

Chapter 3

A Report from Fondwa

Each day since Tuesday evening, the day the earthquake happened, I had found that dawn would bring with it many new and difficult challenges and an occasional joy. This day was to be no exception.

A number of years ago, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I registered with two disaster relief organizations to be placed on their list of available medical staff in the event they needed people--NC Baptist Men and Samaritan's Purse. Both are top notch relief organizations. I had received a number of requests from NC Baptist Men over the past few years but none of them ever panned out.

Late on Thursday evening, I emailed the director of the volunteers to just let him know that I was still available if they were going to send a team to Haiti. I also made contact with my friend at Samaritan's Purse and told her the same thing. She wrote back that they would definitely be sending a team and thought with my experience in Haiti I would be an asset to a team they would send. She told me if I didn't hear from them by week's end to contact her again.

I woke up early, (I hadn't been able to sleep well), and decided to just get up. I watched the report the TV stations did on the prayer vigil and was deeply moved at how sensitively they covered it. The pictures were very poignant--people around the altar praying and a video of hands reaching into a basket to choose names of people in Haiti to pray for. Additionally, the local newspaper ran two stories on it. Both were very good and the copies presented the deep concern of all that were there.

As I opened my email that morning, there was one that immediately caught my attention. It was from Romel. Oh, how happy I was just to see his name on the "from" column. I knew he had to be at least alive if there was an email from him.

It read;

April,

I am alive but cannot find my parents or Fregga. Please pray for us.

Romel, MD.

That was all it said but for now, it was enough. I ran upstairs where Shelia was showering and told her that we had heard from Romel and what he said. I will admit to a bit of frustration at him not saying more, but I had the most important information I needed--that he was alive.

However, once I realized exactly what the email said, I became very worried again. This was an emotional roller coaster; feelings of profound gratitude and elation at even the smallest amount of good news only to realize within seconds that there was no news of others, causing even more anxiety and concern.

Romel couldn't locate his parents or wife. He was doing his residency in Les Cayes, which is about 30 miles from Port au Prince. From what we could discern on the maps, it seemed to be an area which, if affected at all, was only mildly affected. We had hoped he was there but didn't know for sure. His family and wife, on the other hand, were living right in the middle of Port au Prince in the areas that were at the epicenter. We had been so worried about them and now had even more reason to worry. Romel himself couldn't find them.

I immediately sent out an email to those close to our ministry letting them know that Romel was alive and that we had heard from them. I asked them to pray for his family and wife, Fregga that they would be found alive.

Just then the phone rang. It was about 10:00 AM. I was working from home and wondered who might be calling me at this time. While I often screen my calls when I am preoccupied, I decided to answer this one, thinking perhaps it was someone from Haiti trying to reach me.

The caller identified herself as Lisa Clarke, the Missions Committee Chairman for my local Church, Aldersgate United Methodist Church. Lisa was also the team leader for one of our upcoming Jamaica Mission team. We were sending two teams this year and hers was scheduled to leave in a month or so.

She asked me if I had a minute to talk and I said of course. She went on to tell me how moved she and others had been at the prayer vigil the night before. She indicated that having specific people to pray for was a very meaningful experience for her.

The Jamaica Mission team had met following the service for their regular meeting. I remembered her telling me that they had delayed the start of their meeting so they could participate in the prayer vigil. She then went on to tell me that the entire team had discussed this situation at the meeting and they had unanimously decided they were going to delay their upcoming mission trip to Jamaica and instead donate all the funds they had raised for that trip to Luke's Mission to be used for earthquake relief. She also told me that all of the proceeds for their upcoming silent auction--normally a very large fund raising event for the Jamaica mission team, would all be going to Luke's Mission for Haiti relief.

Of course I was astonished at this response. But I wanted to talk with her more before this went any further. I knew that people felt terrible for the people affected in Haiti but Jamaica had needs as well and I wasn't confident that taking money from one group of poor people to give to another was the right thing to do. I expressed my concern about this and asked her to please think about this some more and we could pray about it together before they made a final decision.

