

CRS rep wants to help Haitians help themselves

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Apr. 4, 2011



Luke King, country representative of Catholic Relief Services in Haiti, gestures during an interview with Catholic News Service in Port-au-Prince March 10. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- After serving in Iraq and Congo, Luke King was sent to Haiti as country director to manage Catholic Relief Services' massive response to the Jan. 12, 2010, earthquake.

Since arriving in August, King -- the agency's fourth country director within a year -- has overseen an effort that integrates various forms of vital assistance while encouraging Haitians to shape the path their recovery should take. It's a task the 35-year-old Toledo, Ohio, native admits is a major challenge given the immense difficulties confronting a nation historically beset by profound poverty. The quake killed more than 300,000 people and left 1.5 million homeless.

King met with Catholic News Service in his office at the CRS compound in the Haitian capital to discuss how the agency is structuring its work going into the future.

CRS: A year-plus after the earthquake, what is CRS working to achieve in Haiti?

King: At this point, it's rebuilding communities in a holistic manner through something we call integrated human development. It takes into account all types of qualities of a person's life. There's the spiritual side, the economic side, the physical side, the physical infrastructure that they have in other areas.

We're focused on not just building to rebuild and getting people back to work, but connecting communities with the institutions they've known and sought solace at for years -- reconnecting them with their neighbors, with their schools -- trying to do it in a manner we think creates a more just foundation for development.

The one-year anniversary of the earthquake was a key transition point. It was a moment to remember what happened the past year, to take stock, to look at what we accomplished, and sort of re-energize our efforts in these communities.

It coincides with where Haitians are with their recovery. They're anxious to get back into their communities, to get out of the camps, to restart their income-generation activities, whether they had jobs or whether they had businesses, to get their churches rebuilt, to get back to a sense of normality.

There was a period when it was just complete shock; there was so much trauma. Everyone was focused on the physical trauma, the buildings that were destroyed. But there was an emotional trauma as well. It still isn't completely healed, but I feel the tide is turning, that people are beginning to move on.

How much is CRS working with the Haitian church?

Something we realized after the earthquake was that we needed to reinforce our relationship with the church. We have always had the church as our partner of preference and we're here by invitation of the church. We've been working with them for 54 years.

But as in any relationship you have ups and downs and there have been struggles in the past. We realized after the earthquake that no matter what the struggles, you have to keep supporting these institutions because these are the institutions that are going to be here long after we're gone. These are the people who are going to lead the community into recovery.

That is our top priority for the next five years: reinforcing those institutions, reinforcing our relationships with the local church and supporting the idea of subsidiarity, of permitting space for Haitians to lead this response.

What are the specific goals for the next year or five years?

The overarching goal is, through solidarity and right relationships, to strengthen the partners, to become true agents of change in these communities. Of course, we get to that through programs addressing shelter or water and sanitation, but it's no longer for us the 'what.' Even though we are interested in getting people under roofs and helping families to get enough food and water, we're focused on the 'how' -- how we're going to go about that process and what sort of skills we are going to transfer to partners.

When U.S. bishops have visited, what has been their message?

All of the bishops who have come here have been very moved by what they see. They've been very appreciative of what all the Caritas Internationalis members are doing. We hear a lot of thanks. We receive a lot of their prayers and a lot of their encouragement. They don't just come and sit in the office with me. They go out in the camps.

There was a moving moment in one of the camps where two young women have transformed the community. They walked here several times, knocking on our door asking if we could help them. We were so busy at the time, we said, 'Well that community is so hard to access that we can't do anything until the rubble is cleared.' They said, 'Give us some tools.' We gave them tools. They came back two weeks later and said 'We're ready.' So we sent a few folks over and we didn't expect to see much progress. They had changed the place completely. They had gotten almost all the rubble out.

Now we've built over 200 shelters in that community, Delmas 62. We took Bishop (Richard J.) Malone (of Portland, Maine) there and he was talking with these women. As we left they asked if he would bless them. He gave them a blessing right there. It was really a touching moment.

Is it empowerment that you are doing?

I don't know if that's the right word. There's certainly the sense that we don't want to do work for people. We

want to help them, we want to listen to them and hear what their priorities are and hear what they can do. We want to support those types of initiatives.

We recognize that Haiti is a place where there often is a lack of leadership. Over 80 percent of Haitians with college degrees leave the country to work somewhere else. We recognize if we intend to have a lasting impact here we need to invest in this country. We're committed to the idea of building capacity.

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