



Haiti has a rich and often tragic history, and has been left as one of the poorest and most undeveloped countries in the world. Its history includes the arrival of Western powers, the extermination of its native peoples, occupation by France and Spain, slavery and revolt, and in 1804 the creation of Haiti, Latin America's first modern independent nation and the world's first black republic. Unfortunately, independence was followed by nearly 200 years of misrule, aided by foreign powers, especially France and the United States.

In recent years Haiti has struggled with problems ranging from near-constant political upheaval, health crises, severe environmental degradation, and chronic conditions of poverty and injustice. On January 12, 2010, a devastating earthquake struck Haiti. Most of its capital, Port-au-Prince, lay in ruins. Thousands of people were trapped in the rubble of government and commercial buildings, homes, and shantytowns. Schools, hospitals, and other structures housing essential services collapsed. The earthquake in Haiti left more than 250,000 dead, and destroyed an estimated 280,000 homes and businesses.

It has been a little over six months since the earthquake. There are still over a million displaced people living without homes, approximately 25% in tent camps and 75% in makeshift shelters, with only rudimentary necessities and protection from the elements. There has been an alarming increase in lawlessness, particularly sexual violence against girls and women. The quake left an extraordinary amount of debris, including concrete and steel from

collapsed buildings, destroyed furnishings and belongings, and human remains. An estimated 20 million cubic yards of debris fill the streets, yards, sidewalks and canals of Port-au-Prince, and less than 5% has been removed. The debris is one of the most significant issues keeping Haitians from rebuilding their country. The debris also presents environmental and health hazards.

Medical problems have evolved from the provision of emergency and trauma care to the need for longer-term rehabilitation services, mental health treatment, and public health concerns, such as the prevention of disease and epidemics. Thousands of new amputees face the reality of living with disabilities. There is the need to re-establish an infrastructure, with hospitals and clinics staffed by medical professionals and community health workers.



All photos courtesy of Nancy Chee

Pray for the people of Haiti, that they might be protected from major health epidemics and from major storms in the approaching hurricane season. Pray for the people of Haiti that the world will not forget, and understand that humanitarian relief and economic recovery will take decades. Pray for the people of Haiti for the rebuilding of a functioning, accessible infrastructure, and for good leadership and government. Pray for Haiti, a country at the beginning of its own reconstruction.

Sources: *The New York Times*; Websites of Partners in Health, Handicap International, Doctors without Borders, National Public Radio, and Democracy Now; Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003)

This paper is a project of the Mission and Evangelism Committee of the PCC English Commission. We wish to present current issues of interest, with a focus on church and society. This first issue focuses on the earthquake in Haiti and its aftermath. We are fortunate to feature PCC member Nancy Chee, who writes about her personal experiences in Haiti, where she served as a medical volunteer. Published July 2010.

PCC member Nancy Chee, an occupational therapist by profession, journeyed to Haiti in April 2010, under the sponsorship of Handicap International. Here are some of her thoughts:

Shortly after the Haiti Earthquake occurred in January 2010, I was asked by several people if I thought about going to help with the relief effort. My initial thought was that I was probably not equipped with the appropriate skills for the search-and-rescue and emergency trauma efforts that were needed immediately. As heard in the news, many of the injuries were devastating, including being crushed under rubble, or being pulled by the limbs from under the fallen buildings. To save people from trauma and death, emergency care was needed. Amputations were common, along with injuries such as burns, fractures, and infections.

As the drama continued in the following months, stories and images of the human tragedy unfolded and it was clear that there would be an ongoing need for medical help. My opportunity to serve came in April through a chance meeting, a few calls, and a calling from God. I soon found myself amassing supplies, packing, just making the weight limit on my luggage, and landing in Port-Au-Prince (PAP), Haiti.

Even while being driven through the streets of the city, I took in such a visual and emotional onslaught of images...the crumbled buildings and homes, the massive number of makeshift tent homes, and the sadness in the eyes of the people on the streets. Their appearance and the sense of defeat in the human spirit was devastating to witness eye-to-eye.



But I was called to Haiti with a purpose. Because of my work experience as a hand therapist, especially with trauma, and having done medical volunteer work in other developing countries, I was well-equipped to help Haitian earthquake patients. I cared for wounds, burns, fractures, and paralysis of hands. I provided care such as attending to wounds, splinting, showing rehabilitation exercises, and re-teaching people how to use their hands again for normal function. Can you imagine how it

would be if you lost the use of one of your arms or legs? Yet, each patient I treated had his/her own story to tell of the earthquake, of coming close to death, and of being thankful for life.

Between the oppressive weather (95+ degrees, 95% humidity), the working conditions of a MASH unit, the poor infrastructure, the sheer number of patients, the devastating injuries, the mosquitoes, cockroaches, squat toilets and the emotional impact of the environment and people, the whole package proved to be a huge challenge for me. In the many medical volunteer trips I have taken, Haiti was truly the hardest one. But pushing one's own need for comfort aside, I was there to work. There's an amazing spirit and strength which moves you when working – going from one person to another, touching and caring, bringing comfort and healing to people. Sometimes at the end of a work day, I wondered where the time had gone, and how did I accomplish what I did? Tired as I was, I felt peace and contentment that I was able to touch people's lives amidst the chaos and all of the individual tragedies.



And then there is that spark in the darkness which warms the heart and is the hope for people. That spark was “Olivia.” She was a little girl who had been crushed under rubble. As a result, she had an amputation above her right knee, a foot drop of her left ankle/foot, burns on her left hand and wrist, and partial paralysis to her right wrist and fingers. She was affected in both her arms and legs, and was unable to walk or use her hands to eat or write. However, Olivia had the most amazing spirit. When she

was rolled into our tent, she lit up the place. Everyone watched her in amazement. She was energetic, smiling, and very attentive to what we were doing. Olivia represented the spirit of her people. She displayed a glimpse of the strength of her people despite adversity, loss, and serious injuries. I was touched and most blessed for having met Olivia.

Would I do it again? In a heart beat. The experience of traveling abroad as a volunteer, rather than as a tourist, is different. There is a true immersion in the culture and the lives of people as they are in their own communities and circumstances. I have shared their pains, tears, and also their joys and smiles when they understand that a stranger like me cares enough to help. I have a commitment to share God's gifts and the skills God has given to me, by returning it to His people. I experience their humanity, which motivates and inspires me to do the most I can. God's love and strength sustains me wherever I walk, and I only hope that I may continue to travel and be God's faithful servant in the world. ♥