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Social Justice



Parishioners of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Meyer Grande, Haiti, wait outside their newly built church for services to begin. Parishioners built the structure, with support from members of St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Winter Park, Fla. (Courtesy of St. Margaret Mary Church)



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February 3, 2025
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Despite the myriad security challenges posed by gang violence in Haiti right now, a number of congregations and parishes remain committed to working there in some way, sharing what one Dominican sister calls the "joys and struggles" of the Haitian people.

Worldwide, the Dominican Order focused on Haiti in December for its annual Dominican Month of Peace, saying the situation in the Caribbean nation warranted more attention amid reflection, solidarity and prayer.

"For many years, the people in Haiti have been subjected to violent atrocities and human rights violations, incessant killings, kidnappings, sexual assaults, human trafficking and forced labor," Dominican Fr. Gerard Francisco Timoner III, master of the Dominican Order, said in a statement. He noted that the security situation has caused a number of the Dominican family to "leave the country for safety reasons."

"Our work is to advocate for justice and peace," said Adrian Dominican Sr. Durstyne "Dusty" Farnan, a representative to the United Nations for the Dominican Leadership Conference. "We have brothers and sisters in Haiti and when they can't do that [advocate for Haiti], it's our moral obligation to do so."

The ties to Haiti remain strong, one being the work that Dominicans and others are promoting at the parish level.

One program by St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Winter Park, Florida, is notable partly because of its longevity. Since 2006, the parish's Haiti mission program has had a sharp focus of working with one Haitian partner parish for five years.

That focus is deliberate, said Adrian Dominican Sr. Rosemary Finnegan, one of the program's coordinators. Having a set time of partnership, she said, creates a sense of urgency for both the Florida parish members and the Haitians.

"We don't go in and build houses. We don't go in and dig ditches. We go in and talk to the Haitian people about what their needs are," Finnegan said in a recent

interview.



Members of the St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church Haiti mission team, in the back, seen here with Haitian parishioners in a 2018 photo. The Haitian parishioners were from an earlier parish that the team worked with, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The Florida church now works with another parish, Our Lady of the Assumption. (Courtesy of St. Margaret Mary Church)

Currently, the Florida parish is working with Our Lady of the Assumption, a parish in Meyer Grande, a mountainous area in southwest Haiti.

The program works by four principles:

- A focus on Haitian self-determination, with projects "identified and designed" by the Haitian partners.

- A need for sustainability, with projects intended to be "self-sufficient and sustainable" long after the Florida parish is done with its work.
- Lifting up transparency, particularly on the issue of finances, with any money or remuneration "transparent and well known to all participants."
- The importance of a "clear exit time," with the Haitian parishioners fully aware and accepting that the Florida parish's involvement is limited to five years. "If you stay too long," the Florida mission says, "you become part of the problem, not the solution."

Finnegan notes that one of the needs initially raised by the Haitian parishioners was for a senior food program, as elderly residents in rural Haiti are often neglected and do not have a strong social safety net.

"It would've been very easy for us just to hand over money and say, here, go get food and feed the people. But that would've lasted a short amount of time," Finnegan said. "So we asked them, 'Well, how are you going to sustain that program?' "

The answer was animal husbandry. Within a year and half, the community had developed a program raising and selling pigs.

At the end of the year and a half, the Haitian parish members had enough money to start a food program for the seniors, Finnegan said, and that effort continues.

That is one success. Others the Florida parish can point to over nearly two decades include the creation of medical clinics, schools and chapels; the development of peace initiatives, agriculture and building programs for the community; and women's banking and loan programs.

Still, the Haitians face many challenges, as Finnegan notes.



Haitian parishioners from Our Lady of the Assumption Church and Ken Firling (on the mule), a member of St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Winter Park, Fla., make a three-hour journey by foot and hoof to one of the Haitian parish's outlying chapels, Our Lady of Mercy. These chapels only see their pastor once a month for Mass. The rest of the time they have an administrator who conducts prayer services and oversees other parish activities. (Courtesy of St. Margaret Mary Church)

Because the Assumption parish is located in a remote mountainous area, it is not directly affected by the gang violence dominating the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince and much of the rest of the country. However, "it is indirectly affected because the gangs control many of the major roads, so getting food, gas and other supplies is very difficult," she said.

Finnegan added that many families and friends who have fled Port-au-Prince have returned to live with relatives in the mountains for refuge, with people crowding into small homes and making access to food scarcer. Adding to the challenges is that newcomers' children are not attending school and there are no jobs for adults.

