

From Haitian Methodist Dream to Reality: The Marco Depestre School of Music

If we had not lived it ourselves, it might be less than believable, and yet it is true. Last January, my wife Marianne and I attended that Haitian Partners meeting at the headquarters of the Haitian Methodist Church, located on the Freres campus, in the uptown section of Port-au-Prince. The Partners are those in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom who have been engaged in mission consistently over the years with the Eglise Methodiste d’Haiti or EMH, as the Haitian Methodist Church is known in Haiti. The group came into being in recognition of the need to coordinate efforts of those working in Haiti and to establish clear lines of understanding and accountability, agreeable to the leadership of the EMH and to ourselves. As of this writing a Covenant of Understanding is in its final draft stages and approval is near.

The Partners Meeting usually takes place over a two to three-day period and may include representatives of UMCOR, Annual Conferences, Districts, local churches, and even other denominational representatives, internationally. Several representatives from Virginia have attended these meetings over the past few years and I am a member of a group that meets by conference call mostly, known as the Haiti Roundtable, a group meeting facilitated by Sheree Reece, Global Impact Program Director of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City.

During our Partners Meeting visit, we had the privilege of worshiping together in the town of Arcahaie, about an hour north of Port-au-Prince, not far from the seaside. Sharon Harbottle, a Christian mission educator from Great Britain and the wife of medical missionary to Haiti, Dr. John Harbottle, preached that day. [The Harbottle’s are at present completing six years of service in Haiti and are awaiting reassignment.] During the service we noticed that the congregation was somewhat spontaneous in their hymn singing, lifting their voices to God in hymns known by memory, few having access to a hymnal. The instrumentalists that day were a drummer, a guitar player and a fellow playing an electric keyboard. After the singing began, the instrumentalists sought to join in on the music, searching for the right key, and eventually provided a rather haphazard accompaniment. Finally, our host for the day, the Rev. Marco Depestre, walked over to the keyboard and took over the playing, providing the correct notes, tempo and rhythm. He clearly knew what he was doing and did it well.

Later in the day, as Marco and Marianne were chatting, she complimented him on his playing and mentioned that both she and I had trained as church musicians in college. We in fact had met on the campus of Westminster Choir College in Princeton, NJ, a school that specialized in church music leadership. During supper, Marco strolled into the Guest House dining area from his home on campus and said he wanted us to come to his house later in the evening to play his electronic organ and to talk.

We had no idea what was on his mind other than making some music together. After playing a few hymns on the organ, he said he wanted to share something – his dream. His opening words in that conversation were, “Well, you saw what happened this morning. What we need is a music school for our church.” He explained that many of the church’s musicians have little or no opportunity to learn how to read music or to play an instrument. “We need to raise the quality of our music to help improve our worship. We need to train our pastors and our musicians to get to know the hymns of our church and how to sing them properly. What they know is so limited.”

Although the EMH has some fine choirs led by very able musicians, such as the choirs of Duplan Methodist Church and the New College Bird Church, both located within metro Port-au-Prince. These are the exception, however. Marco said that the church suffers in its inability to provide the training that would benefit congregations throughout the country. As we talked, his words resonated more and more within us, exciting the belief that maybe there was something we could do to help. We told him we would go home and share his dream with others.

Before we left Haiti, however, Marco introduced me to the engineer they used for many of the church's building projects and said that they would begin working on the architectural plans right away. The excitement was already building, and we were wondering what we had gotten ourselves into; indeed, in Haiti you must watch what you say, because even a "maybe" can sound like a "promise".

Our first opportunity to share back home was during the next week's choir rehearsal at Braddock Street UMC in Winchester, where we are members of the sanctuary choir. I asked our outstanding music director/organist, Judy Connelly, if I could share Marco's vision with the choir. She agreed and afterwards there appeared to be interest in finding ways to be a part of this. We shared this dream with others and over time sensed a growing momentum. It was my belief that church musicians in the Virginia Conference would be a good place to share the vision and promote involvement. Many are members of the American Guild of Organists or the Choristers Guild, and they have ways of networking with each other. I spoke to certain musicians that I knew and even interviewed one of our United Methodist college presidents, who had had experience in Haiti, receiving some assurance that if we could get the school of music built, that there might be a way to partner with the school, resourcing it with volunteer teachers and students, to help develop its program.

