

DEMONS

one entrepreneur's experience with

OF

addressing poverty in Haiti

POVERTY

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with contributions from
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PROLOGUE

That frigid morning in 2008, I arrived in my office in Grand Rapids, Michigan unaware that I was about to receive a telephone call that would undermine everything I believed about God, and much of what I believed about myself. It would precipitate a crisis of faith that would last for almost three years; one that would challenge some of my core assumptions and bring hidden weaknesses into the light. And it would mark me indelibly. It was January 30, 2008.

For almost three years I had invested in and led the Nouveau Kiskeya (New Haiti) Development Project in Northwest Haiti. We were a group of American investors committed to developing fifteen miles of pristine ocean-front property about 100 miles north of Port-au-Prince. Our primary objective was to start a tax-free trade zone that would create thousands of jobs and help transform the neediest area of the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Our model would be the one that had put the Bahamas on the map 50 years earlier.

It was an ambitious project with a primarily philanthropic motive. As Christian business people whom God had prospered, we were all in agreement that a profitable return on investment was secondary to the goals of providing jobs for thousands and introducing them to the God of the Bible. The Nouveau Kiskeya Project was driven by a vision I was convinced God had prompted and repeatedly affirmed. I kept track of the miraculous interventions that supported the conclusion that this was a “God-project” which He had stamped with His seal of approval.

My involvement in Haiti had begun almost seven years earlier. It had not been easy. I, as well as others, had invested a significant amount of money and enormous amounts of time in business and political strategies that had not achieved the results we had anticipated. But the Nouveau Kiskeya project was different. As I walked into my office on that snowy morning, the “Miracle List,” what I took to be miraculous affirmations of our development project, numbered sixteen. They reinforced my belief that, unlike those earlier attempts, this one could not fail.

I was about to begin a journey that almost cost me my faith. It would take several more years of my life, but painfully and ever-so-slowly, I was able to distill a handful of lessons I wish I had known at the beginning.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds... In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
James 2:14-17

WANTING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

I suppose I could blame it all on a book I read early in 1998, *Half Time*, authored by Bob Buford. I was in my early 50's. I was CEO of Datacomp, a company I started in 1987 specializing in manufactured home appraisals. At the time we had 80 employees and about 3,000 independent-contractors all across the country. It was obvious that God had significantly blessed our business. Buford's book brought me up short and caused me to take appraisal of my own life. It prompted me to ask an important question, "God, what is it that you want me to do with the second half of my life?"

I had time and some money that could be used to make a difference somewhere. The "somewhere" that I believe God impressed on me was the island-nation of Haiti. I had never been there and didn't know much about it other than that it was extremely poor. I did remember seeing a picture of the Haitian President, Baby Doc Duvalier, I think it was on the cover of Time Magazine. I recalled news reports that had characterized Papa Doc and his son Baby Doc as ruthless dictators who had stolen millions from the national treasury. That was the extent of my knowledge about Haiti.

I knew I wanted to invest my energies and resources in a country I could get my head around. Since Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, but no bigger

than Vermont, it seemed to fit the bill. It wasn't long after this that Kristin, our 22-year-old daughter, announced that she would be taking her Calvin College Interim course overseas. Coincidentally, the country she had chosen was Haiti. This was intriguing since, up until that moment, I had not mentioned my interest to anyone except my wife, Jan. My parting words to Kristin were: "Why don't you look around to see what a business guy like me might be able to do to help the people of Haiti."

When Kristin returned three weeks later, she told me that while in country she had heard of an organization committed to mobilizing Christian businesspeople called Partners for Christian Development (now Partners Worldwide). She suggested that I call them since she had been told that they were committed to starting businesses in Haiti.

I called Partners and learned that their mission coincided surprisingly with what I hoped to accomplish. A few days later Mike Buwalda, their development director, came to my office. He explained that the role of the organization was to introduce American businesspeople to struggling entrepreneurs in underdeveloped countries. The objective was to link the American businesspeople with these entrepreneurs to help them start or expand their business. Business growth would create jobs and allow the currently unemployed to become self-supporting. I was intrigued since that seemed like a great way for a businessperson like me to help the poor.

The problem was that Haiti was in a period of political instability and travel there was considered inadvisable. I waited for conditions to improve and a few years later, in 2002, I received the call from Partners asking if I was still interested in going to Haiti. I was. I made the arrangements and flew to Port-au-Prince, Haiti in February 2003. Despite the dirt, the crowds and the overwhelming poverty I felt an odd sense of excitement. I

took it as an affirmation that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I was introduced to a number of Haitians who were leading the Partners' initiatives in Haiti and we quickly became friends. This was the opposite of what I had felt on a trip to Ecuador, several years earlier, in which I felt like an observer the entire time. In Haiti there was an almost instantaneous bond. This surprised me, for despite some discomfort resulting from the stark differences between the Haitian culture and my own, I was completely at home.

