

# HOPE FOR HAITI

## Groups have made helping the troubled nation a sacred mission

By Award-winning Journalist Ervin Dyer

From The Crisis

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The evening is warm and clear and the sun still hugs the rolling green hills of Kenscoff, a rural region of Haiti, when the young mother approaches. The makeshift clinic, set in a small church built of stones, prepares to close after a day of seeing more than 150 patients. Wait, the mother protests. Her baby is sick. Swaddled in a thick blanket and layers of clothing, the infant has not been able to take the mother's milk for days and refuses to suckle anything. Severely dehydrated, the baby has no energy to even cry.

Leon Pamphile is a Haitian native and the founder/leader of the mission group that's brought dozens of healing hands to this slow-moving mountaintop. He stands at the clinic's door and waves the mother through. She is the last patient of the day. The doctors and nurses rub the baby in a glucose lotion that provides immediate nourishment. Unable to give an IV because the baby's tiny veins are collapsed, drop by life-saving drop, they squeeze a saline solution into the baby's mouth. At last, the 3-month-old whimpers. Doctors say the baby was only a few hours from death. They call her restoration a miracle.

Pamphile, a tall dark man with chiseled features and a gentle spirit, watches and smiles. He knows miracles. After all, 52 years ago, Pentecostal ministers noticed his academic gifts and lifted him from a two-room village schoolhouse to an education in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's teeming capital.

The journey paved the way for him to come to America, where he is now a minister and a retired teacher who lives in Pittsburgh. At this point, Pamphile has spent most of his life in the United States, but he's never forgotten his roots or his good fortune.

The mission work he provides is an example of the hundreds of such faith-based and nonprofit initiatives that have poured into this tiny island nation. They hail from Dallas to Washington, D.C. There are groups like the 50-year-old Albert Schweitzer Hospital, which helps care for thousands, and St. Elizabeth Catholic Church of Pompano Beach, which builds solar ovens to help bake bread for a few dozen. There are groups that boost women artisans and put men to work in the coffee fields. The groups are large and small and they offer Haiti a lifeline of hope.

It's tough to get an official number on how many are touched, but physicians, aid workers and development officials estimate it could be millions.

The brunt shock of just how much help is needed came to Angel Aloma one hot summer day. Aloma, executive director of the Florida-based Food For The Poor, was in Cite Soleil, a sprawling shanty neighborhood near Port-au-Prince where hundreds forage for food in garbage dumps. The group has a feeding center in Cite Soleil where it serves hot meals. Aloma went to visit one couple and their seven children who rely on the center. Their home was a dilapidated shack: dirt floor, no windows and a corroded roof. In the hot, cramped structure, Aloma looked up and saw light streaming through the many holes. When it rained, the family slept in the mud.

Through its network of missionaries and food donations, which come in by the trailer load, Food For The Poor reaches the most destitute in Haiti. "We fight the battle against generational poverty and starvation," said Aloma. "We have tripled our shipments of food to Haiti and the needs there are still tremendous. Haitians are thankful and appreciative. To many of these hardworking and long-suffering people, this aid means the difference between life and death."

The global food crisis has magnified the care that groups like Food for the Poor provide. In Haiti, where an average family survives on \$2 a day, the price of food staples has soared. Beans, corn, rice are 50 percent to 100 percent above their typical costs. A 50-pound bag of rice that was \$13 U.S. a year ago now can cost \$26 U.S or more. The rapid escalation has forced Haiti back into the news. The poorest nation in the western hemisphere, Haiti stands as the epicenter of the crisis as up to 60 percent of its 9 million citizens are left with empty bellies. The crisis has battered the country, threatening a rare, but fragile stability.

To fill their stomachs, the poorest of the poor eat dirt – the small pies crafted from a melange of mud, sugar and oil that sold on the street for a penny. Desperate for relief, in the spring, hundreds marched to the iron gates of Haiti's presidential palace crying "nou grangou" – "we are hungry." The president lowered food prices. Six people died in the melee.

Food For The Poor and most of the aid groups, like Pamphile's, work without fanfare. But the food crisis has given many assistance efforts a broader exposure. In the summer, the Rev. Jesse Jackson led a three-day fact-finding delegation to look at the roots of the crisis and what role U.S. policy could have in bringing relief. Between 2004-2006, the U.S. government provided \$600 million to help Haiti with security, economic and humanitarian aid.

More should be done said the Jubilee USA Network, a web of activist organizations that is pushing for debt relief. Jubilee says Haiti owes \$1.3 billion in debt and pays \$1 million a week in debt service to wealthy banks. In early summer, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University and other groups criticized the United States of withholding millions in loans to Haiti that would have provided two of its severely distressed cities with access to clean water.

Also, in the spring, Grammy-winner Wyclef Jean, Haiti's native son, formed Together for Haiti, a coalition designed to provide food, spur job creation and support Haitian agriculture. It is supported by Jean's own Yele Haiti, a foundation to advance education, health and community development, and by the United Nation's World Food Program and the Pan American Development Foundation.

Now, said the singer, when launching the effort, Haiti "needs us more than ever."

He's right.

Physically, Haiti, which means land of mountains in the language of its original people, the Arawak Indians, is beautiful.

Two hundred years ago, as a colony of France, this fertile garden of emerald hills, mango orchards and banana groves was prosperous. But Haitians wanted to be free and, in 1803, an army of enslaved Africans defeated Napoleon, making their country the first free black republic.

