

A tree grows in Haiti: Harvesting 15 years of mission work

by [William L. Hawkins](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

"Haiti is a nation of contrasts," says Rodney Babe, who meets our church's team of mission workers at the airport. We soon understand what he means. BMWs and Hummers are weaving through the open-air market in Leogane. Someone is boiling a cow's head to remove the hair for sale, and the smell mingles with odors from mounds of decaying garbage, fresh mangos, burning charcoal, diesel fumes, dust and assorted frying meats. Later, along a steep slope in the mountainous terrain miles from Leogane, electricity, running water and any hint of technology, a little boy wearing a cast-off Dave Matthews Band T-shirt greets me with, "Bonjour!" in perhaps the only pure French remaining in the Creole dialect.

President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the Catholic priest who first came to power with popular support in 1991, is coming under pressure for failing to effect any significant change in this country. After rejecting calls for legislative elections throughout 2002, he has agreed to hold elections in the new year. Business leaders, human rights groups and students have called for Aristide's resignation, while Aristide blames the U.S. and the international community for Haiti's lack of progress, citing the withholding of \$150 million in loans for roads and health projects. The funds were pulled in 2000, when the Lavalas Party won in what observers called flawed elections. But although the money was released last summer, it has not yet been received by Aristide's government.

Whatever the current political crisis, it's the economy that defines this country, with its 70 percent unemployment, its financial mismanagement, its illiteracy and hunger. Church groups and Christian organizations of every name and denominational stripe attempt to minister in this sad place, with many of the mission projects dating back before Aristide and the Duvalier dictators, "Baby Doc" and "Papa Doc."

The Comprehensive Development Project (CODEP) is one of them. Our ten-member mission team represents the First Presbyterian Church in Bern, North Carolina, the church that began CODEP 15 years ago under the impetus of church member Jack Hanna. Today CODEP boasts 23 congregations as a support core, with 30-40 more congregations, individuals, organizations and presbyteries contributing to an annual budget of nearly \$250,000.

Mission co-workers Rodney and Sharyn Babe live on the CODEP compound located on the shore of the Canal De La Gonave, 30 miles west of Port-au-Prince. CODEP hosts 20 groups like ours annually for weeklong service, with 1,000 visitors coming to the job sites to observe the progress and copy the know-how that has yielded impressive results. Every day we set out toward the little hamlet of Leogane five miles east of the compound and then turned south to venture another 15 to 20 miles up the winding roadway into the Cormier watershed, where the mission first began. We walk through thousands of the 3.5 million trees that have been planted—trees that give shade and fruit and food and firewood each day. Now, however, the introduction of CODEP's propane tank and gas swap program for use by Haitians for meal preparation is beginning to reduce dependency on firewood. CODEP's tree-planting program, along with the marvels of vetiver grass, will have a bigger impact as erosion control.

We see 25 to 50 formerly denuded miles of hillside that now produce peanuts, coffee and cocoa beans, coconuts and bananas. We cool our faces in a spring that has burst forth from formerly dry ground, visit several of the 140 family water cisterns built for safe drinking water, and work at one of the 40-plus fish ponds that provide four tons of protein annually. Hugh Popenoe, director of the Center for Tropical Agriculture, tells us that aquaculture is the "ideal strategy" for providing protein, heretofore absent from the Haitian diet, and for increasing infiltration into the aquifer (water table).

Sales from the fishponds enabled a pastor to buy several sheets of tin and build a roof for his new church. CODEP's village banking system allows families to begin a self-sustaining business with a loan of \$25.00. In the four years since the program began, only one family has defaulted on its loan. Best of all, we hear 175 children singing scripture songs at the top of their lungs at Siloe School (vacation Bible school), then watch them enjoy bowls of rice and beans.

Sharyn Babe says that the vitamins and protein have changed these children's lives. "These children look so much healthier and happier than those we looked at ten

years ago. What a difference, what a contrast.”