After meeting these key Haitian leaders, seeing their commitment and energy as well as the immense opportunities for business, I bought into the Partners Worldwide vision. I fully embraced their strategy of helping small business owners in Haiti succeed. When I returned home, Jan and I agreed immediately to support the start of their business incubator to help promote small business growth in Port-au-Prince.

During the next 18 months I would travel to Haiti three times. Early on we also decided to provide loans to a modest building-supply storeowner and to a lady selling handmade organic soaps at the airport. I mentored and encouraged these entrepreneurs, hoping to help them expand their business using the principles that had helped me. Slowly these experiences taught me my first crucial cross-cultural lesson. I did not know it at the time, but it is the one that laid the foundation for every lesson that would follow: doing business in an underdeveloped country is extraordinarily difficult.

Entrepreneurs face challenges everywhere but the difficulty factor increases exponentially in a country such as Haiti. Doing business there is not at all like doing business in the United States. My unexamined assumption before I ever touched the tarmac of the Port-au-Prince airport was that the principles that helped me succeed in

Michigan would do the same for any Haitian who was willing to listen and work hard to implement them. After several trips I came to the realization that I had been wrong. Just because something works in the United States does not mean it will necessary work in an under-developed-world context.

I discovered that what makes it so incredibly difficult to succeed is the almost complete lack of infrastructure that we take for granted in the developed world. The roads are a disaster, water and electricity are erratic, and the justice system is frequently non-existent or corrupt. Nelson, one of the entrepreneurs Partners was helping, had to get up in the middle of the night to take advantage of a periodic two-hour electricity-window to power his tools in his small woodworking shop. In addition, assuming you were one of the few lucky ones who qualified for a loan, interest rates were averaging an exorbitant 35%.

By the end of 2004, after several years of effort and thousands of dollars in loans, I was ready to give up. I had tried all the conventional methods for business growth without seeing any results. There had been no appreciable increase in sales much less creation of new jobs, and as a result the loans were not being repaid. Worse, there was no evidence that either those who had received these funds or their employees were any better off.

Like a persistent mosquito, a question began pestering me: “Why doesn’t anything seem to work in this country?” I had begun with such high hopes and had responded to what I believed was a call from God. Yet I was being forced to the disheartening conclusion that what we were doing was not working. While I was not prepared to give up on “my call” to the country, I was ready to quit trying to create jobs there.

Earlier that year God had given Jan and me an opportunity to start a children's ministry in Haiti. The seed of that ministry was actually planted during my first trip in 2003. The first Haitian I had met after arriving in the capital was Lesly Jules, Haitian Partnership Manager for Partners Worldwide. Lesly introduced me to his fiancée, Kerline Toussaint; a beautiful but very shy, young Haitian woman. Shortly thereafter Lesly and Kerline were married.

As Jan and I got to know this dedicated young couple, we learned that Kerline was on a mission to improve her English. To help her, we invited her to live in our home in West Michigan for three months in early 2004. Every evening over dinner, we found ourselves talking about her homeland. During one of these conversations Jan and I shared that we had been thinking about helping Haitian orphans. Kerline looked at us in shock. She told us that she actually had plans in her briefcase for starting an orphanage. She had been working on them for about two years while employed by a Baptist mission organization.

As we discussed the details, Kerline began to explain that many orphans in Haiti are not really orphans, since many of them have one or two living parents. She also introduced us to a culturally ingrained system we had never heard of. "There is something we call *restavec*," she said. It is a term that comes from a delightfully innocent French phrase, *reste avec*, "one who stays with" and conveys the imagery of someone enjoying a friend's warm hospitality.

However, the reality is much different. It is actually a cruel system that is so old and so woven into the culture it is almost invisible. As Kerline spoke, it became clear that

restavec is a perverse euphemism for a system masquerading as hospitality but which frequently is actually nothing less than child abuse and child slavery.

Parents unable to care for their children leave them in the hands of families who are slightly higher on the economic ladder. These families promise to provide food, lodging and education in exchange for “light housework.” In reality it is rarely that simple. Many of these children, as young as three or four years old, find themselves living in hovels in the back yard, and earn their keep by exhausting labor. Abuse is common. Education is frequently an ephemeral dream.