Eventually, a former parishioner who had been generous in his support of mission for many years, allowed an opportunity to share what we were doing. He wanted to know a lot of detail, including the building concept, how the school would be administered, how funds would be handled for accountability both within the Virginia Conference and in Haiti. After satisfying his mind on these matters, he offered to pay half the cost of construction. We continued looking for other financial partners over several months, but to little avail, though there was growing interest in the project.

We shared with many Virginia friends about the hope and momentum for a music school was growing in Haiti, yet we were beginning to fear that we were heading for another big disappointment for the Haitians, meaning that sometimes hopes are raised for promised projects by well-meaning groups, but too often, those hopes are not realized. Good intentions are not always enough, especially in an impoverished country where there are too many Methodist "ruins", i.e., projects that start off well enough, but somehow don't quite get off the ground or fail because of inadequate capitalization or careful administration: rusting rebar sticking into the air is a sure sign, along with abandoned water and agricultural projects, closed clinics, unpaid teachers, and hot-lunch programs with few lunches for children from lack of funding.

We did not want to create another unsustainable program for Haiti and neither did they. Part of Marco's concept was to make the School of Music a joint project of the EMH and the Marco Depestre Family Foundation. [It is important to know that we are speaking of the Rev. Marco Depestre, Sr., the father of the Marco we know, who was the first Haitian pastor to be ordained by the EMH. The EMH is part of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, the MCCA. It was founded by the British Methodist Church and modeled after it administratively. For many years its pastors were only

from other countries or were missionaries. It was a long time before a Haitian could receive the education and approbation of the church to be allowed ordination. Marco Depestre, Sr. pioneered this effort and is greatly honored in Haiti for his landmark achievement.] The Depestre Foundation Board is made up of top leaders in Haiti, including the former Minister of Education for the nation of Haiti. Some of its funding flows from the Haitian diaspora living in Canada.

In the early stages of development, Marco carried his concept for the school both to the Foundation and to all the levels of decision making of the EMH, receiving enthusiastic approval all along the way. Returning to Haiti in May in the company of the Rev. Glenn Rowley, Virginia Conference Director of Mission and Justice Ministries, he and I were introduced to leadership at every level necessary to make the project a reality. In each case we asked their opinion of starting such a school and in every case the response was enthusiastic affirmation. Back in Virginia, I shared with our benefactor what was happening in Haiti, including a full set of architectural drawings and a beautiful artist's rendering of how the building would appear. More questions were asked regarding usage, whether the design truly fit the need, and so forth. When his questions were fully satisfied, our donor said that he had decided to fund the building project in its entirety.

We now had the go ahead that we needed, even though the Haitians had already gone ahead. In fact, before Glenn and I left Haiti, they held a well-attended ground-breaking ceremony with outgoing Bishop Gesner Paul swinging the pickax that broke the ground for the first time. Our "maybe" had become a "promise".

To make a long story shorter, the construction went swiftly, and included an unexpected requirement for a cistern that the government required for city approval. This was another sum of money that we had to quickly raise.

We knew that the building itself would not be enough to get the school up and functioning. There was a need for funds to equip it, along with seeking donations of musical instruments and music. We hatched the idea of a Haiti Benefit Concert to heighten awareness of the project and to raise funds to equip the school. We asked the music department of our church if they would sponsor us in this effort and participate in the performance. It was agreed and I set to work on the music. As a composer, I offered my settings of *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* as the repertoire for the concert. Our organist, various instrumentalists, vocal soloists and the choir all participated. On October 14, the concert took place to good reviews and a fine audience, raising over \$7,000, along with the pledge of musical instruments to be given.

Along with this effort, our donor in the meantime set up a substantial matching fund at the Conference level, to match every dollar UVMIM teams could raise up to \$5,000 per project for disaster and humanitarian projects. With the money we raised and the match from this special fund, we could move ahead with our project, as well as another project, which entailed doing something for the victims of Hurricane Matthew in the hard-hit Leon Circuit of Haiti. Our goal was not only to build a music school, but to provide funds for the construction of two homes for those who had lost theirs.

