



Frontier Internship in Mission

People with disabilities: recognizing their rights



By Ezequiel y Yaniurka Batista

HAITI IS THE POOREST COUNTRY in the Western Hemisphere; 80% of the population lives under the poverty line and 54% is in abject poverty. Two-thirds of all Haitians depend on the agricultural sector, mainly small-scale subsistence farming, remaining vulnerable to damage from frequent natural disasters exacerbated by the country's extensive deforestation. In a context of widespread and chronic poverty, a shortage of public services, and limited educational opportunities, people with disabilities are severely disadvantaged. Children with disabilities are often abandoned or neglected since they are seen as consumers of precious resources who can contribute little to the family. Orphanages are very common; children with disabilities who were abandoned by their families are over-represented in them.

Culture, religion and disabilities

In Haitian culture, physical challenges are thought of as mystifying and dangerous. They are frequently perceived as having their origins in the interaction between the natural and supernatural worlds, rather than being a medical issue. A disability may be the result of a curse from a lwa¹ who is upset. Disability is punishment—a sign that a

¹ Lwa are the various spirits of family members; the spirits of the major forces of the universe—good, evil, reproduction, health, and all aspects of daily life. According to voodoo beliefs, lwa interact with people on earth. They “mount” people now and again during religious ceremonies and give messages. They even cause various good and bad things to happen to people.

spirit was not obeyed. Many Haitian Christians believe that going against God is the same as going against the lwa. God punishes those who do not obey.

Most Haitians are afraid of disabilities and are uneasy around people with disabilities, who may be called ‘crazy’, or ‘possessed.’ People with disabilities may also be labeled ‘non-functional’ or ‘worthless.’ Since the disability may have been caused by an angry lwa, there is always the chance that the spirit may come after anyone who has contact with a person with a disability. Similarly, people may be reluctant to touch an individual with a disability because the spell may transfer to them. Disabilities are treated as if they are contagious. While Protestants have campaigned against voodoo and belief in spirits, many people still believe in spells.

In addition to cultural and religious factors, the plight of people with disabilities in Haiti is aggravated by the lack of infrastructure for surveying the actual needs of the population and for providing care and rehabilitation. “Most people with disabilities do not receive specific attention, as healthcare is expensive and consequently limited to very few. Sometimes, a simple illness becomes a chronic one due to a lack of adequate treatment. For example, many people have lost their sight because they did not receive treatment for hemorrhagic conjunctivitis. It is estimated that 98% of people with disabilities are poor. It is well known that malnutrition is a key factor leading to the development of physical and mental disabilities,” wrote Ezequiel and Yaniurka, from Cuba, the FIM intern couple undertaking their internship among people with disabilities in Haiti.

“People with disabilities are totally dependent, and are frequently hidden away in their homes, forgotten and marginalized. Local churches are either passive or lack interest in this critical issue, relying on international nongovernmental agencies and some international church organizations to provide services to disabled people.”

Among schools and other centers specifically devoted to people with disabilities, it is worth mentioning St. Vincent in Port-au-Prince, which serves blind, deaf and physically handicapped children and is run by the Episcopal Church. The Pazapa Center, started in 1982 by volunteers working with Mother Theresa’s Missionaries of Charity, supports the integration of children with disabilities into the community. Lumière Medical Ministries (LMM) works in partnership with a local Haitian church organization, MEBLH (Evangelical Baptist Mission Lighting Haiti), to offer rehabilitation services that include therapeutic exercises, mobility training, and equipment such as crutches, walkers, wheelchairs, and supportive braces.

Christian Blind Mission (CBM) one of the leading professional organizations for people with disabilities worldwide, is also present. It has a number of projects and Haitian partners, such as the Institut Montfort pour Enfants Sourds—which runs a special school for deaf and hard of hearing children in Port-au-Prince directed by Catholic sisters—the Grace Children’s Hospital, and The Eye Department for Blind and Visually Disabled People.

Ezequiel and Yaniurka’s internship was originally hosted by CONASPEH. After a few months, some logistical problems and misunderstandings emerged, forcing the interns to contact other organizations which might be interested in their work. Following a brief

period of consultations, *Service Chrétien d'Haïti*, an organization that had worked with FIM in the 1980s, readily agreed to host their internship.

