

A Report on the Work Project in La Romana, Dominican Republic
April 22 – 29, 2006
Submitted by the Reverend Tom Carr

The Dominican Republic is a beautiful place. Sharing the island of Hispanola with Haiti, the land is mountainous and filled with valleys and hills. Every day we were there, the sky was so blue you'd have to squint to see it; often, Huge cumulous clouds would gather, usually over the ocean, and we'd receive a brief shower. Sugar cane, which dominates the eastern part of the country, is deep green at this time of year and in the countryside, it dominates the land as far as the eye can see. Sugar cane is king, as Central Romana, the sugar cane company, owns just about everything, including the people.

The people are beautiful, too. Warm, gracious and generous, I found that nearly everyone I passed had at least a smile for me, if not an "Ola!" or "Buenos Dias." And by those I came to know through the church's ministry, hugs were given out in abundance. Music is everywhere, playing all the time in just about every place in La Romana and in San Pedro, where we spent a brief time. The children are especially beautiful. We were greeted with smiles that would melt our hearts and eyes full of curiosity and wonder. And how incredibly creative, resourceful and inventive they are; with so little to play with, how they could play!

The churches are filled with people of passion, enthusiasm and a burning desire to serve God in Christ whose lives revolve around the church. On Sunday, we were part of worship in one of two bateys (pronounced BAH-tay) we visited in the morning and then at our host church in La Romana, Igelsia Bautista Misionera Haitiana (First Haitian Mission Baptist Church) that evening; and to put it mildly, worship was lively! There was music – O, there was music! 75% of the service was music – the psalms were sung, other scriptures were sung, people giving personal testimonies often sang, we heard soloists and quartets, the Maranatha Band (which is playing at the World Mission Conference in Green Lake, Wisconsin this summer), and in most everything, the congregation was invited to join in (if you knew the words!).

Worship is but a part of, though critical part of, the life of the congregation. Following the building of a sugar mill in the Dominican Republic in 1911, recognizing that thousands of Haitians were coming to work the fields and factories, the Haitian Baptist Association decided to establish a mission for the workers in the city of La Romana and the First Haitian Mission Baptist Church was born. Over the years, the church has planted many churches in the bateys and one in a barrio in San Pedro, along with establishing schools there. It has supported individuals to become teachers and doctors, nurses, business people and pastors. And over 15 years ago, construction began on the Good Samaritan

Hospital in La Romana. Two levels of the hospital have been built with at least two more to go; but even as construction continues (almost exclusively by volunteers), medical care is being given to the 60,000 patients who visit the hospital annually.

Medical care and education are the two key components to the work being done in La Romana and I will come back to those soon. First, I must describe a bit of the context in which these beautiful people find themselves in this beautiful place.

Many people in the Dominican Republic are economically poor. It is not nearly as impoverished as its neighbor, Haiti, which is the poorest country in the western hemisphere; nevertheless, the majority of people in the DR struggle to make ends meet. Particularly, for those people who live in many of the barrios (neighborhoods) in the cities and the bateys, life is a daily struggle to survive.

The bateys are the shanty towns that house the Haitian people who harvest sugar cane. They are the poorest of the poor, most living without running water, electricity, medical care and often, shoes. Both Spanish and Creole is spoken in the bateys, though most who have been in the country for some time, speak both. The bateys are owned by the sugar cane companies, where most of the homes are boxes of wood, no more than 10 feet by 10 feet which house anywhere from 2 to 10 or more people. Some of the homes are larger with a window but most have room for a bed and a couple of shelves and lack any windows. Cooking is done outside over fires made of wood and/or coal. There is a company store where everything must be bought (and most prominent above the counter in the stores is alcohol and tobacco). Personal gardens are forbidden; only plants and trees that were there when the batey was built are allowed to stand. We were told that often, when people have planted gardens and were discovered by the security forces they were bull-dozed (there are no police in the bateys, only private security forces employed by the company and the only men you will see on horseback). The men are employed by the company to cut the sugar cane with machettes and for doing so, receive \$2 a ton. It's brutal, back breaking work but for many of those who fled Haiti, it is a step up. Some bateys have schools and churches; others do not. For those who do have schools, the education for children up to about 10 years old is free so long as the family provides a uniform (blue shirt and khaki pants/skirt) and supplies (notebook and pencils). At one batey I visited which was filled with children, there were only nine in school. When asked why so few, the teacher informed us that these nine were the only ones with uniforms. If children in the bateys want to attend school in the city of La Romana, they must have a birth certificate; of course, if you were born in a batey, you won't have a birth certificate. Medical care is spotty, at best. Once or so a year, most of the bateys

