

# 'In Haiti, churches competed, they didn't collaborate. That has to change.'

**Jim Hodgson** co-ordinates the United Church's partner relationships in the Caribbean, Central America and Colombia. Nine days after Haiti's devastating earthquake, he spoke with Richard Wright about the church's response.

**Q** Who are the United Church's partners in Haiti?

**A** In Haiti, we have two partners. One is the MCCA, the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas. In the mid-1960s there was this push from Caribbean churches to claim their own identities. The British Methodist Church stepped away and the MCCA was created. The United Church got involved as a partner right from the beginning. The largest district of the MCCA is the Haiti one. There are 130 congregations there.

Our other partner in Haiti is the Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute. In the 1980s, the United Church began looking for different kinds of partners in Haiti. There was a group of Haitians in exile in Quebec through the Duvalier regime who had begun training people to participate in social transformation. That became the Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute. For 20 years, we've been funding that as well.

What I think is neat about both of our partners in Haiti is that they really have tremendous faith in farming in Haiti, and that runs counter to people's stereotypes of the country.

**Q** Do these partnering arrangements involve Canadians going and doing as well as giving?

**A** We haven't had many United Church groups go to Haiti. There is a tendency to go where lots of people have gone before, so the Canadian groups that go overseas tend to go to Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador. For the majority of United Church members, who come from English Canada, Haiti just hasn't been on their radar. Maybe that will change now.

**Q** What is the United Church doing through these partnership arrangements right now in the face of this present crisis?

**A** Well, first we're trying to get back in touch with our partners. Phone systems, power lines, the Internet, all of that has been really shaky.

With the Karl Lévêque centre, we haven't had a phone conversation or an e-mail, but we know through others that the leadership is okay, but the office was destroyed. Once communication is re-established, we'll work with them and their other international partners in Belgium and the Netherlands to rebuild the office, to re-establish their



networks with the farmers and to make a plan for the future.

With the Methodist Church, we've been in direct contact. What they're doing right now is an inventory of what was lost — church buildings, hospitals, clinics, schools — making a list of what needs to be rebuilt.

**Q** *Some people are saying that simply rebuilding in the same way isn't enough. The point is to build better, more durable structures.*

**A** Point well taken. You might ask why Haiti didn't have any building codes. We need to be creative in our thinking about rebuilding to make sure that the new buildings are safe buildings. That can be done. There are lots of designs for schools that are earthquake proof or at least as earthquake proof as can be, and not expensive to build.

Another thing we're doing in this case is co-ordinating church efforts. We're working with other Canadian churches and with the global coalition of church agencies called ACT, Action by Churches Together. One of the tragedies of the last 50 years in Haiti is that all kinds of little organizations were doing all kinds of things autonomously and there was very little co-ordination across the boundaries of ideology or theology. Churches were divided from each other, and they worked in competition instead of collaboration. That's got to change.

**Q** *Where is the money raised for Haiti by the United Church going?*

**A** The bulk of it will go through ACT because of its network of partners on the ground that can get aid to where it's needed fast. The first efforts are food, water and medicine. Later, ACT will put together a document that lays out, item by item, the things that are needed, along with a plan for delivering all of those things.

There's a story today on the ACT web page about the rural areas. A lot of the focus, especially in the media, has been on Port-au-Prince, which is as dramatic as anything can be. But there are also those small towns and communities up in the mountains, and not much is known about them. So ACT has begun to try to connect there. One of the realities is that the World Food Programme, the UN and the U.S. soldiers will concentrate on Port-au-Prince, but the churches will probably be out in the rural areas.

**Q** *You've been in personal contact with people on the ground. What do you hear from them?*

**A** The first thing is who's okay and who's missing, and I guess now who has died. I really lament the loss of two U.S. colleagues, people I've worked with in the past, who had gone to Haiti for a meeting with the Methodist church. I dodged a bullet. I was supposed to be there, too, but we made a decision that I wouldn't go because I had pressing work to do here.

I also want to say something about a man named Omilus Saint Louis. He was director of the print shop at the Methodist Church and one of those solid guys who was always looking for a way forward. I don't know how he died or where, but those kinds of people won't be there next time I go, and I'm sad about that.

**Q** *Have you heard anything about resentment toward — do we still say "First World"? — interveners there?*

**A** Yes. And I think Haitians have every reason to be resentful. People say, 'Well, my church has been there for 40-odd years.' Well why is Haiti still poor?

What have you done? How have things gone so badly? Haitians are asking these questions.

**Q** *And what are the answers to those questions? Has this crisis been a lens through which the United Church and its partners can look at their past efforts more clearly?*

**A** Yes. I think we should all be doing an examination of conscience.

**Q** *Do you see any hope emerging from this catastrophe?*

**A** The good news is stories of Haitians helping each other. There's been a media focus on violence and looting, but I think the bigger thing is the way people help each other out, sharing what they've got. One of the most moving stories was of people giving money at church. They gave to help each other from the little they had. We should be talking more about how people help each other because I think that's where the future for Haiti lies.

Richard Wright is a Toronto writer.

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## Emergency Appeal for Partners in Haiti

**On Jan. 12, a massive earthquake devastated the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, along with smaller cities and rural communities nearby. Tens of thousands lost their lives, homes, or livelihoods.**

The United Church of Canada has launched an Emergency Appeal for contributions to support Haitians as they rebuild their communities and cities. The United Church is a member of the ACT Alliance, the global coalition of churches and agencies engaged in humanitarian assistance that is leading church-based relief efforts in Haiti.

For more information about the United Church's response to the crisis in Haiti, go to [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca).

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