

25 years and counting . . . Partnership Cange, Haiti

By Reggie Brooker

In 1979 a chance meeting took place between two Episcopal priests, Fritz Lafontant and William A. Beckham, later sixth bishop of Upper South Carolina, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. This meeting was the spark that led to the Cange mission development and the friendship between the people of the Diocese of Upper South Carolina and those of Cange, on Haiti's central plateau. Together with Fr. Lafontant and Harvard physician Dr. Paul Farmer, a founder of Partners in Health, our diocese has been involved in rural Haiti for more than 25 years. The heart of this connection has been cooperation, solidarity, and long-term commitment in partnership with Fr. Lafontant and the Episcopal Church at Cange, Église Bon Sauveur.

Church on the hillside

Cange is a small village 45 miles northeast of Port-au-Prince. In 1979 Fr. Lafontant built the church on a dry, barren hillside. This church was the first building constructed at Cange, and the religious orientation of the community has remained central to all subsequent activities.

Cange had been situated in a fertile valley alongside a river in a mountainous region of Haiti near the Dominican border. In 1956 a hydroelectric dam was built and flooded the valley, forcing the families to relocate to rocky land well above the lake. The soil was hard-packed and barely arable. Water was available only some hundreds of feet below and reachable only by a steep and dangerous trail. Poverty and disease accompanied the people, and life was hard and short.

In 1981 our diocese began its active involvement at Cange. Medical people, doctors, nurses, and helpers carried medicines in suitcases. Hundreds of people came on foot or by horseback from miles around and over mountains seeking help. Clinics were held outdoors under the trees or in the church using benches for tables and the altar for the pharmacy. And this went on during the reign, and under the watchful eyes, of "Papa Doc" Duvalier, then Haiti's president.

Water Cange!

At Cange water for drinking, cooking, and bathing was obtained from a river 1,000 feet below. Attempts to drill wells had proven futile, and cisterns dug at the church to collect rainwater were ineffective. There was, however, thanks be to God, a large, permanent spring flowing out of the base of the mountain on which Cange was situated. What Providence!

In 1983 an engineering team led by Pierce Williams surveyed and measured the flow of the spring's water and concluded that water could be pumped up to the Cange village. The call went out through our diocese—"Water Cange!" Donations rolled in—the necessary \$130,000 quickly—for water is life, and we knew it.

In 1985 the water system was completed—a mechanical marvel. The turbine cranked up as the water flowed from the spring down to the turbine and pump, and then

rose hundreds of feet above to three village fountains and then on to the mission. People were ecstatic—all with smiles. And Cange was changed forever—from a dry, dusty, dirty squatter's settlement to an oasis with running water. Running water was a catalyst to change lives. People were empowered to achieve better sanitation, health, and nutrition. Fr. Lafontant and his family moved to Cange, and Cange began to expand, to change, and to develop toward what it is today.

Hospital Cange!

In the 1980s and 90s diocesan medical health teams with Tom Tiller, Upper SC Suffragan Bishop Rogers Harris, Mark Meyer, and other health workers and clergy traveled to Cange. People gave freely of their time and talent. The diocese came together to construct a refectory, school, teachers' dormitory, and, in 1985, a medical clinic, Clinique Bon Sauveur.

Our friend and collaborator Dr. Paul Farmer is a professor at Harvard Medical School. While a college student in 1983 he travelled to Cange and made a lifelong commitment to serving the poor. In 1986 he wrote to Bishop Beckham and proposed planning for a hospital. In Upper South Carolina we had known that this was needed, and that it would be we that would do it.

The cry went out in the diocese, "Hospital Cange!" A fund-raising campaign culminated in the building of the Children's Hospital in 1996. This small 20-bed, modern hospital with an operating room and X-ray facilities was built, equipped, and supplied. It provided a place for the seriously ill or those recovering from surgery to be treated—the only such facility for a population of 900,000 on the central plateau. At the dedication during carnival week in February 1998 were Bishop Dorsey Henderson, Bishop Duracin of Haiti, and retired Bishop Beckham.

With Paul Farmer's help the hospital was later enlarged to 104 beds complemented by a network of clinics in seven surrounding villages. Now at Cange there are Haitian physicians and health-care workers caring for several hundred patients per day, performing operations, and delivering 2,800 babies in a year.