She said the decision was final. They had talked about this and would be "delaying" their trip. They would continue on with their proposed mission trip but later in the year. The team had discussed this and felt that the people they worked with in Jamaica would support this decision. They would still send the second team but this larger team would be using their resources to help the people of Haiti. They felt like the people of Haiti needed this now. And their work with Jamaica would continue--just be delayed. No one felt there was a sense of urgency about the Jamaican work like there was with the situation in Haiti.

Of course I was overwhelmed at the sacrifice that this group of people was making. One of them had sent me the email the evening before which touched my heart deeply. To think that they would delay the trip that they had planned for nearly a year was overwhelming to me. The desire to help so much that they would give all of the money from their upcoming fund raiser to the cause of the earthquake showed a love and a level of concern that I wasn't really accustomed to.

I expressed my thanks as well as I could and was happy inside for the good news. I really didn't know how to respond and it wouldn't be until much later that the real impact of this tremendous gift would be clear to all of us.

When I hung up the phone, I went back to my computer. I noticed also, in my email inbox an email with the subject message-*News from Fondwa*. I clicked on that to see what news might have occurred overnight. A mutual friend had received the following text message from Jamelyn Williams, the mission team leader who was in Fondwa at the time of the earthquake.

Hello Friends and Family--

Our team is in Leogane, Haiti. We arrived today after taking motorcycles down the mountain from Fondwa.

The road is completely covered in dirt. Everyone is safe and healthy...

Sadly, Fondwa has been hit hard. The guesthouse is in ruins and so is the school. Jesula's house is gone too.

The Sisters lost one of their own in the community--Sister Oudel. We also lost Jude--he was the young baby and he was with Sister Oudel.

Dr. Delson lost the second story of his house. We are staying at Hospital St. Croix [in Leogane] tonight. The guesthouse is gone but we will sleep with John and Susie Parker [caretakers of the Hopital St. Croix guest houser. Tomorrow morning we will go to the Embassy and wait for US Aid plane to help bring us home.

Please continue to pray for us. I am so sorry this has been so difficult on all of you. We have been praying that God's grace will cover you and offer you peace.

Lot of love,

Jamelyn and the team

Again, that emotional roller coaster. The mission team was OK but Baby Jude was dead as was Sister Oudel. Oh how my heart ached and yet I was joyful at the same time.

I was reminded of the scripture text in Ezra 3.

"And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away."
Ezra 11b-13 NIV

The older men and priests knew that this temple would never match up to the glory of the first. After all, King Solomon spent a fortune on building the first temple. They also remembered the horrible end of the first temple, and these memories combined with the joy of the restoration to make profound mixed feelings in the old men.

Possibly some of them had stood on this very spot half a century before, in an agony of despair, while they saw the cruel flames licking the ancient stones and blazing up among the cedar beams, and all the fine gold dimmed with black clouds of smoke.

They had seen that the glory had departed from Israel. In their circumstances it was impossible to build such a house as the first temple and had this even been possible, still it would have been greatly inferior.

There was a danger in their weeping. There are times when looking backward may have a tendency to discount the present. Regrets over the past which paralyze work in the present are always wrong. Moreover all such regrets, as in this case, are in danger of blinding the eyes to the true value and significance of the present.

But the younger people, who had no remembrance of the prior temple, felt nothing but joy in seeing this important step in the restoration of the temple. This profound scene showed the depth of the mixed feelings among the people.

The sight must have been really amazing to see--a whole people, one part crying aloud with sorrow; the other shouting aloud for joy on the same occasion--in which both sides emotional response was understandable and justified. (2006 David Guzik)

That was how I felt. Profound sorrow and joy at the same time.

Jamelyn and the team were OK. They didn't mention Sr. Carmelle and Sr. Simone so we had to assume that they were OK as well and hope that was a correct assumption.

But Baby Jude and Oudel were lost.

Baby Jude...

We had met Baby Jude in November, just six weeks before the earthquake. Shelia and I had travelled to Haiti to work on a project with another organization in Jacmel. Fondwa is near Jacmel so we made a stop there for two days on our way back to the city.

It was so wonderful to see Sr. Carmelle and Sr. Simone again. It had been well over a year since we had been there. Although we kept in close contact on the phone and via email when they had access to it, we hadn't seen them in Fondwa and missed that greatly.

