

..... Hope for Haiti

Two Presbyterian-supported mission endeavors prove that “with God all things are possible”

BY MIRIAM SAULS

Beyond every mountain is another mountain,” says a Haitian proverb. The plight of the small island country of Haiti since colonial times has been like that—one obstacle after another in its attempt to thrive as an independent nation following its successful revolution against France in 1804. This has continued to the present time: poverty is rampant, and one government administration after another has been corrupt and inefficient.

St. Barnabas Agricultural School

“We have to start with the basics, and feeding people is basic”

If you go to St. Barnabas Agricultural School, a Presbyterian mission near the northern coast, outside the city of Cap Haitien, the proverb may seem literally true. The visit requires either a grueling road trip or a flight in a tiny airplane out of the capital of Port-au-Prince over desolate mountain after mountain, where deforestation is obvious. This country, which used to be so verdant the French called it “the Pearl” because of its valuable natural resources, has suffered ecological disaster and neglect.

Farming in this now nearly barren land requires a combination of skill and determination to coax nourishment from the cracked, rocky soil, and St. Barnabas is providing the “skill” part of the equation. Founded in 1984 by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church of Haiti, the school is still supported by the two churches.

“If we want to get this country back on its feet, we have to start with the basics, and feeding people is basic,” says A. Ernest “Nicky” Delva, director of the Agricultural School. “If the people aren’t fed, they won’t be healthy, and if they’re not healthy, they won’t be able to learn. And there is no hope of development in this country without education.

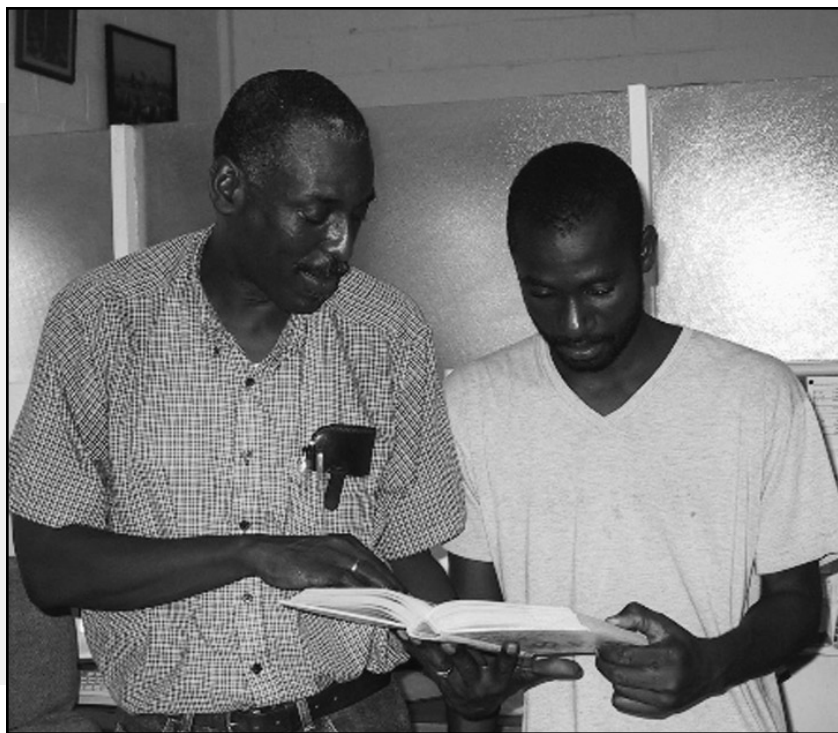
“After nearly two centuries of independence, there has been almost no progress in agriculture—farmers



Skill plus determination: a student watering crops at St. Barnabas Agricultural School, where courses focus on making Haiti's farms more productive. Many of the country's farmers still work the cracked, rocky soil with hoes and machetes.

Pix Mahier

One-on-one teaching:
St. Barnabas director Nicky Delva helping one of his students



REMEDIAL WORK

Most students come to St. Barnabas in their 20s from outlying rural areas. Delva explains that there is no government-run school system in Haiti, so schools have no basic standards. "A school might be run purely as a way for a teacher to make money," he says, "with no real teaching going on, so we were getting students who had graduated but couldn't add simple numbers or read and write."