(there are approximately 125 of them in the general La Romana area) will have a medical team visit them. The school or church building is used as a medical clinic.

Once, a pastor of a batey was asked what his people need most. He paused, smiled and said, “everything.”

The mission of Igelsia Bautista Misionera Haitiana is to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the hope that lives within them. Particularly, they are called to bear witness to those in deep need in and around La Romana. Pastor Jean-Luc Pharnord, who died in a plane crash not long after 9/11, was the visionary of this mission. It was his contention that as part of the Gospel, people need medical care and education to live abundant, productive lives of service to the world. His vision was to build a hospital, from which medical teams could be sent out into the bateys and for those in need of urgent care, to come to the hospital for treatment. He believed in training men and women in his congregation to become doctors and nurses to be part of this work. He also believe that education is a gateway to a more productive life and so, men and women continue to be trained as teachers, not only for the bateys, but in La Romana itself. Every day I witnessed classes going on in the church, in rooms no larger than an average size dining room in America. The teachers and children were excited about things; you could tell they knew that what they were doing was important work and their lives reflected the joy inside.

On the first “work day”, Charlotte Massie and I worked side by side on a medical team in a batey and I was absolutely delighted and moved to be working next to such a gifted, caring person. When people came with complaints about joints, back, neck, sides and other “chiropractic-type” issues, it was thrilling to watch her use her gifts to show them how to move and exercise that particular part of their bodies. Every day, Charlotte worked with the medical teams in a different batey while I spent the rest of the week at the hospital, helping to complete construction of a cafeteria (I actually helped hang sheet rock, which is a miracle all by itself!). Though not my forte, finishing the hospital is the key to the mission. People must be healthy in order to learn and become servants of Christ for others in need and the hospital is that central place where people with serious problems and general health care issues come; and from that center, the rest of the vision flows. The best estimate is that \$500,000 is needed to finished the hospital building.

As I mentioned in worship and in other venues prior to leaving for the Dominican Republic, we did not build the bio-sand water filters. Other concerns took precedence and our special funds we raised for the water filter project will be going to support the Promoter program. Promoters are men and women (mostly women) from the bateys who are trained in the very basics of medical care. The goal is for every batey to have a Promoter; currently, there are 25 with at least 100

needed to cover all the bateys. These Promoters will be able to do simple diagnoses and distribute appropriate advice and medicine. If there are serious problems that require emergency care, she will be able to contact medical personnel and if necessary, make arrangements for a hospital visit. The Promoters are paid \$600 a year.

We were housed and fed by the wonderful staff of the church, living in one of two compounds, adjacent to the church and a block away. I loved the food, plenty of rice and beans along with deliciously prepared meats and vegetables, and the best oatmeal I have ever eaten. Mostly, I enjoyed the relationships developed during the week. The people on the work team, primarily from central Massachusetts and those people from the church, the neighborhood, hospital and the bateys, took time to be with you. It is at the heart of Dominican culture. Time is not money; time is time for relationships. Except for the motor traffic (which is absolutely insane!), the people I met were never in a hurry when you were in their presence. I mattered to them and because I did, they came to matter to me.

There is so much more to say and stories to tell but this is enough for now. My hope is that you will want to learn more and that our congregation consider a return trip next year. I will be doing a presentation at the Women's Fellowship Spring Dinner on Thursday, May 17, hopefully with pictures. If you can't make it on the 17th, please speak with me or Charlotte Massie. Though we had similar experiences, I'm certain Charlotte has different impressions and reactions. These are mine – for now.

May we pray for the mission in La Romana and the world wide mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.