The St. Margaret Mary program is part of a larger effort by U.S. parishes to partner with churches in Haiti and elsewhere in the Americas. About 230 Catholic churches in the United States have a "twin parish" in Haiti or Latin America, said David Siler, the executive director of the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas.

Siler told GSR that the St. Margaret Mary program "is one of our most dynamic and interesting parish twin members. They are very active and operate some very robust programs."

This and other work are part of humanitarian efforts and ministries that continue despite Haiti's ongoing security challenges.

Salesian Missions recently said that a partnership between the Salesians of Don Bosco and the humanitarian group Rise Against Hunger resulted in food distribution to more than 3,000 Haitian young people in the first half of 2024.

The shipments of food were distributed to 11 Salesian centers and schools.

One of those receiving food was Rodnel Ball, 16, a resident in a gang-affected area of Port-au-Prince. He said the food improved his health and also helped him to stay motivated to study and stay in school.

"Not only did I gain weight by eating the meals, but I also found the motivation to study. I study better."

It is that kind of humanitarian assistance that is supporting Haitians at a critical moment and underlines the need for programs like the one by St. Margaret Mary Parish.



A wedding can be expensive in Haiti, so couples live together and have families without the sacrament of marriage. However, members of Our Lady of the Assumption Parish wanted to be married within the church. As a result, St. Margaret Mary and the Haitian community developed a marriage program that included marriage preparation classes for all couples, especially those who had been together for years, as well as a 2021 communal ceremony. St. Margaret Mary parishioners contributed funds that allowed the couples to have wedding rings and a reception afterward. (Courtesy of St. Margaret Mary Church)

During a Dec. 17 livestream presentation by the Adrian Dominican Sisters' Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, those working on the St. Margaret Mary program attributed its success to what one of its founders, Ken Firling, working with pastor Fr. Richard Walsh and others, called "a strong mission relationship."

"We depend on the Haitians to identify the needs that are most important to them," Firling said, adding that Haitian self-determination is paramount.

"A lot of times you go to Haiti, you see a problem and you're convinced you've got the answer, but a hundred percent of the time you're wrong."

John Rife, who chairs the parish missionary committee, added: "I think quite often that where other NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and American-led efforts fail is that [they] come without any humility at all and say, 'We know better.' "

During the livestream event, Jean Bony, a Haitian lawyer who works as the "on-the-ground" coordinator for the St. Margaret Mary program, and who lives in Jacmel, Haiti, praised all aspects of the program.

He said that given the extreme conditions in Haiti right now, any program that promotes community leadership is welcome, as are vocational programs to help young people train for jobs.

"When kids have a profession, it is very difficult for them to become gangsters," he said, using the popular term for gang members. Also valuable, he said, is an initiative to stop domestic violence, a real problem given the immense day-to-day pressures Haitians face.

"St. Margaret Mary is doing valuable work in our Assumption community," Bony said, helping build a more peaceful community in what are overall troubled times in the country.

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The mission is also committed to expanding understanding of Haiti to Americans. One way, said Lisa Meier, a nurse who heads the program's medical work, is for students at the Florida parish's school to occasionally eat rice and bean lunches "so that they're eating lunch and in solidarity what the kids in Haiti would be eating."

Also, the Florida students will participate in "walk to school for Haiti events" so that the students, who are usually driven to school will relate "a little bit more to what the kids are going through in Haiti." (Haitian students often have to walk long distances to attend school.)

Parish members say that the recent security challenges facing Haiti have made their work more challenging, though regular virtual meetings between the Floridians and

Haitians have helped.

And some of the Floridians still plan to travel to Haiti — though flying to Port-au-Prince is no longer possible, requiring flights to the northern city of Cap-Haïtien and then flying south domestically to the project site.

The fact that the parish's work continues despite challenges is a testimony to the commitment of the parish — something fully supported by Walsh and parish members.

"Thanks be to God for the Haiti mission," Walsh said. "I think it has been a wonderful experience for the parish."

Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Virginia West, who also works for the mission, said full tribute should be given to the Haitians.

"The Haitian people are so resilient," she said in an interview. "I don't know how they do it, even in the best of times."

Sometimes while visiting Haiti, West finds her own faith wanting compared to that of the Haitians she works with and meets.

"They're a very faith-filled, very faithful people."

Read this next: 'People can't live in Haiti safely': Sisters struggle to serve surrounded by gangs