

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the twenty second. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Learning Today for a Better Tomorrow: New Hope for Haiti

By Rev. Scott Couper

In March 2018, I traveled with a Florida-based United Church of Christ delegation to Petionville, a community on the outskirts of Port au Prince, Haiti. Haiti Partners, a remarkable organization that is changing lives multi-generationally primarily through education, hosted us. I immediately thought about Brattleboro's interest in sister communities – and wondered if Petionville might be a natural fit.

Having studied southern African history for two decades, I'm aware of the brutality that can result from a 'colonized mentality'. A dynamic exists: 'the repetition compulsion' ("it-was-done-to-me-so-I'll-do-it-to-others", or in Kenya's terms 'It's Our Turn to Eat'), which is made manifest in an abuse of power and a reckless use of violence when new leaders assume power. Those who were earlier abused can easily become abusers. In addition, neo-colonialism can create a dynamic in which foreign aid is often distributed in a controlling, patronizing, and thus demeaning manner. A third dynamic that emanates from colonialism and neo-colonialism is 'dependency' – materially, spiritually and culturally – whereby one's own resources are usually viewed as 'less than', while those which come from abroad are favored and absorbed.

I discovered in Haiti something else I'd seen frequently in southern Africa: that of all the sectors in a violence-prone society, education is likely to suffer the most. The pedagogical tools found in Haiti's schools too often are rote memorization, corporal punishment and humiliation, and the teaching of prejudice, conformity, and passivity while stifling the critical and creative thinking that the country so desperately needs.

So, it's no surprise that I was impressed with Haiti Partners, an organization which seeks to counter all of these practices with innovative, quality education – an education that empowers children to develop their potential, to think outside the box and to engage in improving their communities.

I also was impressed with the manner in which Haiti Partners operates: working collaboratively with local communities, giving these communities a real sense of ownership. The result is a liberating, community-based model of collaborative leadership, innovative educational methods, and collective change-making that provides students and parents with the skills and knowledge needed to move toward a brighter, more loving and sustainable future.

All of this got me wondering about the possibility of sending some of our own French class students (who ought to also learn a bit of Creole) to witness first hand this extraordinary work, while discovering a new country.

Let me tell you about an amazing experience I had while interacting with Haiti Partners. The organization had been encouraged to operate a bakery as a means of raising money for the school. However, multiple problems emerged:

- intense competition from other local producers;
- a low profit margin, often inevitable when selling a 'staple' to locals with limited means;
- the product had a brief shelf life;
- the product required imported ingredients;
- the production was energy intensive; and
- the product required costly transportation (delivery trucks requiring maintenance and fuel).

But then, after much anguish and painful deliberation, an idea emerged. Why not convert the baking infrastructure to one which makes paper? With organic material (banana tree stalks/trunks) readily available for pounding into pulp, and with the ovens used for drying, massive amounts of paper could be produced at low cost. Being non-perishable, easily stored, and weighing little, the paper could be shipped inexpensively to the US as homemade cards, envelopes and art pieces.

Only one hydraulic press was needed to remove excessive moisture and flatten the paper to ready it for cutting and design.

Haiti Partners and some dedicated friends assembled and installed the press. The only thing I could do was plug it in! So, the next time you see beautifully decorated, handmade stationary from Haiti in your local gift store or craft market, please support Haiti Partners with your purchase, and, in turn, support the education of a new generation of learners in that country.

The Rev. Dr. Couper is the Minister at Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Main Street, Brattleboro, Vermont







Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.