“When we see you, we are encouraged. Thank you for being with us. We ask that you come again and bring others with you to see us!”
One spring month in 1969, my father plucked me from my grade eleven class at Rockway Mennonite School to take me on a whirlwind trip to Haiti, that “poor sister of the Dominican Republic.” Even then, Haiti was viewed as a destitute, diseased, dictatorship, ruled by the self-imposed, president-for-life, Papa Doc Duvalier and his infamous private army, the Ton Ton Macoutes. But to my father, Haiti was “The Pearl of the Antilles”, a country that held intrigue and promise.

While I had the opportunity to visit Haiti from time to time, it took me about 30 years to figure what my purpose might be in that country. “What does Haiti need?” was a question I put before me on one weeklong adventure I had with my Dad and several others in the early nineties.

It is a question that I encourage all visitors to Haiti to ask, particularly those that travel with me on our FIDA Haiti Adventure Tours. However common sense it is to ask this of Haitians themselves, the truth is not so easily heard. Haitians believe that the only reason people visit them is because of their perceived need. This is a real dilemma for them. Haitians do not want to be treated as poor and needy people. Relationship is highly valued. How is a respectful relationship possible without diminishing their desire to be seen as valued human beings instead of poor people in need?

Just about any vision worth its salt requires a foundation of principles and values: such that are less about physical structures and activities and more about affirming our humanity, leading us toward productive and peaceful communities through respectful relationships. It is a tough thing to fund because a donor cannot as easily visualize the transformation of human lives. It also repositions the role of the donor and places the beneficiaries at the heart of their own development process. This becomes a different kind of “feel good” benefit that many people often can’t get their head around.

The people who take on our “not-so-comfortable-adventures-in-understanding-poverty” tours do so in the spirit of exploring what it takes to make a difference in the world that is respectful and appropriate. It requires an ability to ask the question that will allow the truth to be spoken. “What is it you wish from us” is the question that we ask visitors to put to the Haitians they visit. Time and time again, the response has been, “When we see you, we are encouraged to go on. Please tell others what we are doing. Thank them for supporting pcH. We wait for you to come again and, to bring others.” The testimonies you will read in this issue speak to lives changed and their personal transformation into agents of peace.

This, too, can be your experience. Let us know when you are ready!
I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in a Foundation for International Development Assistance (FIDA) organized tour of Haiti along with a group from Premier Equipment Ltd in January 2015. I appreciated seeing first-hand the success of FIDA’s agricultural cooperative model and their effective grassroots approach to development.

We visited a number of projects, including an irrigation project that is bringing much needed water to the crops of local farmers in Saint-Marc, even during the dry season. We also dropped in on a small rural classroom where adults were learning how to read and write, increasing self-sufficiency and building their self-esteem. It was rewarding to witness the positive impact of these projects, and the difference that donors in Waterloo Region are making in the lives of Haitians who benefit from FIDA’s work.

We were in Haiti at a significant time: the 5th anniversary of the devastating earthquake in 2010. We remember all those who were lost, and kept in our prayers the many families that were affected. I also reflected on the amazing resiliency of the Haitian people, and the significant progress that the country has made since the earthquake. More progress than I had expected.

Thank you to FIDA Executive Director Betsy Wall for the opportunity to see Haiti up close, and to learn about its challenges, opportunities and achievements.
This past January, seven representatives from Elmira-based Premier Equipment Ltd. undertook their annual visit to Haiti to view projects that they invest in. This visit included two owners, Ian Verbeek and Allan Dueck. “We feel FIDA allows our employees an opportunity to connect first hand, with a contribution Premier is making in an area that is in need,” say the owners. “Writing a cheque to an organization does not have the same effect as seeing first-hand what actual difference we are making. We feel we connect strongly with the co-operative model. It fits nicely with an agricultural initiative that Premier wants to support.

We observed the lingering devastation in the country from the earthquake as well as parts of beautiful Haiti that is not well promoted or even recognized to the world. We dialogued with Haitian farmers first hand and heard of their challenges and what they are doing to better their community and their country. We learned about the diverse and complex Haitian culture – and why ‘just sending money’ rarely fixes anything.

It was clear to us that the people have a hunger to participate in their own future, rather than have it dictated to them and that practical help such as water, literacy, food and animal production is most impactful. We were challenged to rethink how we help those in need (in Haiti or outside of Haiti) and to question whether our personal actions are helping or hurting.

“We returned to Canada reassured that we are making a difference as Premier.”

Each of us appreciates more what we have and take nothing for granted (even the simple act of turning on the faucet to get water). We learned that not everything we see in the media is fact; it is often presented to attract money. While this is something we knew, it is another thing to see it first hand.

We all left Haiti with more than we came with; a recognition that relationships, not possessions, define what makes us successful. Each of us has come to appreciate the benefits of the co-operative model and its effectiveness to change the face of poverty.”
“I truly believe that the FIDA/pcH approach of empowerment and ownership for the Haitian people is absolutely necessary to building communities and a self-sustainable country.” -J.D. Moore

“This tour was an experience that changed my view on poverty. It informed us, educated us, and opened our eyes and hearts to see Haiti not as poor and dismal but as bright, colourful and hopeful.” -Jamie Blais

“As Premier employees, we can be proud that our company’s contributions are going to such a worthwhile cause with sound methodology and sustainable gains.” -Mike Josiak

“I left Haiti with the solid affirmation that the work of FIDA/pcH is an essential part of bringing hope to the people of Haiti. I left Haiti more convinced than ever that the participatory approach of the cooperative model is the best way to tackle agricultural challenges in Haiti. Experiencing cooperative formation, and the adult literacy program in action convicted me in a way that made me realize Premier’s support of FIDA must continue and we should endeavour to grow our support over time.” -Allan Dueck

“Our eyes have been opened to what is really needed in a complex country such as Haiti.” -Ian Verbeek

“When we stepped off the plane, I knew this was no longer a work trip. It was a life trip.” -Tracy Ellig

‘Not-so-comfortable-adventure-in-understanding-poverty’

TOUR INVITES YOU TO DISCOVER

The brave, new Haiti beyond the mountains; to meet its people, to understand its history and our role in it.

