

Could Inspiring More “We Did It” Stories Help Break the Dependency Mindset?

BY DAN CARL

Dan Carl lived and worked as a missionary in Haiti for 18 years. He is currently a coach with Five Stones Global with an emphasis on facilitating their online missions training course, “We Are Not The Hero Group Learning Experience.” Dan and his wife Liz now live in Panama City, Panama where they are working to launch a Disciple Making Movement in their local community.

During my years in Haiti I was involved in numerous construction projects. On one occasion, I arrived a few days in advance of a larger team to finalize the foundation for a church school which was being 100% financed with US dollars.

Thinking I would further inspire local participation, I suggested the pastor take an offering from the church to help offset some of the costs of serving lunch to the workers.

Although the local church had participated in the demolition of the old earthquake damaged building, they had yet to contribute even a small amount of money. Thinking I would further inspire local participation, I suggested the pastor take an offering from the church to help offset some of the costs of serving lunch to the workers. Although an offering was taken, no one from the church congregation gave any money.

When I asked the pastor, “Why?” I was told, “It’s because the people see you are an American missionary. They know you always have enough money to pay for everything. Therefore, they don’t give.” Besides feeling hurt and disappointed, I remember asking myself, “What would this congregation have done if we Americans had never contributed to their school?”

Recently, a Haitian friend of mine helped answer my hypothetical question while we were co-conducting a symposium in Haiti centered around the theme, “What is the current state of the Haitian National Church?” Valery Vital-Herne, a three-generation pastor and

the Country Director for Micah Challenge said: “The Haitian Church is a dependent church and a church full of initiative.” How can a church be dependent and at the same time full of initiative? The Haitian Church is a poor church and a rich church at the same time.

We’ve been receiving missionaries for years—missionaries investing in education, investing in orphanages, investing in building churches, investing in everything. The result in part is having dependent churches, dependent church leaders who say, “To build the next school we need to have a *blan* (foreigner). We need someone from the United States.”

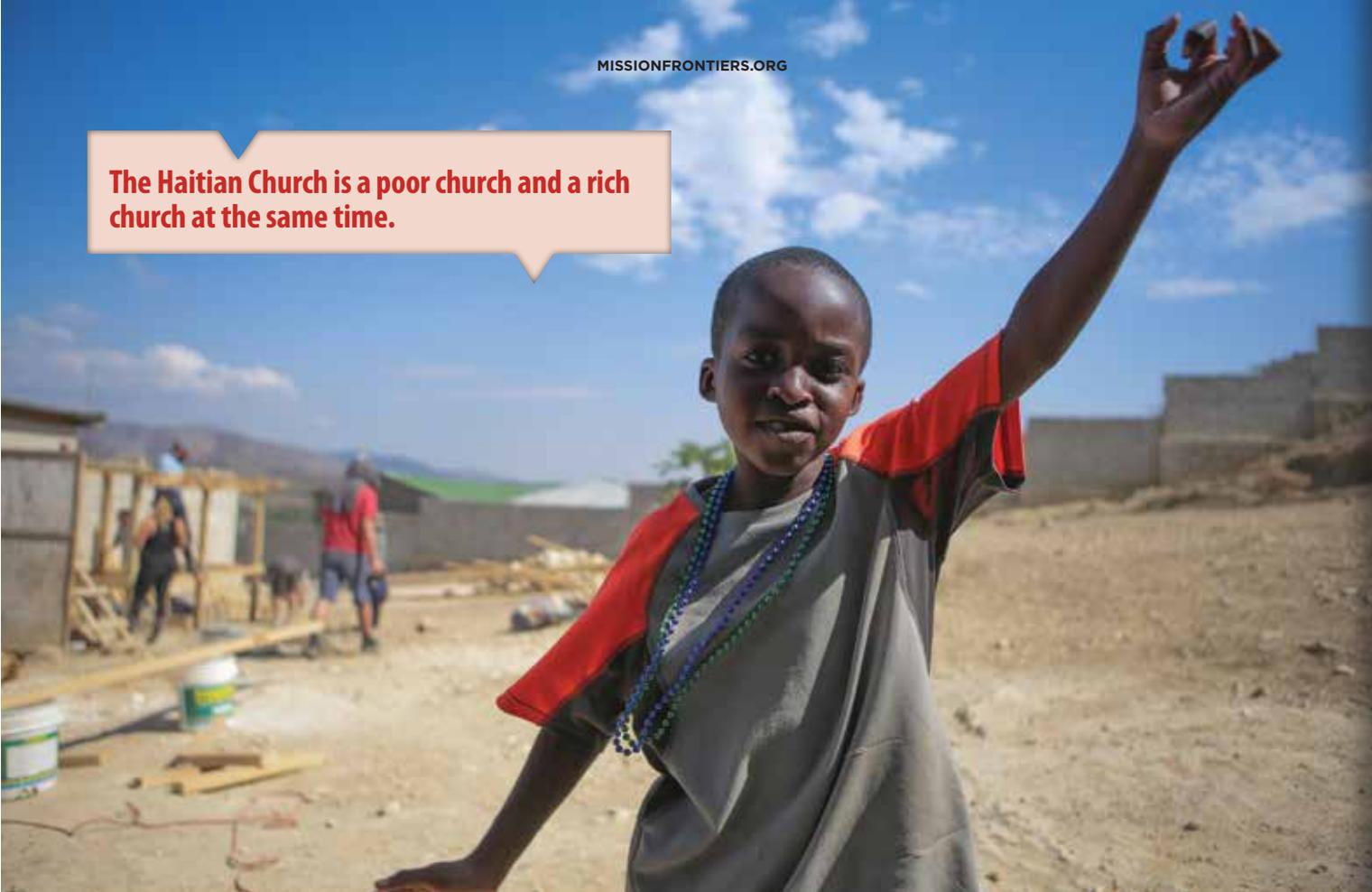
But at the same time, when those churches receive a “No!” from a *blan*, or have struggled to find a white missionary, guess what? Years later you find a big building. And those pastors will tell you proudly, “We did it! We searched for international help. We didn’t find it. So, we told the church, ‘We serve a big God. Let’s put our hands together and let’s build that.’”

