

From Haiti to Home

by Jack Munos

FMWM Missionary to Haiti from 2004 to 2012

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” Psalm 116:15

This is written in memory of Jeanne Acheson-Munos, Erlin Blot, Gene Dufour and Merle West, Free Methodists who perished in the Friends of Haiti Organization (FOHO) building in the earthquake of January 12, 2010. The following are events that stand out from my perspective as someone in the midst of profound physical and emotional trauma. There are certainly many more details and experiences others could share.



4:53 pm, January 12, 2010, FOHO building, Haiti: The jolt was sudden and huge as the earth moved. It felt like an airplane had crashed near us. Our building rocked sideways and collapsed.

When I regained consciousness, I was lying on my stomach with my legs pinned by concrete debris and a column. I yelled in agony, “Oh God, oh Jesus, oh Jeanne! I lost my precious wife!” Fellow missionary Katie Zook heard me and responded, but her voice was little more than a whisper due to a punctured lung.

I eventually heard some noises outside our “cave of life.” I called out but received no response. At one point I tapped on the ceiling that had been about 14 feet high, but was now within my reach. A piece of plaster came off, so I didn’t touch the ceiling again for fear it would collapse. Having been hit on the head, I faded in and out of consciousness.

I truly believed I would die in this place. I took off my cross, wrapped the chain around my hand and repeated Jesus’ words, “Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.” When found, I wanted the world to know I held onto this cross to the end of my time. There was no fear, only His grace to relax into His arms. I never looked at my watch as I did not want to know how long I had been under the debris – the pressure was incredible but I have no memory of pain. I do remember two hymns that played in my mind, Tell Me the Story of Jesus and I Love to Tell the Story.

Our Journey to Haiti

Jeanne Acheson and I met in speech class at Bethany Nazarene College (now Southern Nazarene University). I thought she was a prissy pastor's daughter and she thought I was a hippie wannabe. We argued frequently, but after a time we stopped disagreeing and our love grew. One day during a missions chapel service, with the song I Have Decided to Follow Jesus playing, the speaker asked, "If God calls you, will you go?" Both Jeanne and I walked down the aisle and said yes to His call. We were married on June 3, 1972.

Twenty-five years after we both answered the call, it came to fruition. Jeanne began work at Free Methodist headquarters where she learned of a mission trip to Port-au-Prince. When she asked me if I would go it seemed a great adventure and I said yes, even though we had considered an anniversary voyage to Alaska. In August of 1997 we took our first of what would be four short-term trips to Haiti.



Our trips culminated in Jeanne and I both feeling God's call to make a greater commitment to the work in Haiti. She received her definite invitation when she heard a young boy playing his accordion at the Ebenezer Glenn Orphanage in Dessalines. My calling was confirmed by the simple act of responding to an old woman begging for some food. Her smile lit up my day more than the hot Haitian sun. If we could give the people food for their stomachs, how much better if we could provide food for their eternal souls! I was hooked.

In May of 2004, Jeanne graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary, was ordained an elder in the Free Methodist Church, and we were commissioned as FMWM missionaries to Haiti at the Wilmore FMC (KY). In January 2005, we boarded the Mission Flights International DC3 cargo-passenger plane (a vintage craft flown in World War II). Having given away most of our earthly goods, we took only 33 plastic totes and boxes, plus the chair that Jeanne's dad had used in his study when writing sermons.

Learning to Trust God in Haiti

Living and ministering in another country shapes one's character in major ways. Whereas Jeanne blossomed in her life and work in Haiti, I initially found it frustrating because of the language barrier and my job

responsibilities. I had never seen Jeanne happier than when she interacted with our Haitian brothers and sisters. Her education at Asbury had helped her prepare for the complexity of life in a frequently chaotic environment where what seemed obvious was not. Her greatest preparation, however, was her heartfelt love of the people and the country. One of my all-time favorite photos of her was taken as she leaned down to talk with a young, dirty-faced girl in the street. This was a great metaphor for her approach to ministry: relationship over task. I was tired after a two-hour church service and ready to relax over lunch (task), but Jeanne was willing to take the time to talk with this girl (relationship). As our work progressed, we learned more about the culture and studied the Creole language. I became more acclimated to my responsibilities by God's grace. You can handle the most difficult challenges with His help.



