to learn and to be present with the Haitian people.

You can study everything about Haiti before you go, but nothing really prepares you for it.

Flying into Port Au Prince airport, I looked down and saw roofless houses in every block. About half are buildings destroyed by the earthquake, the other half are replacement buildings under construction. Roads are banked with rubble not yet cleared after four years.

The EU has funded reconstruction of excellent new highways, dams and electric transmission systems, and an amazing new hospital was built on the outskirts of the capital, but today, almost five years later, 100,000 earthquake refugees still live in unsafe, unsanitary tent cities. The government periodically evicts an entire tent city even though no replacement dwellings exist. Those turned out then take shelter in the unstable ruins of buildings damaged by the earthquake but not yet demolished. Many of these ruins still contain the remains of victims trapped below.

We learned this gruesome fact as our caravan of SUV’s and supply trucks made its way out of Port Au Prince for a bumpy three-hour drive into the central highlands to the headquarters of the Papaye Peasant Movement – PPM— near the small city of Hinche. It was Sunday and we shared the roads with hundreds of small motorbike taxis, each with two, three and even four passengers, their brave drivers bringing them home from church – men in suits and ties, women in conservative dark dresses and hats despite midday temperatures near 90 and humidity about the same.

We dodged oncoming tap-taps, which are brightly painted minibuses and covered pick-up trucks, jammed full with passengers, including some riding on the roofs, and others dangling from the sides. Pedestrians thronged along the country roads, too. Many carried empty jugs to community water spigots, spaced a mile apart along rural roads, usually the only “running water” available outside Haiti’s towns. At one shallow river crossing, men were washing a pick-up truck in the middle of the river, while a family was washing clothes on one bank, and a group of children splashed and swam off the opposite bank.

We passed clusters of brightly painted, cinder-block houses, with rusty sheet metal roofs all with small covered front porches. Most looked no bigger than standalone single-car garages that used to be common beside American homes. These houses are usually two small rooms – one for sleeping and one for eating. Extended families in rural Haiti have traditionally organized themselves in lakous – self-sustaining clusters of homes built around a common yard for cooking, cleaning and socializing. Vegetable gardens and feeding areas for goats, pigs

and chickens ring the houses. Bathroom facilities consist of a single shared latrine not necessarily enclosed in an outhouse.

In *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, Duke University professor Laurent Dubois explains, “The lakou system developed largely in the absence of – indeed in opposition to – the Haitian government. Unable to transform the national political system, rural residents found another solution: they created ... an egalitarian system without a state. ... These communities took on many of the tasks of social organization ... such as the regulation of inheritance, land ownership, and family relationships.”

Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere before the 2010 earthquake. Life expectancy is only 49 years, the literacy rate just 45%. The World Bank measured Haiti’s gross per capita income at \$1,710 U.S. dollars per year in 2013.

Haiti’s poverty is the by-product of a tumultuous history of colonialism, racism, and international meddling that begins with Christopher Columbus’s Santa Maria running aground on the north coast of Hispanola on Christmas Day 1492. He leaves 39 men behind to establish Haiti’s first settlement.

French pirates follow, settling the west coast of the island, and in 1697 France takes control of the western third of Hispanola from Spain. French planters establish huge sugar cane plantations, and import tens of thousands of African slaves to work them. The brutality of the French slave holders is legendary, with one in three slaves dying within five years of arrival from Africa. In 1791 the slaves fight back. Inspired by stories of the French Revolution, they use voodoo religious gatherings as cover to organize mass insurrection. Within two years they burn the plantations to the ground and set themselves free. But they have to fight the French military for another 11 years to keep their freedom.

On New Year’s Day 1804, Haiti declares its nationhood, making it the first and only nation to grow out of a successful slave revolution. This unique and impressive accomplishment was somehow neglected in all my history courses. I didn’t know it until preparing for this trip.

France refuses to recognize Haiti until the rebel nation agrees to pay reparations to former plantation owners for their lost property – including the market value of their freed slaves! France blocks its allies – such as the US – from trading with Haiti until this extortion is agreed to. Haiti finances these reparations with high interest loans from French banks.

Southern slaveholding states continue to block US recognition of Haiti for another 30 years until the Civil War. After President Lincoln officially recognizes Haiti as a nation, Wall Street refinances Haiti’s debt to France. The terms are better, but Haiti still can’t keep up with the payments. The cost of debt service impedes domestic development and fuels internal political conflicts. Government instability leads to U.S. intervention “to protect American interests” – sound vaguely familiar? The U.S. occupies Haiti from 1915 to 1934, sets up puppet

governments, centralizes power in the military, and promotes large-scale export-based agriculture that undermines traditional lakou self-sufficiency.

Enter Dr. Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier and his son and successor Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Their iron-fisted rule lasts 30 years, from 1957 to 1986. Hailed by Washington for blocking Castro-styled communism in Haiti, their brutal regimes scare 80% of Haiti's professional class into exile, destroy the international tourist industry, and leave the rural poor to survive on their own.

It is against this chaotic backdrop that a Belgian priest sets up an agricultural mission in Haiti's highland region in 1970. He hires a young Haitian agronomist named Chavannes Jean-Baptiste to teach local farmers sustainable agriculture techniques. Chavannes breaks with the mission in 1973 to form the Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP) and begins turning subsistence farmers into self-sufficient agricultural communities. Starting with just two groups of peasants in 1973, MPP celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2013 with more than 60,000 active members in 4,200 groups throughout the country.