They feel a sense of pride and a sense of ownership. That’s why I said the Haitian church is a dependent church. That dependency mindset is still there. When they don’t find foreign funds, they work together and start schools and start churches. Some of the big buildings you see downtown or in Delmas are debt free, paid for only by Haitians.¹

Why is being able to say, “We did it,” really important? As Valery shared about Haitian churches saying,

¹ Vital-Herne, Valery, 2013, audio transcription from presentation, “Ten Characteristics of the Haitian National Church”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqd7WhJS7II>.

The Haitian Church is a poor church and a rich church at the same time.



“We did it” and “the sense of pride and sense of ownership” that pastors and their congregations experience through trusting in a big God, I was reminded of a couple of important principles.

The first is local dependence on God. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, we learn that the Lord is watching each local church to see how well it utilizes the gifts and resources he has entrusted to it directly. Zambian missionary Dwight Kopp says, “If this were not so, Jesus would not have written seven separate letters to the churches in Revelation. Instead, one letter could have been sufficient—blaming them all for the sin in the church of Sardis.”²

Secondly, he multiplies “few” resources into “many” resources based on faithfulness (Matt. 25:21) and according to the power of the Holy Spirit at work within a community of believers. (Eph. 3:20)

With these in mind, could it be that when we as Westerners give towards church building projects in a foreign land, that along with creating dependency on us, we are actually hindering that local congregation’s intimate trusting relationship with God? How often do we unintentionally bypass God’s process of maturing faith and steal the real blessings of “satisfaction” and “sense of ownership” God wants to instill in every local church? Instead of writing more checks to building projects, I’d like to suggest we look for ways to inspire more “We did it!” stories.

With these in mind, could it be that when we as Westerners give towards church building projects in a foreign land, that along with creating dependency on us, we are actually hindering that local congregation’s intimate trusting relationship with God? 

² “Awake Africa!!!”, Dwight Kopp, Feb 19, 2006. Copyright (c) 2005 Evangelism and Missions Information Service (EMIS)