

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING THE HAITIANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

12/1/04

PROFILE OF THE HAITIANS

General Background

Haiti is located on the western half of the Caribbean island discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492 called "Hispaniola" meaning "Little Spain." It is a mountainous nation with 1,100 miles of coastline, about the size of Maryland. Though there was an indigenous "Indian" population, the Spaniards in their rush to extract gold from the mines, enslaved the local population which did not survive the cruel treatment and within a generation became extinct.

The slave masters, still incited by greed, started the infamous importation of Blacks from Africa to carry on the deadly and ignominious task of slavery;

Soon, the English and the French came to the party. They wanted their share of the booty. It was the French who succeeded in forcing the Spanish to give them the western part of the land. This new French territory later became Haiti as we know it today, and the larger eastern section became the Dominican Republic.

The Blacks of Haiti never accepted the idea of living and dying in slavery. Under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, he and other leaders fought against both French and Spanish until his death. They planted the seed of freedom in the hearts of a people who would never live in slavery again. However, it was not until the uprising of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a lieutenant under Louverture's command, who continued the struggle toward freedom against the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte.

In 1804, Haiti proclaimed its independence from the French, thus becoming the first Black republic on earth but remained isolated because other slave-states in the region were threatened by the example produced here. Through a long history of political instability with repeated interference by U.S. interests, including the period of 1905-1947 when the U.S. had direct or indirect control of Haitian finances and 1915 to 1934 when the country was under U.S. occupation. As a result, Haitians continue to have mixed feelings about their relationship with their northern neighbor.

Currently there are nearly eight million residents with the capital Port-au-Prince being the major city.

The language of Haitians is French-Creole, a pidgin version of French mixed with English, Spanish, and African languages. French is the official language of the country with most books and documents recorded in French. The education system itself was inherited from France. A good number of people speak French fluently. Most understand it quite well, but virtually all speak and understand Creole. Creole is now becoming more socially acceptable and is used primarily in worship services, hymnody, etc.

Immigration Issues

Haiti is a very poor country, impoverished by war, ignorance, and theft by both nationals and foreigners. Haitians, however, are very proud people, conscious of their past, and always striving to improve their conditions at all social levels. Those who consider themselves fortunate enough to immigrate to the United States and Canada are very laborious people, who bring their knowledge, skill, and strength to this continent.

Due to the language barrier, especially in the U.S., they are commonly seen as another group of Blacks, and

receive the same treatment as the American Black. This is quite a shock for Haitians living in the U.S., who come to realize for the first time in their lives that the color of their skin makes a difference.

Still, Haitians are not vengeful. They understand that they have a responsibility to their relatives to improve their lives and find a better opportunity for those entrusted to their care. The political instability of the post-Duvalier dictatorial era (1957-86) has produced severe population dislocation as various factions have escaped the whims of questionable democracy, by sea, by legal immigration and through refugee status, resulting in disrupted family relationships, economics, and religious loyalties. Many Haitians are deeply committed to sending funds back to the homeland for their relatives.

Today there are about 420,000 foreign-born Haitians (530,000 of Haitian descent) living in the United States with Florida populated by almost 185,000 of these and New York with 126,000. Massachusetts and New Jersey are two additional states with substantial populations of Haitians.

It is only a small percentage of Haitians who actually arrive as refugees or asylum seekers.

Religious Heritage

Haitian people are very religious. Roman Catholicism is considered the official religion of the country. From the time of independence until about 1960, 95% of the Haitians claimed to be Catholic. However, during the last three decades Protestantism has made impressive progress in the land. It is estimated today that one third of the inhabitants are Protestant.

Many non-Protestant Haitians practice voodoo, which is a syncretism of African religions and Catholic rites. Roman Catholicism has failed to eradicate voodooism from the land. Most Catholics feel that it is normal to practice both simultaneously. When evangelical Protestantism reached Haiti, it was made clear that people needed to make a choice between serving Christ and serving heathen spirits. Then they realized that one can actually be freed from the influence of evil. This has been one of the most important contributions of the Protestant church to the spiritual and social welfare of the people of Haiti. However, voodooism is being promoted as the true national indigenous religion.

The task of planting Nazarene Haitians churches began in the early 1970's through the initiatives of Haitians themselves such as Rev. Massillon Pierre, Luc Pierre, Delanot Pierre, Akish Devallon, Pierre Michel Paul, and Gesner Jean and through the support of general and district church leaders.

Many of these leaders were Nazarenes in Haiti where the Church of the Nazarene where the Church of the Nazarene was founded in the 1950's under the leadership of Rev and Mrs. Paul Orjala and has grown to encompass ten districts and nearly 100,000 members, making it the denomination's second largest national field and one of the most intensely evangelized.

As of October 2004, 60 Haitian churches are currently actively organized in the United States and another 15, in Canada. They are concentrated along the east coast of North America with Southern Florida District hosting 19 congregations; Central Florida, 10; New England, 12; Metro New York, 10; Mid Atlantic, 8; and the Canada Quebec, 10. Other congregations are located on the Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Philadelphia, and South Carolina Districts. Most of these churches meet in shared or rental arrangements, thereby inhibiting growth and freedom. Many of the Haitian congregations struggle financially due to heavy personal economic burdens, insecure circumstances, and commitments to the homeland.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Haitians

General Suggestions:

Acknowledge the difficult realities that face Haitian immigrants—both in their coming and in their subsequent life issues faced in a new and difficult land. The language, cultural, racial and economic barriers are perhaps more difficult than with any other national group.

Avoid stereotyping Haitians. They are not to be lumped in with Africans, or African Americans. Their history is one of independence and abuse, but not on the same terms as others.

Treat Haitians with respect; avoid condescension

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR DISTRICTS IS TO:

- Welcome international students. Go onto college campuses and seek to host them.
- Sponsor a work and witness team to go serve in Haiti.
- Invite missionaries who have served in Haiti to inform, counsel and motivate the local church in its ministry to Haitians.
- Screen well any independent church and pastor who wishes to be affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene for doctrinal and ethical integrity. Have them thoroughly convinced that the Church of the Nazarene is the right church for association based on doctrine, governance, and mission, and not primarily on practical advantages.
- Pray for Haitian leadership, and commit perhaps scholarship funds to help prepare someone called for ministry
- Give adequate training opportunities for local church leadership to complete the course of study or engage in the formal training programs of the Church. Offer financial assistance for meritorious studies.
- Recognize the great progress that has been made by Haitian-American and Haitian-Canadian Nazarenes, making them the second largest immigrant church in North America. The leadership, networking and experience serves as a great incentive and resource for additional growth.

THE MISSIONAL TASK OF THE LOCAL CHURCH:

- Make friends with your Haitian neighbors
- Meet a specific need, i.e. food, clothing, medical, general information, immigration document counseling
- Learn French and use it in communicating with Haitians
- Identify ESL teachers and develop a local program
- Provide space in your church for Haitians to meet
- Offer translation in English-language services
- Volunteer to teach an English Sunday School class to children and youth in a Haitian church
- Commemorate important Haitian holidays or hold cultural event open to the public
- Engage the resources of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries to assist the practical needs that face so many in the Haitian population.