

GOOD NEWS FROM FAR AWAY: IS THE LAMBI CALLING YOU?

by
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If you're bookish like I am, and you take an interest in the developing world, you may have read *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder's inspiring account of physician Paul Farmer's global health ministry that began in Haiti. If you haven't, I highly recommend it. But in either case, if you have any idea of the scale of Haiti's challenges, you'll be happy to know there's another American physician with a commitment to Haiti, and he's one of our own.

Dr. Tom Fame is a member of the Companions of Francis and Clare SFO in Roanoke, Virginia. When I met Tom and Leah at our regional Chapter of Mats in July, he told just a little of the story and gave me a copy of his 2008 book *The Lambi's Call: A Haitian Journey*.*

The *lambi* (you must be wondering) is a conch shell. It's the Haitian symbol of freedom and hope because it called the people together out of their slavery. They say it is like the gospel: good news from far away.

"I was professed in June 1998," Tom says, "but I began my Franciscan journey along with my Haitian journey, and that ministry has been parallel to my Franciscan walk."

Tom's wife Leah, who is in formation as a Secular Franciscan, and their three daughters have been to Haiti and support the work he does there, but his love affair with the Haitian people has been a personal, particular, and expanding call.



Tom first heard that call on a fairly ordinary medical mission trip. He went to Haiti for the first time in the early 1990's with a group of other physicians. They took a supply of medicines and put in long days treating hundreds of patients who had not had medical care in a long time and would not have it after they left.

It was gratifying, and it left him with tremendous admiration for the Haitians he met, but it was also frustrating. Clearly, visiting for a week was not enough.

Back in the US, Tom attended a meeting about a parish twinning program that offered a chance to be in ongoing relationship with a particular community of Haitians.

The project had roots in Richmond Bishop Walter Sullivan's own engagement with Haiti and the work of several Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (including Sister Rose Gallagher, who also attended the *Chapter of Mats*). His fellow parishioners agreed to be twinned, but communications had to be hand-carried, so the going was slow.

Still, by 1996 Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Salem, Virginia was twinned with the Parish of St. Gabriel in Lascahobas, on Haiti's central plateau.

Says Tom:

"I finally had a purpose, and that was to have no purpose."

No purpose, that is, other than to develop personal relationships with their new friends in Haiti, and then see where the Spirit led him.



This time, rather than going in with his medical kit thinking he had the answers, Tom took others there to visit while he waited for the pastors and parishioners of St. Gabriel and another even more remote parish, to tell them what they needed. When they did, it was not a clinic but a school.

Rural Cabestor had just built a church, after 50 years of prayers, so a school was the next step. The project had been carefully budgeted out at US \$49,000. Tom had no idea how he would raise that sum, but he agreed to try. He says, "It was a promise not written on paper but inscribed on my heart."

Trying meant turning himself into a fundraiser, learning the Creole language, arranging for a road to be built stone by stone, and negotiating new and sometimes difficult relationships.

Over the course of repeated visits, trust grew stronger on both sides. And as he and the friends who supported the project tackled one obstacle after another, they learned the truth of the proverb that describes Haiti's landscape and so much more:

"Deye mon gen mon":
"Beyond mountains there are more mountains."

The book opens in 2001 on January 1— the Haitian national holiday as well as the beginning of the year— with the dedication of the new school, Sacre Coeur. It was a mountaintop experience. And as soon as it was over, Tom learned there was no money to pay the teacher's salaries, at that school or the one in the next village, and the students were coming to school hungry. He went home and got back to work.

Funds for salaries were raised and feeding programs were set up and staffed at several area schools. In the years since the book ends, two clean water projects have been built with Farmer's nonprofit Partners in Health, and a third is in the works.



Another school is going up—very slowly, since all the materials have to be carried up the mountain where it's sited. Tom has made an arrangement with the priest in the nearby village, who is starting an advanced high school, that will allow 25 students who graduate from the elementary schools to continue their education. He has learned how to work with the Haitian peoples' bank, Fonkoze, and set up a trust fund, the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Haiti Trust, so the partnership's projects will remain financially secure. Hurricanes Ivan and Jeanne ravaged the area in 2004, and other natural and economic disasters have followed. Tom lost some dear friends, including a strange little girl he had come to love, Tifi, or Rose Carmel.

He reflects, "I cannot relieve all the suffering in Haiti, but I can hold a child, I can comfort a man, and I can visit with a family... I have taken on some of the suffering of my Haitian friends, and together, with solidarity, we support each other on our mutual journey."

Tom tells more funny stories than sad ones. Talking to him or reading the book, it's clear that he sees what is unfolding as a series of miracles, and he credits the Haitians' own resilience and the grace of God more than the resources he has helped to provide. "Each time I visit," he says, "I am amazed at what can be discovered when I reach down into the unknown world of poverty's richness."

Tom will finish a Master's degree in public health from Johns Hopkins in May of 2012, so he has even more to offer at home and in Haiti. The village of Cabestor has recently gained a new community kitchen, a bookstore, and a guesthouse with power provided by solar electric panels. A partnership has been forged to start a fish farming program on the nearby lake.

Many urgent needs are still unmet. Will there be enough money? Each of the book's 16 chapters begins with a Haitian proverb. For chapter 9, it is: "Si Bondye ki vole ou, li pral paye fre pou ou": "If it is God who sends you, he'll pay your expenses." Chapter 11 begins with "Men anpil, chay pa lou": "Many hands make the load lighter."

If you'd like to order a copy of the book, learn more about the OLPH Haiti Project, and possibly lend your hands, contact Tom, fame5@verizon.net,  or call 540.389.3577.

*Tom Fame, *The Lambi's Call: A Haitian Journey*, Salem, VA, Trust Publisher, 2008. 

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