With its newly won freedom, Haiti stood as an international symbol of black liberation and Toussaint L'Ouverture, a self-educated slave with no military training, became the architect of Haitian independence. L'Ouverture became a celebrated figure of freedom, a sort of 19th-century Nelson Mandela.

There was a backlash, however, to the rising black pride. France and even a newly independent United States, which was still a slave-holding nation, denied establishing a relationship with the new country. In the decades since, Haiti has been treated like a stepchild of the west.

It has not helped that a succession of corrupt leaders further eroded the country's political stability, including the brutal 20th-century dictatorships of Francois Duvalier, and his son, Jean-Claude, who fled the country in 1986.

Today, Haiti's people are crippled by rampant malnutrition, tuberculosis and a crumbled up infrastructure that denies most proper plumbing and electricity.

Two-thirds of the country's people are unemployed, and most Haitians live on about \$2 a day. Heavily armed United Nations peacekeeping troops troll the streets struggling to keep a lid on the gangs and crime in the urban areas. Life expectancy is little more than 50 years.

Pamphile knows this pain and its people.

From a dusty unfinished room in the clinic he founded five years ago, he can look in the distance and see the region Laboule. It is shrouded in the thick green arms of a nearby valley. For Pamphile, the eldest of 10 children, Laboule is home.

He was the first in his village to escape the grind of having little electricity and the never-ending struggle for clean water, and he never forgot it. At the clinic, he is surrounded by cousins and nieces and nephews who come to help. He speaks effortless Creole, his native tongue, and scores of parents and their shoeless children beam at him, grateful for his services.

"Haiti is still alive because of Haitians abroad and their families who have reached out," said Pamphile, a scholar whose own work is devoted to discussing the relationships between Haitians and African Americans. "Our generosity comes from a communal dimension that is part of Haitian life. One will reach out and pull up the other."

That's what Pamphile did. Once settled in Pittsburgh, he opened his doors and helped five of his siblings to make the transition to America.

While steadily improving his own life – Pamphile has a law degree, a masters in French, a masters in theology, and a doctorate in education -- about 25 years ago, he sought a broader service.

He dreamed he could better his home country through education, health and work.

In 1983, he founded the nonprofit Functional Literacy Ministry.

It's a mission dedicated to Haiti. The group hires teachers to improve students' reading and writing skills. It built a school in his native village on land donated by his father, a 90-year-old preacher. And, it supports struggling schools by providing scholarships that help with books and clothing.

Pamphile's vision came to fruition with the help of David Robinson, a Presbyterian minister in rural Pittsburgh who died four years ago. Pamphile's clinic and the adjacent church are called the House of David to honor Robinson's sweat and conviction in expanding the ministry.

Every summer since his departure, Pamphile returns to Haiti for about two weeks with as many as a dozen volunteers. Now, they go offering the medical attention that is desperately needed. In the country, there is only one physician for every 10,000 Haitians and one hospital bed for every 1,000. In the two decades since he founded the charity, it has raised more than half a million dollars to support its missions.

The school he supports educates 500 children, whom Pamphile call the future of the country. Through the ministry, he also supports a literacy-training program that gives up to 1,200 people a year the building blocks to a better life. The clinic, which still needs walls and tile on its dirt floor, began its outreach in 2003. During Pamphile's summer mission, it can serve up to 1,000 people in 10 days. This summer, mission leaders were excited that a small circle of Haitian physicians and nurses are interested in working with the clinic and helping to establish a more stable presence in the Thomassin community, a busy place about 25 miles from Port-au-Prince where mounds of garbage and shanty communities share space with gated pastel-colored homes, small shops and tidy restaurants.

The illnesses and trauma that Pamphile and the group deal with during the missions can be crushing. Hundreds present with high blood pressure, malnourishment, infections, worms and fever. The appreciation for their work is easy to see. It walks in one humid afternoon, in the quiet smiling face of Wendy Nestor, a 12-year-old boy with a thick wool cap on his head.

A year ago, Wendy was severely burned when boiling oil spilled onto his head. His wounds were inappropriately treated by a Haitian physician and became badly infected. His parents brought Wendy to the mission clinic. As divine intervention would have it, Sam Roberts, a West Virginia physician long active with the group, just happened to bring along the medicines and dressings necessary to attend to Wendy. Under sedation, Wendy's wounds were cleaned and he was given antibiotics. Still, Wendy had a long road to recovery. With the help of Pamphile's group, arrangements were made to eventually transport Wendy to Boston for two surgeries, one of which was a graft to help his hair grow back.

He's improving today. He's in the clinic to thank his friends for the new hair now puffing up from his scalp.

"If there was not this clinic," says Wendy, "I don't know if I would be here. I thought I might die."

Sitting on a wooden bench in the shade of the clinic, Pamphile said he has sometimes been a "weary traveler along a heavenly road," but the possibility of such a Haiti/American partnership fills him with hope.

"I believe in empowering community development and in the empowerment of people to help themselves," he said. "This has not been my vision all my life, but after my training as an educator and theology student, I knew service would be a cardinal principle of my life."

Meanwhile, on the mountain at Kenscoff, Pamphile and crew are packing up to leave. Mission accomplished. They are heading down the stony dirt path with two additional persons attached to the group. It is the mother who came late to the clinic, Rachele, and her infant son, Steevenson, who is now softly crying in his mother's arms. Pamphile takes both to a nearby orphanage where they will be given special care to recover. Before his two-week stay is done, Pamphile hears both are well. He is pleased. Yet another sign that Haiti can be healed, even if it is one person at a time.

*Ervin Dyer is a Pittsburgh writer who covers health and issues related to the Africa Diaspora.*