

After the earthquake: MCC workers in Haiti

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

When the earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, Ben and Alexis Depp were in Port-au-Prince working with the Mennonite Central Committee. Ben served as a field reporter and communications assistant in a microfinance operation; Alexis worked on sustainable development and as an advocate for Haitian-led use of donors' money.

What happened on the evening of the earthquake?

Alexis: What was happening didn't hit me right away. The wall between our house and our neighbors' house collapsed. I remember thinking, "Oh, no, the flowerpots are falling. That's going to be a big mess to clean up." Then I heard Ben yelling at God, saying, "Have mercy on this country." That's when I heard buildings collapsing and people screaming.

Ben: When the shaking stopped, I grabbed a pickax. We went to check on our neighbors. We went toward the poorer end of our neighborhood, because we guessed that would be the more affected area. There were people everywhere in the road. The sky was full of concrete dust. People were carrying other people, covered in blood and dust. Women were out in the street screaming, "Jesus is coming back! Jesus, I'm ready." People were praying.

Alexis: What was amazing was how instantaneous the response to help was. Within minutes, motorcycle taxis were picking up people to take them to the hospital. Everyone who wasn't injured or looking for a family member started helping each other. That level of solidarity was astonishing.

How were you able to help?

Ben: We joined other groups working to dig people out from under concrete blocks. One woman was buried a foot and a half under concrete chunks and gravel. We could hear her yelling.

What happened next?

Ben: After about three hours, we gave our pickax to others and took a motorcycle to check on some of our co-workers. We found a co-worker's apartment building in a state of collapse. We were sure everyone was dead. We spent a couple of hours looking for people.

I was able to take a couple of people to the hospital. I took a United Nations worker who had a compound fracture to the hospital on my motorcycle with a third person holding him. Then I went back out and at last found our friends at another hospital. They had been on the fifth floor in a doorway when the building collapsed. When the building came down, they had seen a light and crawled toward the light. There were a lot of stories like that of miraculous escapes.

How did you feel about the response of the international community?

Ben: For several days, there was basically no response from the major aid organizations. The main office of the UN collapsed, and the UN mission lost its director and hundreds of staff. The response of all the major organizations was really set back because of such losses.

Alexis: The airport was damaged; the port was damaged. There were few ways for people on the outside to respond quickly.

Ben: But on the ground, it seemed like the response was way too long.

Alexis: To be honest, we have a lot of anger. One of the many things that makes me angry is the injustice evident in who was able to access immediate care. Once the search-and-rescue teams finally arrived, they went first to the places where there were the most foreigners, the fancy hotels and the supermarket. At the U.S. embassy, you got help if you had a passport.

What did MCC workers do in the aftermath of the earthquake?

Ben: MCC service workers and staff were able to jump in right away because we didn't have any major losses.

Alexis: MCC has a vision of forging transformative relationships. We live with the people, with Haitians. We take public transportation. We know our way around the city. We don't have security restrictions. We speak Creole. That gave us a unique

opportunity to help larger organizations like the UN, the World Food Program and the International Organization for Migration. We helped to map out where the spontaneous settlements of internally displaced people were. We were able to find the camps and talk to people and find out how many people were in them. We could tell people which roads were passable and which weren't. We were kept very busy.

How did the food distribution process go?

Alexis: Most neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince have community organizations that were in place prior to the earthquake. Most of the camps that formed were either organized through a pre-existing community organization or formed their own leadership structure. Those groups were designating areas for toilets and bathing, trying to find and distribute food, finding shelter materials, providing security and setting up community watches. A lot of the violence the media have portrayed could have been avoided if the World Food Program and the U.S. military would have worked through these preexisting organizations.

Ben: Their error was that they didn't take the time or didn't have enough staff or . . .

Alexis: . . . have enough cultural understanding to know that these organizations exist. They aren't immediately apparent. If you set up your truck on a major road in Port-au-Prince, you won't necessarily see that the community is already organized.

What is next for Haiti?

Ben: A lot of the relief organizations, including the U.S. government and the UN, are going in with the idea: "Let's fix Haiti." They are not taking the time to talk to Haitians. There are so many brilliant and talented Haitians who could be involved. At the UN base a lot of the decision making about the rebuilding process is going on without a single Haitian present.

Alexis: The factors that made Haiti so vulnerable to this earthquake are man-made. Poverty in Haiti is the result of centuries of external intervention, beginning with the reparations that Haiti was forced to pay to the French government for its own freedom—and then there were the effects of structural adjustment, policies of privatization, unfair trade practices. The United States and Canada bear much responsibility, not just for the situation in Haiti prior to the earthquake, but also for the extent of damage that the earthquake caused.

I cringe to hear the Inter-American Development Bank talking about “investment in Haiti.” Cement manufacturers in Mexico are going to be getting massive contracts to provide cement for rebuilding in Haiti. Before the privatization of Haitian industry, Haiti produced its own cement and Haitians had jobs in that industry. That was money circulating within the Haitian economy. Another example is the Hope Act, which gives Haiti preferential trade treatment for the production of textiles. The idea is that clothing manufacturers in the U.S. can source that labor in Haiti.

Ben: It’s a great thing to create new jobs in Haiti. But there are other options for creating jobs that would be more beneficial. For example, in Haiti’s agricultural sector, we could work to create hundreds of thousands of jobs in food production that would strengthen Haiti’s ability to feed its own people.

Alexis: The Haitian president, in the week after the earthquake, made a statement on Haitian radio about the need to strengthen the country’s agriculture in order to improve the quality of life and to boost agricultural production even to the detriment of imports. This was an incredible statement for him to make. The Haitian government recognizes what Haiti needs. We hope that the international community will allow Haiti, a sovereign nation, to make those decisions.