Encouraging a different approach

As the first stage of their internship, Ezequiel and Yaniurka began an awareness raising process among pastors, church leaders, and families about the need to adopt a different approach to the plight of people with disabilities. It entailed meetings in the capital and its suburbs of Carrefour, Cazo, Tabar, Bon Repos, and La Ville and in the provinces of Le Hogar, Saint-Michel de Latalay, Verèt, Arcahaie, and Cabaret. These meetings normally included a debate on human rights and churches' responsibility as inclusive communities, as well as a presentation of practical advice to assist people with disabilities.

Highlights of this stage were the *'I Can also Do Something for God'* workshop held at Pétion Ville with people with disabilities, and the activity in the Saint Michel de Latalay province attended by over 50 people with disabilities, which culminated with an ecumenical service attended by over 700 people from nearby churches. Additionally, every third Sunday the interns held an activity for children with disabilities in the Cazo region.

Broadening the scope

Under the wings of *Service Chrétien d'Haïti*, the internship received significant institutional backing, allowing the interns to enlarge their scope and relationships. In June, a meeting with deaf, blind, and paraplegic people was held at the Mennonite Guest House in Port-au-Prince. The meeting was intended to provide an inclusive climate conducive for people with disabilities to express themselves, share their personal problems and find mutual support. The same month, Ezequiel and Yaniurka were invited by the government secretariat for the integration of people with disabilities to take part in a colloquium in the community of Acaye on this subject.

The *'Basic Principles for Working with People with Disabilities'* seminar, held in Port-au-Prince July 26-28 attracted over 200 people from 20 denominations, among them a Roman Catholic priest and a representative from the concerned governmental office. It also elicited the attention of the national media. "Around 45 deaf people attended, most of them were at this kind of activity for the first time. The fact the worship was led by a young deaf woman greatly impacted the media," asserted Ezequiel and Yaniurka.

In August, the interns organized a three-day seminar on 'Mental Disability' for 70 participants, including a number of pastors and representatives from NGOs which deal with this issue, notably RANIPH (*Rezo Asosyasyon Nasyonal Pou Entegre Moun Andikape Yo*) and from the government secretary in charge of the integration of people with disabilities. A signs language course was given. A group was formed that meets twice a week to be trained in Braille and signs language, rehabilitation, and special psychological tools.

A similar seminar in September brought the participation of 150 pastors and leaders from 10 denominations, including Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Assembly of God, and Roman Catholic. On September 30, as has been a common practice over the past six months, the whole day was devoted to a meeting with disabled people, attended by over

100 persons. The program includes analysis and debate on the issue, recreational activities, and an ecumenical worship.

The seminar in November, led by Yaniurka, dealt with Multiple Disabilities and gathered some 200 people from several denominations. This time, a humanitarian organization that knows of the Frontier interns' work brought rice, beans, and clothes to distribute among the participants.

A preliminary assessment

Assessing the first year of their work in Haiti, Ezequiel and Yaniurka underscored the institutional stability achieved by the program under the *Service Chrétien d'Haïti*, which has allowed them to present monthly seminars, visits to different communities and engage in other activities with people with disabilities. Likewise, a number of Haitian churches are now involved in the project, namely Baptist Traditional, Assembly of God, Seventh Day Adventist, Church of God, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Independent Baptist. "Leaders from these churches have begun to appreciate the achievements of our approach and the potential of the project."

"Thanks to *Service Chrétien d'Haïti*'s network and the participation of these churches, we can reach almost all communities in Port-au-Prince now", said the interns. They are also glad that 40 people with disabilities regularly attend the different seminars and activities undertaken during the first 10 months of the project.

"We have been able to create a working group with eleven people —three nurses, one physiotherapist, one sign language expert, a psychologist who received a degree in Canada, three pastors, and two people with disabilities. Together with them we plan, organize, and carry out our activities."

Ezequiel and Yaniurka comment that previous work in this area was done by individual churches, not with an ecumenical perspective. This ecumenical cooperation —together with the new approach that focus on empowering people with disabilities, enhancing their self-esteem and enabling them to take on responsibilities in their communities and churches— has already transformed mindsets and behavior.

"The reality of Haiti has been a both a shock and a great challenge for us. Regrettably, many missionaries have left behind a distorted meaning of what Christian mission is. For many people here, including church leaders, a missionary is somebody with wealth—a good car, a bank account— and power. Quite frequently, when we respond that our work does not entail monetary assistance, people with disability cannot mask their frustration. A key element in our work has been to tell pastors and church leaders that mission with and among people with disabilities is recognizing their rights, empowering them and transforming our churches into truly inclusive communities."