

JAMAICA SITE VISIT

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After visiting Haiti, I traveled west 100 miles across the Caribbean Sea to Jamaica for a little vacation. We had recently funded a few projects there, so I did some site visits during my trip.

It is interesting to see the similarities and differences between Haiti and Jamaica, both former African slave colonies that developed their own languages (Creole and Patois) and culture based on their French or British masters. The poverty in the inner cities and rural places of Jamaica is about the same as in Haiti, but not as overwhelming. Jamaica is wealthier because of its tourist attractions, but the gap between rich and poor is extremely wide. While over 80% of the population in Haiti is Catholic, the percentage of Catholics varies between 1% and 5% in Jamaica, depending on the parish. There are 14 parishes in Jamaica divided into three counties: Cornwall, Middlesex and Surrey.

The first congregation I visited was the Daughters of Divine Love (DDL), who have established several mission centers in the Diocese of Montego Bay. Sr. Providencia and Sr. Louise Therese (pictured in that order to the right) came to pick me up at the hotel where I was staying near the airport. They are both from Nigeria and are currently stationed in Savanna La Mar, the capital of the Westmoreland parish, located about an hour away from Montego Bay.



The DDL Sisters have two main social outreach programs in the towns of Little London and Grange Hill. The sisters routinely visit the sick and the elderly in hospitals and in their homes. They provide regular meals, medication and healthcare to the shut-ins, as well as Holy Communion, when requested. The sisters also organize youth ministries and help the students with their schooling. They showed me their “soup kitchen” at St. Luke’s Church in Little London where they distribute food to the hungry. It was just a large red storage bin where they keep dry goods donated by Food for the Poor. Volunteers help them cook warm meals outside next to the bin.



The people they serve work mainly in the sugarcane plantations, one of the country’s main sources of income. According to Sr. Providencia, the Jamaicans no longer own the plantations; they are now owned by the Brazilians. Those who are able to work earn only about \$50 per week cutting sugarcane. This is not enough to provide for all the family needs. Many of the children find it difficult to concentrate in school because they do not have anything to eat for lunch; some prefer loitering in the streets rather than suffering hunger at school.

The people live near the sugar plantations in old, dilapidated shacks that are placed on top of cinder blocks and large rocks. This is so the houses do not get flooded during the rainy season. When it rains, the children cannot go to school because they do not have good shoes or boots to cover their feet. It is difficult to travel on the roads when the grounds are muddy.





The DDL Sisters took me to visit the many families they work with in Little London and Grange Hill. The people in general are very friendly and sweet-natured, just as their neighbors in Haiti.

After my visit with the DDL Sisters, I met Sr. Grace Yap in the parish of St. Elizabeth. Sr. Grace belongs to the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Alleghany and is a native born Jamaican whose parents are Chinese. Apparently, there are a lot of Chinese-Jamaicans living in the country. Sr. Grace, who is very proud of her Jamaican heritage, is involved in many community-building projects. One of the projects we recently funded was the Porziuncola Farm, a 100-acre demonstration farm that was established to help the Braes River Community in St. Elizabeth become more sustainable. Grace's ophthalmologist donated the land. It is a 100% organic farm that cultivates honey, various fruits and vegetables. I learned that pineapples do not grow in trees, but in the ground.



Sign at Farm Entrance



Sr. Grace Yap with Braes River Boys



Pineapples

I arrived just in time to attend two important meetings Sr. Grace had with the Braes River Community. The first meeting was held on the front porch of the farmhouse with several young farmhands. The main discussion was how to maintain the various gardens and improve the produce. The average age of the boys was 18 years old. She reminded them that the farm belongs to them and that they should take care of it with pride, knowing that it will help the people in their community.



The other meeting was held in a large gazebo by a small river that runs through the property of the farm. The community was organizing a big

festival for June 2012 that would hopefully draw more tourists. An archeologist, Ms. Brooks, was invited to assist in helping turn Braes River into a popular place of interest. She brought several rolls of old maps for the community to review and discuss a few historical landmarks in Braes River. Ms. Brooks encouraged them to interview the oldest members of the community and find interesting stories to share about its history. Several homes in the community are working on getting licenses to operate as bread and breakfasts for travelers.





After my visit in St. Elizabeth, Sr. Grace took me to her convent in Kingston located about two hours away. The convent is a beautiful building that was a former hotel built in 1888. Because the hotel was a financial failure from the start, it changed ownership a few times before it was eventually sold to the Franciscan Sisters for a good price in 1940, and became the Immaculate Conception Convent and High School.

There are only about 12 sisters living in this convent; their average age is about 70. Half of the building is used as a hostel. Many different Catholic groups from different parts of the world stay at the convent when visiting. At the time of my visit, there were two Catholic youth groups from Canada who come every year to do volunteer work in the inner cities and rural villages. Like Habitat for Humanity, they help repair and build affordable homes for the poor.



Sr. Grace took me to different projects in the inner cities of Riverton, Trench Town, and Whitfield. These shantytowns consist of many tin-roof houses and abandoned buildings. A lot of the homes are in need of repair. There are several community centers in the inner cities that have goats, chicken and fish that provide milk, cheese, eggs and meat to feed the poor. Sr. Grace, who is known as the “Reggae Nun,” is part of the Trench Town Development Association, which put together the Culture Yard Museum in the place where Bob Marley grew up and wrote songs.





While in Kingston, I was able to meet the Missionaries of the Poor, an international monastic order of Brothers founded in 1981 by Chinese-Jamaican priest, Fr. Ho Lung. On March 27, 2011, Fr. Ho established a new order of religious sisters who take care of young, pregnant mothers and abandoned babies at the Holy Innocents Center.

Five young religious women and one aspirant make up the Missionaries of the Poor Sisters (MOP). Only the aspirant is Jamaican; the rest are from the U.S. and Canada. The sister holding the baby in the black and white picture is Filipino-Canadian. This striking image was taken about a month ago by one of Fr. Ho's professional photographer friends. I saw the picture hanging on the wall and took a picture of it because I thought it was beautiful. The name of the baby, who is just days old in the photograph, is Innocent Steven. I got to hold him while I was there. He was exactly one month old at the time.

My last visit was with the Compassion Franciscan Sisters of the Poor in Montego Bay. This congregation consists of four sisters from the Philippines and one novice who is Haitian. The mother superior is a social worker and the other three sisters are registered nurses. They manage a hospice and a clinic that provides dental, emergency and ophthalmologic care for more than 2,000 patients per month. Two Burmese doctors, who are a married couple, work as volunteers at the clinic.

I heard gunshots early one morning, and I asked the sisters about it. Apparently, this is very common. One sister responded nonchalantly that it was just the "notorious gang." She related how the mother superior, Sr. Joy, had to go into a dangerous part of town several months ago to visit a patient in his home. The leader of the "notorious gang" warned her that if she ever came back she would be killed. Sr. Joy told him that she was not afraid to die doing God's work. She has gone to visit her patient several times since then and has earned the respect of the gang members who live there.

