

GOD ALWAYS HAS A PLAN

Responding to the cholera epidemic in Haiti

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God always has a plan. The two key elements to understand God's plan are to open your heart and mind to hear the message and then to accept it with faith and understanding that once accepted, God will deliver. God can be trusted.

Our parish has had a close relationship with St. James Parish in Plaine du Nord for over twenty-five years. Through these years we have seen God provide for us as we tried to respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. We have been blessed to touch not only many lives in Haiti but many lives here in Evansville as well as many people have joined us in our ministry with and for the people of Haiti. We have delivered to our Haitian brothers and sisters financial support, innovative ways to improve their lives through improving their school, church and clinic facilities, providing support for their medical and dental needs and the personal message that we will not "let you down." We have committed to sending groups of people to Haiti twice a year to work with the people there. All this has, to some extent, been relatively easy to do.

Several weeks ago we received a simple but profound request from Fr. Alain, a request that was to take our relationship with our brothers and sisters to another level. The request, at first glance, was pretty simple— "we have had several people in our community who have been affected by cholera. Is there anything you can do to help us?" As a doctor, I knew this simple message belied the seriousness of situation facing them. The outbreak of cholera is quite simply a serious epidemic.

Cholera is spread by people drinking water that has been infected by the feces of people who have cholera. That's pretty easy to do in Haiti where there are no bathrooms to speak of and most water supplies have been contaminated by human waste. The usual treatment for cholera is hydration, either through drinking purified salt water solutions or through IV treatments of saline. If people are not treated within forty-eight hours of being infected they will, in all likelihood, die. Young children are especially susceptible to this disease.

Responding to this simple request was truly an overwhelming medical task, yet God put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a nudge to gather resources to create a plan that could somehow respond to this epidemic. St. Mary's Medical Center responded quickly to my request. Bypassing a lot of red tape, they simply asked "What do you need?" and then proceeded to supply us with hundreds of bags of IV solution, hospital gowns and gloves and other needed medical supplies.

We also needed to collect as many gallons of bleach as we could take, since bleach can be used to decontaminate water making it safe to use for drinking and bathing. Many of you responded and we soon had gathered over fifty gallons of bleach.

We also needed to transport this material to Ft. Lauderdale where it would be flown to Cap Haitian then delivered to Plain du Nord. Again, the people of our parish came through with thousands of dollars in donations and many offers to help with the shipping. Thanks to the help of our friends from Raben Tire, especially Adam Raben, we had a way to ship the supplies.

But we have learned through the years that nothing comes easy when you are doing things for Haiti. We had supplies and we had people to go, myself and Mike Ennis, but now we faced another challenge. There had just been a national election in Haiti and the results were soon to become public. Because of the difficult political situation there, Fr. Alain was reluctant for us to come fearing for our safety because of the anticipated outbreaks of violence. We were not to be deterred, however, and told him, that despite any worries about political uprisings, we were coming. He agreed to meet us at the airport with the trucks needed to transport the supplies we were bringing.

I had a simple concept to open a twenty-four hour hydration facility to treat victims of cholera. However I did not know what we would encounter once we arrived. By this time we knew there had been several deaths,





including five children from the school who had died, and over eighty confirmed cases of people with cholera in the Plaine du Nord area.

We arrived on Saturday morning and were delighted to find that there was a staff of sixteen doctors and nurses from Cuba, Argentina, the Dominican Republic and Columbia who had come to help. They were critically low on any kind of supplies however, so they were delighted to find out about all the medical supplies we had brought.

Mike and I jumped right in to help. Through the efforts of UNICEF, two tents had been erected, each one large enough to handle about forty patients. We saw many people close to death, particularly many young children who appeared at first glance to be almost lifeless. Within twelve hours of being treated, they showed new signs of life. Throughout Saturday and Sunday we treated over two hundred fifty patients, all of whom survived with the exception of one elderly patient.

On Sunday morning, after Mass, we took the time to explain to people how they could use the bleach we had brought to purify their water. The fifty gallons of bleach was parceled

out into small squeeze bottles so that many families could benefit. We traveled to the mission chapel of St. Joseph and shared the same message with them.

By the time we left on Monday, we had a sustainable hydration facility with a very competent staff to run it. Over the next week, more than four hundred fifty more people were treated. It is not an exaggeration to say that without the supplies we had brought, these people would mostly likely have died.

It would be great to say that this cholera epidemic has been averted. The truth is that there are enormous challenges to overcome. There is need for more supplies, particularly bags of IV fluids. And there is a need for more bleach to help decontaminate the water for people to drink. Making the water supply safe is a task that requires enormous improvements to the current infrastructure, much of which is beyond our capabilities.

In the meantime, we continue to try to do what we can. Right now that means trying to obtain more bags of IV fluids and more bleach to send to Haiti. It means providing some money to Fr. Alain to provide food for the doctors and nurses who have committed themselves to working in the parish for the next four months. Lest we become discouraged by the enormity of the situation facing our brothers and sisters in Plaine du Nord, we continue to remember the words of Mother Teresa, that "God did not call us to be successful, but rather to be faithful." And

through it all we are reminded again and again that God will make a plan and show us the way.