One outstanding event that took place during this time period was when Jeanne developed a friendship with a 3-year-old restavek (child slave) named Fanya, who lived across the street, but was never allowed to come onto the mission grounds by her caretaker. Jeanne would go out to Fanya and give her little things, talk to her and give her loving hugs. This child was very near and dear to her heart.



One day Fanya had been told to make a fire for cooking, but in the process spilled some of the fuel on her clothing. When Fanya lit the match, her clothing caught fire. The Voodoo doctor's wife, who lived next door, saw what had happened and rushed to put out the flames. She carried Fanya to the local hospital. When Jeanne heard of the horrific accident she was devastated. Upon seeing Fanya, she was overcome with sadness and wept. Fanya was burned over a great portion of her body, yet she still recognized the kind lady who paid

attention to her. Fanya was in great pain and her hands trembled as she held the rails of her bed. She would ask for "ti dlo, mama," a little water.

Due to commitments and responsibilities back in the U.S., Jeanne had to leave a few days later. While she was gone, little Fanya passed away. Jeanne became very angry with God and told Him she did not want to return to Dessalines because Fanya would not be outside her gate. God spoke to her and said, "No, Fanya will not be there, but when you come to my home she will be inside my gate waiting for you!"

Ministry continued and our love for Haiti grew and matured. In addition to the teams that came to work in Haiti and stayed at the FOHO guesthouse, we opened the facility to many Haitian Free Methodists who came for the district assembly. The guesthouse was sometimes full and we had much to keep up with, but it was a joy to see the excitement of the believers who came to conduct the business of the church.



The Day My World Was Shaken

Tuesday, January 12, 2010, began uneventfully with a trip to a local bakery to get pastries for the staff devotion time. We sang, prayed, ate and enjoyed fellowship with our faithful workers. Little did we know that Jean Wiler, sitting at the table with us, would soon be responsible for rescuing Katie and two young neighbor girls from the rubble.

At 4:53 pm, Katie and Jeanne were in her office in our apartment working on financial records so Katie could take over when Jeanne and I left for vacation the following morning. I was taking clothes out of our walk-in closet and loading up my suitcase when the floor and walls were jolted. We had experienced a minor tremor in 2005, so I thought this was just another “little one.” I knew without a doubt it was an earthquake, but was unafraid as I thought it was over. I stepped into the closet doorway and saw Jeanne for just a second – for the last time on this earth. She was encompassed by a light I have never been able to describe. Then my whole world shifted violently and I was knocked unconscious.

Fellow missionary Russ Cole had been working on a vehicle in the basement garage when Sherrie, his wife, reminded him that they needed to go to the grocery store. They had made half the three-mile trip when the quake hit. Immediately they turned around and after two long hours finally made it back to the FOHO compound. Russ began looking for survivors. I heard his voice and yelled out to him. Some of the people did not want him to enter the wreckage but he asked them, “What would you want me to do if you were inside?” He prayed with Sherrie and some others, then crawled in. I heard him say, “I’m gonna get you out,” and I believed him. His only significant injury was a cut knee from razor wire during his crawl of approximately 70 feet over concrete, glass and rubble (although after two hours laboring in the rubble, he was described as a “dishrag” when he came out, because he was so exhausted and dirty).

Russ later told me that the “cave of life” around me was so narrow he had to crawl over me to get to my legs. During each of the many aftershocks, he would pause from moving rubble, cover me, and comfort me in my trauma. From my waist up I was free and able to watch my left wrist swelling. With my uninjured right hand, I wiped blood from a cut on my forehead. I could not believe the incredible feelings of desperation, of urgency in prayer, of being totally out of control and needing help as never before.