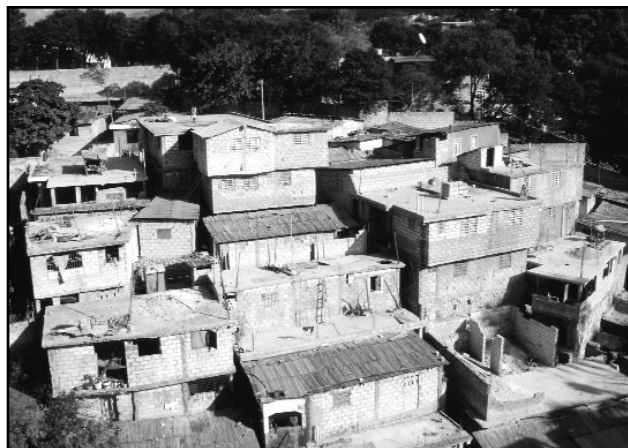
Pix Mahler

are still working with hoes and machetes. The two resources we do have are manpower and land, and there's no reason we can't be more productive." And again he emphasizes: "It just takes education."

So St. Barnabas teaches courses such as crop production, basic agronomy, bookkeeping, labor law and nutrition. Each student is assigned a garden plot where he or she tends a variety of vegetables, and together they care for the school's pigs, chickens, goats and cows.

Delva often encounters students who have grown up believing that rocks grow like plants because they have noticed the rocks getting bigger as the soil erodes. Many have been steeped in old wives' tales such as that you must hold water in your mouth when planting lima beans. And old habits continue, such as cutting down entire trees for wood to make into charcoal (the country's leading cooking fuel) although the branches only could easily be harvested every three months, leaving an ongoing supply of wood.

Delva, who grew up in Port-au-Prince, is university-educated as an architect and also trained as a professional flutist—he spent some years playing in the Haiti National Orchestra. He could be



Urban landscape: one- and two-room cement-block homes in Haiti's capital city, Port-au-Prince, where government corruption and inefficiency have created large-scale poverty and hunger

Renee Dietrich

living the good life near his extended family in Port-au-Prince, making a healthy living for his wife and two children.

So what is he doing on the other side of the country, driving two hours each day to cover the 20 miles from his home in Cap Haitien, on washboard roads that will quickly wear out a person's vehicle and his vertebrae, and then two hours back at the end of the day? "I was called," he says simply. "It is a mission for me.

God placed me here to help my countrymen.

"I've had to learn agriculture as I go, and I meet with constant interference and obstacles from the Haitian government, which you would think would support any effort to put food on more tables. No one could do this and weather the drive here and back every day unless God had sent them.

"My Presbyterian missionary friend Rhine Fecho brought the idea of St. Barnabas to me when I was working with him on architectural projects. After wrestling with the idea for a while, I went into silent retreat for three days and came out understanding it was good for my country and good for me, and my family supported me."