Sr. Carmelle was sad while we were there. Her brother, who was 48, had just died the week before of hepatitis. This kind of thing is common in Haiti. Lack of medical care for serious diseases often causes the demise of the person with the disease. She was heartbroken and had brought her 4 year old niece to Fondwa to stay with her for a while hoping she would be a source of comfort for her.

Baby Jude was a new orphan to them. He had just come to the orphanage a few months before. It was so easy to immediately fall in love with him. His sweet disposition and desire to be close to most anyone who would hold him captured my heart right away. But it was clear that he "belonged" to Sr. Carmelle. He went to others who wanted to hold him but if he had his way, he would be in her lap. We got several great photos of him and Sr. Carmelle. They are a treasure to me today.

Sr. Oudel was one of the 11 novices of their order training with Sisters Carmelle and Simone at the Sister's House in Fondwa. She was his main caregiver. She made sure he was fed and bathed and saw that he spent the time he needed napping and got him to bed when it was time. She was often seen carrying him around the guest house the two days we were there. It was a beautiful site.

Baby Jude was dead...and so was Sr. Oudel.

We were to find out later that Sr. Oudel was found on top of Jude, trying with her last breath of her too short life to protect him and save him from the terrible catastrophe that was going to consume the country of Haiti on that sunny Tuesday early in January. We were to find out later that Sr. Carmelle was in Leogane that day, a small town about 15 miles from Fondwa. She had gone to buy supplies for the mission when the earthquake hit. She felt tremendous guilt at not being there when the two of them died. She even expressed the inner thought that if she had been there she would have died trying to save them.

Shelia and I found it difficult to know how to respond. In the course of several minutes we were to find out that someone very close to us was alive, but his family was unaccounted for. We learned that the team was alive and on their way home only to find out that Jude and Oudel were now in their eternal home with the Lord.

The emotions were hard to balance.

We stopped and prayed for Sr. Carmelle and all of those in Fondwa, as well as the team. I know it must have elicited serious feelings of conflict to be evacuated at a time when that wasn't an option for many whom they knew.

I knew that Sr. Carmelle's heart was already broken when we saw her in November. A situation like this would try the faith and emotional constitution of even the strongest person. I wrote in my email update on our website later that day:

"We received a report from Fondwa. The US team that was there has been located, is safe and will be returning home in the next day or two.

Fondwa was severely hit with the earthquake. The mission guest house, which holds 40 people, was completely destroyed as was the school for 600 kids. We are assuming that Sr. Carmelle and Sr. Simone are OK since they weren't specifically mentioned. The text message did sadly report that one of the novice sisters Oudel and the 2 year old orphan that the nuns were caring for, Baby Jude, at the quest house with them died in the collapse. He was 2 years old.

To help you pray, Sr. Carmelle was in a state of near complete exhaustion when we were there in November. Her brother of 47 had just died of hepatitis the week before and she was very fragile. She had her 4 yr old niece there too. She was worried about how the family would survive now without someone who earned even a meager living. We talked to her the week before the earthquake and she was still in a severe state of worry and depression. She is the stalwart of that community and holds it together. So much on her already and now this.

Shelia and I are very worried about how this crisis will affect her already fragile psyche. Please pray for extraordinary strength to get her through this. April"

It was hard for me to understand fully how the community might be affected by the damages to the buildings as she described them. The Fondwa compound had a large three story guest house which held about 40 people, a dining area and a medical clinic. There was also a house for the novice nuns which housed about 15. It also contained a small chapel. This seemed to be where Oudel and Jude died. A few hundred yards down the road was a large school for 700 or more children. Sr. Simone was in charge of the school. Finally there was a large church which held about 200 people. This complex was the center of the community. Attached to the guest house was a newer building, Fondwa University, where 10-20 young people were studying higher education in this rural mountain village.

My heart was breaking and I was finding it more and more difficult to deal with the sense of helplessness that I was feeling here at home knowing many of my friends and people I loved were in Haiti enduring this tragedy of unknown proportions.

About noon time I got an email from the volunteer director of NC Baptist Men. He indicated that they had sent a first response scouting team earlier in the week. He was collecting contact information from those who might be able to go to Haiti but wanted the first team to evaluate what was needed before putting together the next wave of response. He indicated he had added me to the list of available people.