Oddly, what most struck Jan and I was Kerline’s demeanor as she spoke. It was as if she were discussing Haitian weather patterns. Though a committed, college-educated Christian, she gave no indication that she recognized the depth of this systemically evil system.

When you grow up with a pervasive wickedness, education and Christianity are frequently not enough to give a clear perspective. Take slavery in our own country. How many “God-fearing” Christians recognized the horror and degradation they had grown comfortable with in their own towns, schools, and places of business? Separate drinking fountains and forbidden counters, along with designated bus seats were tolerated and supported by Christians in the United States for decades. Cultural paradigms are very dangerous things.

In June of 2004, we decided to respond by launching an organization called Rescue One. Kerline would be in charge. Her primary role was to encourage Haitian pastors to preach against this abusive system and take action against it. Rescue One Haiti would then be tasked with forming church partnerships that would reach out to the

poorest of the poor children in their neighborhoods. The Haitian church partners would look for the most vulnerable, and the most desperate children. The Haitian church would make arrangements to provide Christian education, food, clothes, healthcare and summer spiritual retreats for the children. They would also be responsible for covering 10% of the cost, with the understanding that their percentage would increase a little bit every year. Rescue One USA would cover the remainder, which amounted to about \$1000 per child per year.

That first year Rescue One, with the help of one local church, rescued 15 children. Today there are five churches that have joined hands to help 75 beautiful children. Local Haitian churches are finding strength and courage they did not know they had. And they are now paying an average of 30% of the program costs. One of the Haitian pastors expressed his gratitude that Rescue One had not followed the standard NGO model. “You have empowered us,” he said. “You have allowed us to make the rules, you’ve let us lead and decide how the ministry should be run.”

Some of the Haitian Church committee members made this remarkable admission: “we never understood that there were others we had a responsibility to serve. We were used to thinking of ourselves as recipients of charity. It did not occur to us that there were others who were needier than ourselves.” (For more information about Rescue One check out the website at www.rescue-one.org.)

Although I was pleased with the success of the Rescue One effort I was still wrestling with unanswerable questions. After all, I was a businessman, my vocation was business, and my experience was in business. I knew the power for good that business and job opportunities could exert on people and communities, and how it could elevate

the poor from despair to hope. I could not make sense of my inability to promote business growth and job-creation among people who were so crushed by poverty and had such a strong desire to break free from it.

In late 2004, as I was reevaluating our job creation efforts in Haiti, Partners Worldwide asked me to join them on a trip to help review the progress of the business incubator which had been started two years earlier. I didn't really want to go. My experiences had convinced me that it would be unproductive.

Several days later, as I was struggling to make up my mind, I came across a one-page article written by a researcher at the UN. It was about the UN's prognosis for Haiti for the next ten years. One sentence in particular blew me away: "Haiti appears to be headed toward another decade of decline, with health, education and social services suffering amid continuing conflict and environmental disaster."

How could this be? I wondered. How could life possibly get worse in what was already the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere? And why weren't the billions in aid and finances, provided by the international community, reversing this trend?

I thought about that for several days. I could not get those questions out of my mind. Then I began to write. I believed then and I believe now that God prompted what I wrote. A new strategy began to take shape. In hindsight, I recognize that it was a macro-approach to poverty-alleviation rather than the micro-approach on which I had been focused. Its central thrust was that American Christians had an opportunity and a responsibility to help their Haitian brothers and sisters make systemic changes in their country.

These thoughts turned into a three-page letter to Doug Seebeck, the Executive

Director of Partners Worldwide. In it I stated my conviction that “this continuing deteriorating Haitian situation demands a Christian response” and asked him if he would be willing to join me on a “preposterous journey.”

I went on to say that “I believe it’s time for the Christian community to step to the plate. Our choice is simple: we can continue to dabble in Haiti and allow millions of people, right in the backyard of the largest and richest Christian country in the world, to live and die in abject poverty; or we can rise to the occasion and begin to act as if the lives of our Haitian brothers and sisters depended on it – because it does!”

The strategy was simple: the North American Christian community would do everything it could to help Haitians establish a Christian government and provide assistance to stabilize its economy. This is where the plan became audacious. Economic stability would be accomplished by creating a Free Trade Zone that would offer employment to at least 100,000 Haitians by the end of 2007, and a million jobs by the end of the decade.

Doug’s response was not only positive but enthusiastic. In addition, our friends in Haiti without hesitation and with great excitement affirmed this idea. Two weeks later I was invited to speak at a rally of Haitian Christians inside the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. It appeared that God was opening doors. We were on a roll.

Thank you for reading the first chapter of

Demons of Poverty,
One Entrepreneur's Experience with Serving the Poor in Haiti.

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