Presbyterian churches in the United States also

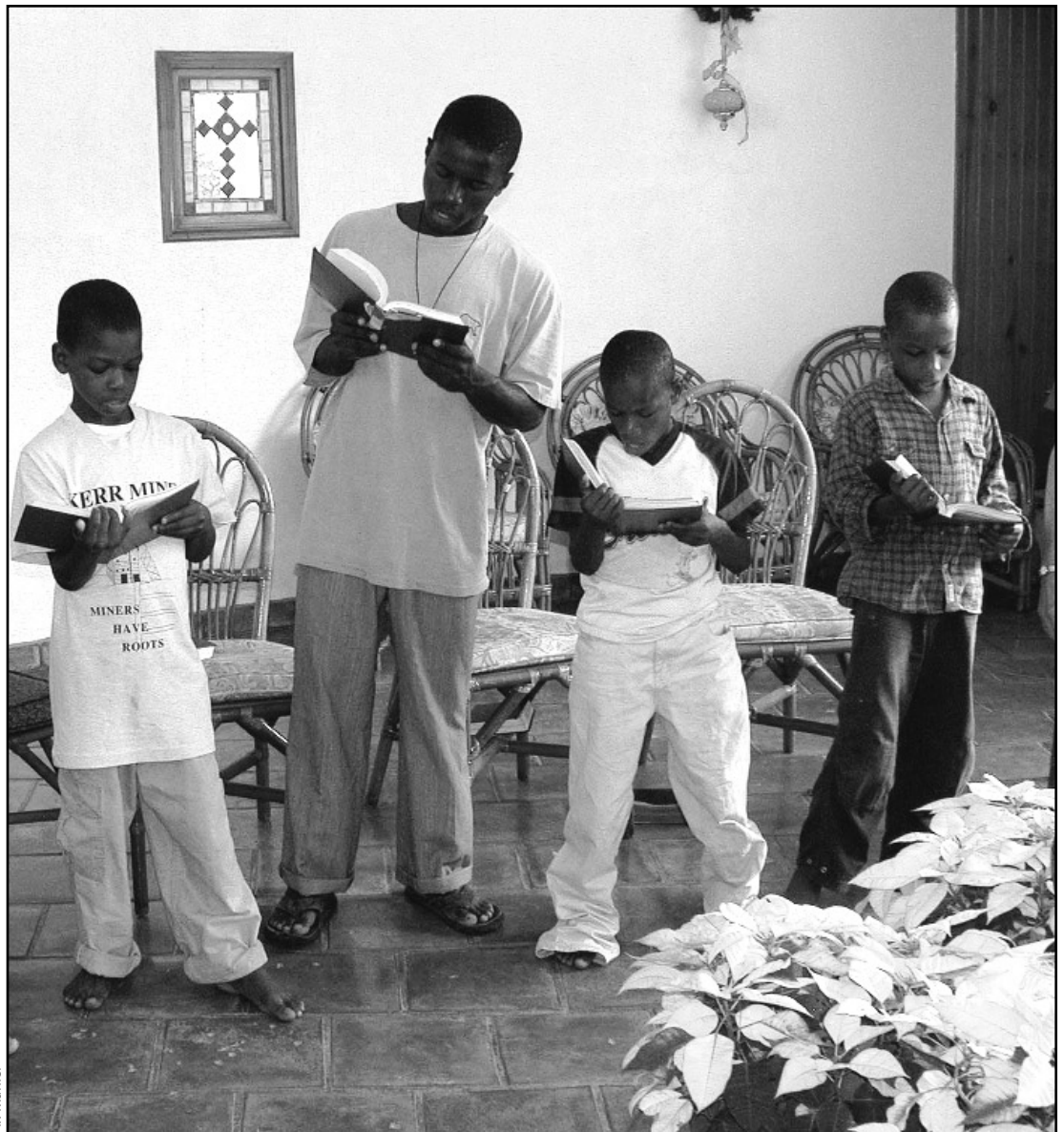
A place where “joy . . . fills the air”: residents of St. Joseph’s Home for Boys singing hymns in the chapel. The boys gather for prayers twice a day and worship services on Sunday.

support Delva and St. Barnabas. Primary financial support comes from two presbyteries in the Southeast, Coastal Carolina and The Peaks. “Nicky Delva’s commitment to his Haitian brothers and sisters is phenomenal,” says Pix Mahler, Hunger Action Enabler for The Peaks Presbytery and longtime devotee of St. Barnabas Agricultural School.

The Peaks Presbytery designates a portion of its “2 Cents a Meal” offering to St. Barnabas. Mahler says: “Our love for Haiti has grown and developed over the years. In fact, witnessing the joy of the Haitian people in the face of such extreme poverty and their spirit of *degaje* (Haitian Creole for ‘to make do’) is so inspiring, many of us who visit get hooked on Haiti. It is a privilege to make these contributions to the school.”

Maria Arroyo, PCUSA area coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, says this financial commitment is crucial. “It’s wonderful the way these presbyteries have been faithful supporters. It allows the school to be able to plan ahead and carry out its mission. Often when gifts come to a project without a long-term commitment leaders can’t count on stability the way St. Barnabas can with this support.”

But of course there are always more needs to be met. Delva very much wants a satellite dish that would allow his students to connect with the Internet and learn about worldwide agricultural trends. But for now he is happy that 60 or so students a year are learning better ways to feed their families and communities—a healthy start to a better Haiti.