In early February of this year, the Winchester District Board of Missions made the decision to donate \$4,000 to the project. With the matching grant we now had over \$20,000 to be used for equipping the school and to build the two homes.

It was important for us to be part of the project in more ways than just raising money, so we formed an UMVIM team to travel to Haiti, near the completion of construction with plans to help with the finishing work, including painting, building cabinetry, providing dentistry, and offering a Bible school experience. Our team of fifteen volunteers was scheduled to arrive in mid-February, just before the Dedication of the building, a big event that would include a public concert by our musicians and Haitian musicians.

Just before our departure we heard there were demonstrations taking place in Haiti, protesting the high prices of food and fuel. This news was disconcerting, and we immediately asked our hosts if we should continue with our plans: was it safe to come? We were told by EMH leadership that the protests were not new, but were a little louder now, coinciding with the second anniversary of the election of their President, Jovenel Moise, whom they felt had not honored promises he had made to be elected. We had heard that there were marches and some tire burning near the government buildings. The EMH again explained that the disturbances were sporadic and aimed at the leadership of the country, that they felt we would be perfectly safe within the walls of the compound. We checked on this daily until our departure.

We arrived to see quiet streets, though could see some evidence of the disturbances in the form of road impediments and places in the road where tires had been burnt. On arrival at the Methodist Guest House we received a warm welcome. We were soon told that there were marches taking place here and there, and that it would be best if we confined our stay to the compound. We knew there was plenty of work to do and had no problem with that arrangement, though it was disappointing that we would not be able to take the team up the mountain to see the beautiful vistas or into the heart of the city to witness Haitian life up close.

That first night marchers passed nearby on one of the major avenues. We could hear the crowd chanting and occasional firecrackers, or gunshots into the air. We were told that many of the demonstrators were being paid to protest and that some trouble makers were racing around on motorcycles and occasionally burning tires, some shooting into the air. Frankly, the outside disturbances were becoming more disconcerting. We wondered if it would get worse. We saw on the Guest House tv news that there had been some looting downtown and that shops were closing. By the next day the streets were even more deserted than when we arrived. People were hunkering down, staying in their homes. The markets were not functioning.

Apparently, it was being announced each day where the demonstrations would take place. We were even told that the police were accompanying the demonstrators, for their protection and the protection of businesses. Our team by now was working at full speed, coming together as a family and having a great time. We were meeting new friends on the work site, our interpreters making communications clear, and Haitian pastors living in the compound stopping by to see the progress, including their new Bishop, Jean Lesly Dorcelly, a long-time friend with whom we had worked in several different circuits in earlier years.

On February 14, two days after our arrival, the State Department issued a level 4 alert, and began evacuating non-essential Embassy-related people, particularly family members, out of the country. At the same time, we began receiving messages from home that we ought to get out of the country ourselves, that we should not "risk our lives". We truly appreciated the concern and prayers of friends, family, and church leaders who were emailing us, but we did not feel the intensity of worry in Haiti nearly so much as we did from home. Honestly, none of us felt that our lives were at risk. In fact, it had

become rather quiet on the streets around the Guest House. We kept working and felt things would be all right. The messages from home kept coming, so I told the team that if anyone was uncomfortable being in Haiti that we would arrange their departure with no hesitation. No one wanted to leave. As pressure mounted from home and as the demonstrations appeared to be continuing, albeit away from where we were, I again made it clear that if anyone wanted to leave, they could. Several team members came to me privately and said that they wanted to stay to complete the mission. A couple members said their wives at home were concerned and thought maybe they should leave. Our dentist was unable to get his dental chair, which had been used by another team in a rural area. When that team evacuated by helicopter due to roadblocks far south of the capital, they were unable to bring the chair back with them, due to weight. Realizing that he could do no meaningful dental work, as he had done on many previous missions to Haiti, he decided to come home early, leaving on that Saturday by his own arrangements.

We knew how important the Dedication was to the EMH and that they were determined to conduct it on schedule, if possible. After much prayer and discernment, I decided that we needed to come home early. We were having difficulty getting supplies for the project, especially lumber for the carpenters, and we sensed that our presence was putting a strain on the Guest House with water and fuel in short supply. However, to a person, we wanted to stay through the Service of Dedication. Our hosts were daily assuring us that they were monitoring the situation and were confident that we were safe. The compound had high walls and there were armed guards at all the active gates.