"ORGANIZE OR DIE" is their motto, and organize they have, building schools, clinics, credit unions, farming co-ops, solar panel assembly shops, and facilities for producing rum, honey, jams, bread and folk arts. They have also grown into a potent political organization, which at times has threatened insecure governments and made Chavannes the target of assassination attempts; he has been forced into exile twice.

We met with Chavannes our second afternoon in Haiti. Now 67 and trying once again to retire as executive director of MPP, he is tall, slender, and still passionate about MPP's mission to empower "the people on the outside," by defending their interests to land and protecting the land itself from the threats of deforestation and climate change, and by providing technical assistance for healthy, sustainable, organic farming techniques.

"God created all the riches we have," Chavannes told us, "It is up to us to decide how they are apportioned." He showed us around MPP's demonstration gardens and shops where they train their members, and put us to work doing the same kinds of things their trainees do. For instance, MPP repurposes old tractor tires as garden vegetable planters by cutting them in half, turning them inside out and putting them atop frames built from PVC pipes filled with concrete to keep the planters 3 feet off the ground for better drainage and pest control. Our first work project was to build a tire garden and then make compost from banana stalks, cow manure and straw to fill the planters for the next season.

MPP teaches members how to build composting toilets that transform human waste into odorless fertilizer. They show them how to configure rainwater catch cisterns to not only irrigate their gardens during dry seasons but also to function as mini-fish farms for fast growing white fish for extra dietary protein. They manufacture small solar panels from damaged chips discarded by a Boston solar panel manufacturer, then install them in members'

homes to give students enough light to study by and to charge their cell phones. Yes, they live off the grid, but everyone has a cell phone!

In the weeks after the earthquake, tens of thousands of Port au Prince residents fled the capital and headed upcountry for safety. They lived out in the open, slept on the ground, and scrounged for food. MPP's headquarters were packed with people who had nowhere to go. They needed sanctuary. Chavannes and the leadership of MPP turned to the UU Service Committee, which had provided assistance and funding for other projects in the past. Together they tried to figure out what to do. They came up with the idea of building eco-villages patterned after traditional lakous. The Service Committee agreed to partner with MPP for both funding and hands-on assistance. We were the hands-on assistance.

Each Eco-Village consists of 10 three-room concrete cottages. Each family gets their own cottage, with separate small kitchen buildings and shared composting latrines between each pair of cottages. The families work together to build their own eco-villages from the ground up, and only when the entire village is completed do any of them get to move in. The eco-villages are all "off the grid" but each is equipped with solar-powered pumps for their water wells, and both communal and private garden areas.

Four of the eco-villages were completed and already occupied before we arrived; we worked on the fifth. Most of our work time – half of each day – was spent filling in the foundation of a small community center for Eco-Village Five. A backhoe would have made quick work of this task in 3 or 4 hours. A dozen UUs working with shovels and buckets took four days!

It didn't seem like we accomplished very much, besides amusing the locals with our awkwardness and our silly singing. But on our last day there, we drove out to Eco-Village One to meet with MPP leadership from all four of the occupied communities. As its name implies, Eco-Village One was the first completed. 10 families moved into their homes there in late 2011. Its gardens are mature, its papayas are huge, and its children look healthy and happy. While we waited in the community center for the leaders to meet with us, villagers of all ages came in and filled the benches of the room – young women with babies, prim and proper grandmothers, dust covered middle aged men, teenage boys. More men lined the walls, and we could see people peeking in the windows and side doors. They had come to thank us for their homes and for helping them start their lives over.

The most dramatic story came from a young woman named Madame Jacqueline who said she had gone insane after losing her home and parents in the earthquake. And she pulled out official looking certificates as evidence that she had been declared mentally incompetent. And that she had recovered. MPP provided her with mental healthcare that stopped her from committing suicide. And UU had made it possible for her to move into Eco Village Two with her children. "You are now my Mamas and Pappas" she told us in creole. "I love you," she shouted in English. And then she hugged each of us individually, repeating softly, "I love you, Mama," and "I love you, Papa."

And in that moment, I shivered with the realization that our small efforts that week, had combined with Chavannes's efforts for the past 40 years, and with the UU Service Committee's efforts --in Haiti and wherever it has lent a hand since it was organized in 1940. And together we really *were* making a difference – one bucket of dirt at a time.

Each evening in Haiti, we “pilgrims” gathered on the front porch of MPP's spartan guesthouse to process our day. Our conversations grew deeper and more open each night, and by the end of the week, we had formed a special beloved community of our own. On the first night, we learned a variation of a simple gospel tune from the 1930s and we sang it every night to begin and end our meetings. The lyrics go like this:

Love prepare me to be a sanctuary,
Pure and holy tried and true
With thanksgiving
I'll be a living sanctuary for you.

Our first tries at this song were pretty rough. At the beginning of the week, we sang haltingly, self-consciously, not all on key. But by the end of the week, our voices flowed together and harmonized in a musical conversation filled with love.

It takes a village to build a village, and we had become part of each other's village by helping build the villages of our Haitian hosts.

It takes loving intention and practice to build a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Whether it be eco-villages in Haiti, Ebola clinics in Liberia, chalice circles, service projects, church congregations, or our communities of work, family and friends, with loving intention and practice, we *can* transform every one of our communities into sanctuaries where peace, liberty and justice thrive.