Pix Mahler

St. Joseph’s Home for Boys

“I felt I was to ‘create’ a family of street children”

Another mission in Haiti that has captured the hearts of many Presbyterians in the United States is St. Joseph’s Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince. And like St. Barnabas it has an unlikely pilot at the helm. Iowan Michael Geilenfeld is a former brother in Mother Teresa’s order, the Missionaries of Charity, and in his early years served children all over the world. But he felt called to do something outside of what seemed to be his future with that order.

For two and a half years Geilenfeld was assigned to work with a shelter the brothers had in Port-au-Prince that housed 26 street kids at night. “The problem is that the brothers come and go every year

Practicing hospitality: *St. Joseph's founder Michael Geilenfeld and boys at the home waving good-bye to visitors. They regard guests as angels sent by God, greeting them warmly and sending them off with songs and hugs.*



MICHAEL'S MISSION

"I felt I was called to something special, that God wanted me here as the head of a family. The brothers didn't feel it was their mission to support the kind of family I envisioned, so I went through a discernment process and finally left the order to follow God's call."

Renee Dietrich

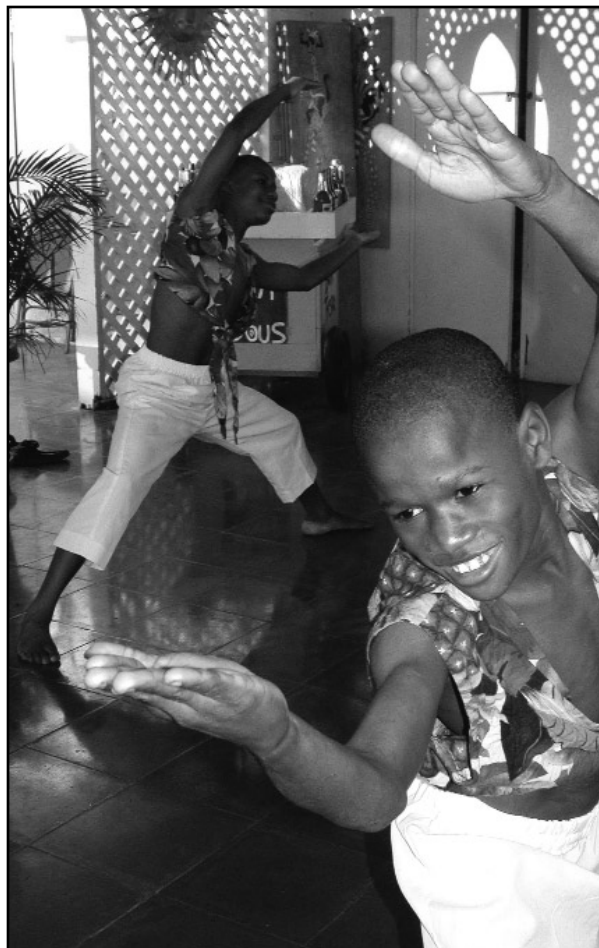
or two," he explains. "Then the kids feel abandoned again. I felt someone needed to stay with them and give them stability, to commit their life to them.

"I felt I was to 'create' a family of street children, and what has evolved over the past 17 years is a total surprise." What started out as five street boys in a simple rented block house has grown into a ministry that has spilled outside the walls of St. Joseph's Home for Boys. St. Joseph's now serves as a home for 20 boys ages 8–21 and a guest house for visiting mission workers.

In 1993 the boys convinced Geilenfeld to take over a home for physically and mentally challenged children just outside the city when the missionaries running it decided to leave the country. He suggested that it would be difficult to support such a mission, but the boys reminded him of what he said to them daily—"with God all things are possible."

So Wings of Hope became a part of the St. Joseph's family and is run by young men who grew up at St. Joseph's. And a third home, Trinity House, has been built in the seaside town of Jacmel, where graduates of St. Joseph's lead a family of 15 young boys. Many churches in the United States helped with construction costs.

The Presbyterian Hunger Program has given grants



Resurrection Dance Theater of Haiti: *Fignole Lexis dancing with this troupe of former street boys, some with disabilities, now residents of St. Joseph's, who have performed across the United States and Canada*

Renee Dietrich

to St. Joseph's. Presbyterian churches in North and South Carolina, Florida, Virginia, Colorado and Minnesota are helping as well.