Thus, I began the process of leaving Haiti. Repeatedly, we had been calling the Embassy, trying to get their assessment of the situation. No one was picking up the phone over a two-day period. Finally, I called by brother Dana, who is a Washington, D.C. attorney with connections to the State Department. He was able to reach them, registered our team with them, and within a day I received a call from their agent to whom I explained our frustration in reaching the Embassy. By this time, I had contacted the airline, trying to find out how and when we could leave. There were no flights available for us to Reagan National Airport the Monday after the Dedication, and by the way, we would have to pay a change fee of \$200, plus another \$229 for the difference in the price for each ticket, a total of \$429, which came to well over \$5,000 for the entire group!

I shared this news with the State Department representative, asking if he could intercede with the airline to help us, that by this time they were removing their own personnel and felt that we, too, needed to go. He told me he would contact the Embassy, that they could not intercede specifically on behalf of our group, but that he would ask Embassy officials to speak with all the airlines serving Haiti, seeking their cooperation, due to the level 4 alert.

In the meantime, I called the emergency line of our travel agency and spoke with a wonderfully helpful fellow, who went to bat for us. He later said he had to go to the highest level of the airline group fare administration, finally receiving assurance that we could leave on the Sunday afternoon flight with no change fee or ticket increase. This was the second time the airline came through for us. Earlier, upon our departure from Washington Reagan to Haiti, we had with our regular baggage eleven crates of musical instruments. We were sure this extra baggage would cost us upwards of a thousand dollars, but a very helpful lead agent worked for over an hour to find a way to reduce the cost, and ultimately waived us through with no cost whatsoever! I told her she had earned a "star in her crown" that day.

We were now ticketed and had a plan wherein we could participate in the three-hour Dedication Service, complete with musical concert by Haitians and our musicians, and the ribbon cutting, which I shared with Bishop Dorcely. Afterwards, we hustled to say our goodbyes, barely making it on time to the airport, where we saw a few US Marines ushering out State Department personnel. Fortunately, all had gone smoothly for us on the ride down. We got through customs and security, made our flight, and the team was safely back home in chilly Virginia by late evening.

Some would have preferred that we depart sooner, but truly, we got out about as quickly as we could under the circumstances. We did not get to do all that we had hoped, but we had done a lot and the Haitians were happy. Unfortunately, because of the situation, all the UMVIM teams scheduled to travel to Haiti over the next several months cancelled, leaving the Guest House staff without work and its leadership in considerable worry as to whether they could keep the ministry going. We determined that we would ask for no refund of monies we had paid for services in order to help them in this crisis as best we could.

They had taken extremely good care of us, kept us safe, and allowed us to experience the daily reality of their lives. We “lived through” something significant with them – a time of accomplishment, and yet a time of great uncertainty. They shared their innermost feelings about the situation of unrest, and we did the same. We were frank with one another regarding safety issues and all felt we had done the right thing. By faith we knew we were in the grip of God’s hands and that all would be well, and it was! Thanks be to God.

As we prepared to leave, Marco came to us and said that we must come back. We need you. We assured him that we would, that we needed them, as well. Our lives are now intertwined, we feel, in a great work for God. Just as God opened so many doors to us, even while other doors closed, we believe God has great things in mind for Virginia United Methodists as we continue to partner with our brothers and sisters of Haiti. As Bishop Dorcely said at the Dedication, “We have a birth. Now we must nurture it into fullness of life.”

Submitted by Rev. Dr. Jack Martin, Haiti UMVIM Team Leader

February 23, 2019

Team members: Joe Boaz, Bob Brock, Chip Connelly, Judy Connelly, Nina Frederick, Randy Lenz, Aaron Lloyd, Marianne Martin, Jack Martin, Mark Pugh, David Roane, Linda Shimer, Dr. Rick Taliaferro, Jackie Wilbourne, Bryant Wilbourne (the Wilbourne’s had to drop out at the last minute due to a tragedy in their family.) During our time in Haiti, the Rev. Sam Nesmith and his wife Brenda arrived to participate in the Dedication. They were not officially part of the team, but shared in group activities and worship, including the concert.