INCLUDES: Cultural orientation, accommodation, meals, in country travel, guide, translation, field visits, shopping and various cultural experiences.

For more information and travel dates contact:
Betsy Wall at betsy.wall@fida-pch.org or call 519-886-9520
I came to Haiti to see the country for myself. There is a lot of pre-conceived notions about Haiti and its people. I seized the opportunity to be informed, and experience a way of life different than my own.

The Haitian people are kind, artistic, resourceful, and ingenious in using what they have. As I listened to their stories, I began to understand the importance of relationships in creating a sense of community. I worked hard to learn basic Creole. Although my accent may not have been the best, little things like saying, “Thank you, Good Morning/Afternoon,” in their language brought huge smiles and changed the stereotypes perpetuated by white people. This trip quickly became very different than what I had imagined.

“...I began to understand the importance of relationships in creating a sense of community.”

During our nightly discussions I always found something new and powerful to take away from the stories we had heard during that day. The resiliency and resourcefulness of the Haitians were so inspiring, reminding me of some of my own experiences. We observed men and women who were just learning to read and write. The participants were so proud when they were able to show us how they were able to print their name on their personal chalk board. My father who was raised in a low-income family in northern Canada, is to this day illiterate. Seeing the struggles and pride of overcoming these barriers in Haiti, made me better appreciate the determination and intelligence it must have taken for my father to be where he is today.

I am not one to sit idly after an experience that is so unique. I am speaking to others about my experience in Haiti and about the misconceptions of Haitians. I want to explore the possibility of learning-type tours to Haiti, and inspire others to experience Haiti in a new way.
I travelled to Haiti with fellow Lambton College students on an awareness trip for our International and Community Development class. We had the pleasure of meeting and touring with Betsy Wall, Executive Director of FIDA/pch. Betsy has been visiting and working in Haiti for over 30 years. She provides a very useful insight into the people and the country.

Throughout our week, we were privileged to see the many sides of Haiti: the beautiful, amazing artizani culture, the spiritual uplifting service of a Baptist Church, lunch at La Boutillier Lookout that offered a breath-taking view of Port au Prince, a sweaty half-mountain trek to tour a health clinic, a micro finance centre, and to observe an adult learning program supported in partnership with Rayjon and FIDA/pch. We observed the joy and beauty of Haitians despite our perception that they have so little in material goods. They work hard for so little, yet are happy and appreciative for all they have.

“They were happy to know that we were not in Haiti to fix or build anything for them.”

We learned that the true value of our visit was to listen and learn from the Haitian people. It is not our place to tell them what they need but to be an encouraging presence, the message of hope being our belief in their capacity to do it themselves. This is what they asked of us.

The impact of this message was truly life changing! I will continue to spread the word of what I experienced and learned in Haiti (and hope to return again soon).
When visiting Haiti for the first time it is normal for foreigners to become overwhelmed with the pervasive poverty that exists in Port-au-Prince. After all, we are human. Our natural propensity for compassion kicks in and we want to solve the problem that sits before us, and we want to do it now. I firmly believe that humanity’s innate response to the inhumane living conditions that exist in a place like Haiti is a testament to our sense of connectedness with others. The manifestation of this feeling is the desire to serve those in need. However noble our desire to help and assist may be the response from those of us in the “First World” is to want to solve the problem, and to solve it immediately. Again, this is a positive thing and a great beginning point, but it is so important that we take a step back and really consider what our role should be in “helping” those living in extreme poverty. What is the most appropriate and genuine way to respond to naked toddlers living in homes made of random pieces of metal and donated tarps? How is one to react the “right way” to streets filled with garbage and open sewers? These are common sites throughout Haiti and they all pose moral, theological, and practical questions about how we are connected as human beings and how we should best respond to such profound inequality and suffering.

I believe that the starting point for this type of discussion is to do what might feel counter-intuitive for many of us: by considering what strengths and natural gifts Haiti already has. Huh? The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere has assets? Indeed they do. The first asset is that they have an incredibly motivated workforce that is willing to commit to investing in their families’ futures, as well as working hard to make the most of opportunities they are presented with. Another asset is that Haiti has multiple growing seasons, which enable farmers to produce crops throughout the year. These are two examples of the indigenous strengths that are part of the makeup of Haiti. FIDA believes that foreigners can best direct their compassion and yearning to serve in ways that are respectful and empowering by being in solidarity with Haitian communities that are motivated to be in charge of their own transformation. This is what FIDA US is seeking to do: be in solidarity with Haitians that have a vision for their own communities. We can only do this once we recognize that the solutions to the problems that plague Haiti must be in the hands of the Haitian people. In addition, how much good can we really do if we only see Haiti for the material things that it lacks? As those seeking to be in relationship with Haiti we have to begin by acknowledging that Haiti already has many blessings, many gifts that should be recognized and honored by those of us who truly want to partner with this most incredible nation. When we name and celebrate the gifts of the Haitian people we begin a relationship grounded in respect and faith in one another. This is the type of relationship that has the potential to grow and bear fruit.