Our diocese continues active involvement in health care. Surgical teams led by Don Roberts and Doug Devore are working a week at a time, operating all day on cases from the countryside – thyroids, prostates, tumors. Tom Tiller raised funds for the dental clinic. Darrell Jervey, long involved in eye care in Haiti, developed an Eye Center, and he and colleagues teach and train other doctors at Cange and at the medical school in Port-au-Prince.

Artisan Center

In 1985 Jackie Williams started a sewing center and received a gift of three treadle sewing machines and a roll of unbleached cotton cloth. Now expanded in scope, renamed the Artisan Center, and assisted by Beth Kunkel, this center provides employment through which clothes, handicrafts, and paintings are made and brought to South Carolina for sale. Jackie Williams now lives in Cange and is a valuable liaison for our diocese.

Schools

In 1979 a small, two-room school stood at Cange with a banana leaf roof and no walls. By 1985 a mortar and brick structure was built, and now, with many additions, school enrollment has risen to more than 1,000 at Cange; and 4,000 more students are at surrounding mission schools. In the past year our diocese funded a six-classroom addition, so that students at Cange can finish their secondary education there without having to journey to Mirabalais.

Fr. Lafontant realizes that finishing school is just a beginning. He understands the need for employment. He knows that people need employment locally, so they will not migrate to Port-au-Prince and fall prey to the temptations and problems of the city. A vocational school is now a priority of his to train agricultural workers, mechanics, carpenters. Education for employment is needed, and skilled workers need to be retained in the Cange area. Our diocese is asked to help. Let us unite behind this goal, Vocational Education Cange! as we did behind Water Cange! And Hospital Cange!

“Adopt a Village”

The Cange parish comprises 13 village missions with the center and main church Église Bon Sauveur. Fr. Lafontant is the spiritual and social leader. His foremost priority now is to have a well-built Episcopal church and school in each of the villages with the school also being able to serve as a community center.

Our diocesan program “Adopt a Village” is striving to accomplish this chief priority, and the help of everyone is needed. Thanks to Charlie Weesner, Jane Chalker, and many others, five missions have been adopted and churches and schools have been built, but several villages are waiting. Opportunity awaits us as members of a congregation or congregations, as churches in a convocation, and as an entire diocese to “adopt a village,” and be involved in the lives of our Haitian friends.

Partners in Agriculture

In 2003 Gillaine Warne started a one-acre garden plot at Cange. This garden produced so abundantly that it led to the development of a 35-acre diocesan farm along the banks of the Artibonite River. Produce includes cabbages, corn, onions, peanuts, and bananas, from some 12,000 banana trees. This has greatly augmented the food supply, thanks to Gilliane Warne’s inspiration and leadership and the generous support of the people of our diocese.

Paul Farmer’s Partners in Health is purchasing the farm produce for nutritional programs, and a school lunch is being provided for all 5,000 students under the Cange umbrella. The Rotary is providing additional funding for the farm, and Clemson University is providing seeds and expertise.

Because of malnutrition in the countryside, Yolanda Lafontant, Fr. Lafontant’s wife, started a preschool nutrition program many years ago. Now with the farm in operation, and mission village farms being planned, the goal has become to eliminate malnutrition on the central plateau. Using primarily corn, beans, peanuts, and rice, feeding formulas and nutritional supplements are provided to malnourished infants and children. And to help the whole family, seeds, tools, and a goat are supplied as well.

In 2006 the Cange water system was expanded to meet the needs of a growing community. In early March Tim Wilson led a team to install a water filtration unit at the mission compound. Running water, supplied in 1985, is now filtered to remove bacteria and viruses to improve general health. And the work goes on.

What happened to be a chance meeting between two priests in 1979 was the spark that ignited the Cange mission development, now an internationally recognized model. God has given us the strength and vision to continue to maintain our focus and long-term commitment to work together. The shared vision and the projects have enriched us all, both here and in Haiti, even though there have been moments of difficulty and discouragement. But if we look at the productivity, students going to school and succeeding, people restored to health, burdens of life being lessened, hope replacing apathy and despair, we have no choice but to continue onward.

Onward

Where do we go from here? Let us “adopt a village” and build a church and primary school. Let us build a vocational school. Let us grow more food and eradicate malnutrition. Let us heal and comfort the sick. Let us teach the children. There is no limit to what our people can do.

As martyred Salvadoran bishop Oscar Romero said: “This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.”

Diocese of Upper South Carolina, thank you very much.

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