

Ouanaminthe---Schools Still Closed, “Refugees” Arriving, People Afraid, Mourning

By Pam Mann....Thursday, January 28, 2010, 8:15 a.m.

It was nearly 8 p.m. We walked home in the light of a nearly full moon. Because few homes have electric power, a full moon draws people out into the street or onto porches to chat at day's end. If we weren't in a month of mourning, loud music would be blaring. Last night we didn't even hear loud laughs and joking, only muffled conversations

A group of neat, casually dressed people of assorted ages passed us. They carried small suitcases and backpacks headed toward the Massacre River. There have always been occasional bands, like this, passing Institution Univers on their way toward an illegal entry into the Dominican Republic. In this week, we ourselves have seen probably forty such individuals. We can only wonder how many more there are whom we've not seen. With the quake, many believe the nation is beyond repair. If you truly believe that, it makes sense to leave however you can.

Others believe God has not abandoned us. They're the fighters who understand St. Paul's "struck down but not destroyed" sentiment of 2 Corinthians 4. This weekend the president of Quisqueya University (Port-au-Prince) is coming to Ouanaminthe to dream with I.U. administrators about a satellite campus here. They were not in session yet on the day of the quake. Two of our graduates in their first year at the university lost all their possessions in their crushed rented home. But because they were still in Ouanaminthe that day, they themselves did not even witness the catastrophe. So now Quisqueya University has most of its students and staff but no city in which to stay and study. Maybe Ouanaminthe can be that city.

At the Wednesday parents' meeting, after an open mike forum, a nearly unanimous vote decided that we would await February 18th, at the close of the month of mourning, to reopen I.U. We must still wait for the Ministry of Education to announce if and when official exams will be this year, and how long this disrupted school year will run into the summer. Hugues asked parents to provide I.U. with information on how many refugees they were housing, how many of them were students wanting to enter I.U. and who would volunteer for relief trips to clean up the capital. Half the assembly raised hands when Hugues asked how many lost a close relative or friend in the quake.

It was a somber meeting but I thought the unity and care expressed had a consoling effect. Afterwards, several female staff chatted about the challenges of hosting quake survivors.

"You can't get them inside the house. They'd rather sit in the noontime sun than be under a porch roof. They sleep outside in the yard. They refuse to sleep under a roof," one woman complained.

"Let them be. When they're ready, they'll come inside. It took my people four, five days, some a week, to move inside," another advised.

"Well, it doesn't help that now the city's finally decided to grate the roads. That road grater makes the earth shake. It sent Port-au-Prince people on our street into hysterics," said a third.

We could only shake our heads in sympathy.

"And the nightmares, when will they stop?" someone asked.

Ma Collinyo, the preschool director, spoke. "All these things take time. We will listen to them. We will pray with them. Often healing takes times."

Amen. I was impressed. It seemed like a sound survivor-support strategy to me.