"I come from a country that has an enormous amount of material wealth, while Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere," comments a 15-year-old participant in a mission trip from White Memorial Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. "But no matter how much I could ever offer the Haitians materially, my gifts would never equal the value of the gifts they gave me. They showed me a joy I never thought possible. It fills the air there. It is a joy they express simply for being alive, even in the most extreme conditions."

"We are making revolutionary changes in Haiti from the bottom up," Geilenfeld says. "We are taking the cast-offs, the rejected ones, and enabling them to become positive and compassionate leaders

who are effecting tremendous change in a hidden, humble, *powerful* way.

"Haiti tells these children that they can dream of becoming only shoe shiners, street vendors, or even worse, prisoners. We at St. Joseph's are telling them that they can become anything they set their hearts and

Presbyterian Campus Ministries in New Hope Presbytery takes students from several universities and Peace College on international mission trips each spring. In 2003 a group of 37 students and campus ministers visited Nicaragua and Haiti. These reflections are from the Haiti mission trip.



Haiti pilgrimage

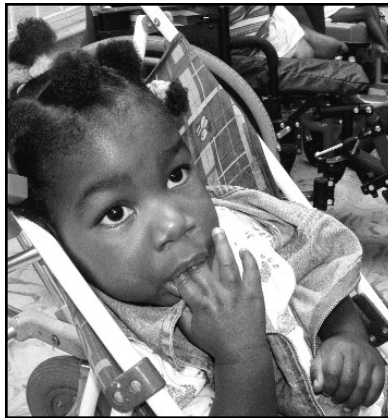
A place called poor is rich, and in a place called dark, light shines

BY CAROLINE E. CRAIG

We are asked about the buildings we left behind, the ditches we dug . . . But what we want to tell about instead are the relationships we bring back, the faith we have witnessed, the joy and celebration we have shared with others so very different from us and yet so much like us.

Our relationship with people in Haiti has been nurtured for eight years in New Hope Presbytery. We see familiar faces of boys pulled from Port-au-Prince's streets by the love and embrace of St. Joseph's Home for Boys, and we see how they have grown in stature and wisdom. We see that for some children abandoned to the streets, even in Haiti there is a place that is safe for them, where they are loved, and where life is full of ordinary moments.

Our mission trips are pilgrimages for many of us. Somehow in this land called "destitute" and "dangerous" and "hopeless" we are greeted by an unparalleled richness of art and beauty, the welcoming embrace of children and their caregivers who call



Renee Dietrich

An expanding mission: *Josephine, one of the children served by Wings of Hope, a home for children and young adults with physical and mental disabilities. The home is operated by young men who grew up at St. Joseph's Home for Children.*

us God's messengers of hope, and an unwavering belief in the possible.

Haitians do not practice holding on to things, grudges or sufferings. There is little to own, so there is little to protect as their own. Everything is shared, from a bowl of soup to the suffering of AIDS. Perhaps that is why the men and women at Sans Fils,

a Home for the Destitute and Dying, so readily offer their arms and legs and backs and bellies to our gentle caresses. Even as you see in their eyes the valley of the shadow of death there is that spark of generosity hoping to share what is left of this life—and an eagerness to feel touched by grace.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed at the orphanage, where there are more cries of babies than arms to hold them. Yet all the world's cries of needs not met focus into the eyes and mouth of the one child whose arms reach up to you. Holding that one child, hearing the cries subside and watching the tears cease their journey, you feel the power of love. It is enough for that moment.

We did not return with a sense of pride in what we had accomplished, but rather with a sense of reverence for what we had shared. At Wings of Hope, a home in Fermathe for children and young adults with disabilities, we joined in the work of healing. In the act of massaging angry muscles, or assisting in an art project, or wiping the chin of a child, we sit before the mirror of the image of God. This image is full of imperfections, and yet so complete we can only be in awe.

They joined us in songs as we worked together. God is in Haiti. The spirit of possibility is pervasive.

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minds to becoming: doctors, dancers, businessmen. They can become leaders who have a heart for the poor, who will return to the streets to rescue others and enable those they reach out to, to dream as well."

Both Delva and Geilenfeld feel God is guiding them to guide others to make a difference in this struggling country. And American Presbyterians too

are seeing God at work, watching things grow and blossom from what looks to be barren soil and dangerous streets and hopeless poverty. Indeed, "with God, all things are possible." □

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