About mid-afternoon another email came in from him:

To: April Perry

FYI, Today a NCBM 7 person medical team arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. We have been asked to write a proposal to fill a C130 Cargo plane with people and "stuff". I need to give the authority some sort of idea of how many medical personnel can commit to go within the next 2-4 days. Details following:

Departure: no sooner than Jan. 17

Length of stay: approximately 7-10 days

Type of work: provide medical help to those affected by earthquake in Haiti in primitive conditions

Lodging: mission compound. Food, water, and a place to sleep provided

Transportation: C130 cargo plane

Cost: very little if any

Requirements: must be current in your medical training and have a license to practice. **MUST HAVE A VALID PASSPORT!!!**

Health: you need to be in good health, able to withstand long hours in difficult conditions

ACTION: If you can go, reply to this email within 24 hours with: name, profession, mobile phone number, and email.

This proposal may be approved or disapproved by the authority. So, as we say in disaster relief work....be flexible. It could fail at any point and not come to fruition. However, many people need you in Haiti, and this is a great opportunity if it gets approval.

Sincerely,

Gaylon Moss

Disaster Relief Director

Volunteerism Coordinator

North Carolina Baptist Men

Of course I responded back that I was available on short notice and to please add me to the "Active List".

Later in the afternoon I phoned my friend Bob Herdman in Ohio from The Hands and Feet Project (HAF) which was located in Jacmel, another area hard hit by the earthquake. We had just visited them in November and were actively partnering on planning a project with them beginning in February. Obviously that would be put on hold at this point but I wanted to see how their organization fared. As we talked I mentioned to him that we hadn't heard from Emmanuel, our translator and assistant. Emmanuel had traveled to Jacmel with us in November and Bob and he had struck up a nice friendship. I expressed my concern for him to Bob on the phone.

I was really happy when he told me that Emmanuel had sent him a message via Facebook on the day of the earthquake that he was in the Dominican Republic doing some translation work. I wanted to make sure so he checked back and said, yes. He had gotten a Facebook message that he was in the DR working. From that he assumed he was OK and out of the country-maybe trying to get back. He did indicate that he had said he had relatives who had died during the earthquake.

To know that Emmanuel was alive was such a relief and yet here was the sadness-again. We were happy Emmanuel was alive but didn't know who the relatives he was referring to were. I knew all of his brothers well.

He told me that the mission partners for our local church with HAF-Mission of Hope in Grand Goave about 30 miles from Port au Prince-where we had planned to take a mission team in September, 2010-had sustained serious damage. None of the buildings were inhabitable and the guest house, which was brand new and almost finished when we visited it last November, had been destroyed completely. He also said that our mission partner there, Lex Edme, had been in a motorcycle accident and had sustained a head injury losing consciousness and requiring treatment from the UN medical staff.

Bob told me that their orphanage at HAF had not been damaged but that Jacmel had sustained much damage. Many of the buildings there had collapsed. The mission compound was serving as a food distribution center for many people. He also said that none of their children or staff was hurt.

Knowing that Jacmel, which is about 20 miles beyond Fondwa, had sustained such damage, I was more and more concerned about the situation in Fondwa. It was like putting together a puzzle, with bits of information coming from a variety of sources and trying to see how they might all fit together to give us a picture of what things were like on the ground.

Friday night as I went to bed this was the situation as I knew it:

- Boselor Souffrant-translator and friend confirmed deceased
- Baby Jude-Fondwa-confirmed deceased
- Sr. Oudel-Fondwa confirmed deceased
- Dr. Romel--alive but unable to locate his wife Fregga and his parents
- Emmanuel-alive but lost relatives
- Lex Edme-ministry partner at Mission of Hope-survived the earthquake but was seriously injured yesterday in a motorcycle accident; he has a head injury, a severe cut to his leg and was unconscious-- being tended to by the UN. Please pray
- Pastor Jean Revil Belbede Christian church-status unknown
- Edmund Franz-medical student supported by Luke's Mission in PAP-status UNKNOWN
- Eddie Petit Homme-translator-status UNKNOWN
- Jules Remy-translator and friend-status UNKNOWN

My job of updating the website was beginning to become something that I dreaded doing.