About two hours later, the Clear Blue Global Water Project team, which had been drilling a well near Haiti Providence University, made it back to the FOHO building. They had been our guests the night before. These people risked their lives as they took shifts in the continued attempt to free me. One man filled the cave with his prayers. There was no way it could have collapsed! Others prayed outside. At one point, my rescuers thought they might have to cut my leg off to free me. Finally, with both legs still

attached, I was given a “Haitian toboggan ride” on a mat – up, down, over and through the wreckage. Despite ardent searching to find Jeanne, Merle, Gene and Erlin, the rescuers’ attempts were unsuccessful and only Katie and I made it out of the FOHO building alive.

I was placed on the back of a flatbed truck and taken to the United Nations hospital where Katie was, having been extricated two hours earlier. Dr. Dan Snyder, a fellow Free Methodist missionary, had been able to get her into the UN hospital by physically carrying her up to the gate in his arms and pushing his way in. The hospital workers were expecting many soldiers to be brought in and would not permit my entrance. Dan was able to get the UN doctor to provide me with some saline and morphine, which he started administering in the parking lot. When I regained consciousness, I saw that a big Haitian who had been helping with the well drilling was my IV pole. An embassy doctor finally allowed us to come in and provided a table in the employee lunch room for my hospital bed.

Dan made the embassy an offer they could not refuse. He would work triage if they would get Katie and me out of the country for the lifesaving procedures we required. I awoke as I was being loaded onto a Coast Guard helicopter. A small hand reached out and I discovered Katie was lying beside me.

At Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba, we were rushed into the operating room and examined. Because of God's perfect timing, there happened to be an overlap of medical staff on duty. We were given fasciotomies – opening our legs by incision with the goal of relieving the swelling and protecting our kidneys from toxic substances that result from these types of injuries. I remember being colder than ever before, even in Indiana winters. The doctors gave me heated blankets. I also remember one doctor telling me, "Sir, we may need to take off your leg." I had no response as I again passed out.

I woke as I was being taken to an X-ray area in a trailer. Out again until a boat ride, then onto an aircraft for transport to Florida. The FMWM missionary evacuation insurance provided one entire aircraft dedicated to me and another dedicated to Katie, complete with attendants. The Naval doctors had told our home office staff in Indianapolis that they did not think either Katie or I would live through our flights to Fort Lauderdale.

After a bumpy arrival, then an ambulance ride to North Broward Medical Center, we were immediately taken to the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU). Due to the excellent care and many prayers we received, Katie and I both pulled through. In the long process of being treated, I was taken from the MICU to the third floor, to the fourth floor, back to the third floor, and back to the MICU before I was again taken to the fourth floor, where I settled for the remainder of my stay. During my time at the hospital, I had several visitors and was grateful for many acts of love and kindness from the medical staff, family and friends.

God provided compassionate nurses to soothe me when I became overwhelmed. One night, I began yelling "No!" to the whole situation – Jeanne's death, the pain, the destruction and the lack of sleep. Quickly my room filled with six nurses, all attempting to calm me at once. The supervising nurse asked the others to leave, then, once I was able to listen, related her own encounter with an earthquake in the Philippines. Sometimes, help means the most when it comes from someone who has experienced a similar situation.

Even what seemed like my less significant needs were met, but the kindness added up. One friend brought a technician from a local company to order glasses for me. At the time it didn't seem important, but take off your glasses and try to move through your day! On my first day of rehab, I had nothing but my underwear and a hospital gown. My therapist thoughtfully provided some sweat pants for my next session and then tennis shoes when I was able to begin walking.

Physical therapy and counseling eventually allowed me to make enough progress to continue my recovery in Waco, Texas, at the home of my brother and sister-in-law. I departed Florida on February 14th – my first Valentine’s Day without Jeanne. I made up my mind not to dread special occasions, but rather to celebrate them. So I bought candy for the attendant who traveled alongside me as thanks for the help and emotional support during my trip.

My early days in Waco were an emotional roller coaster. I learned that the bodies in the FOHO building had been recovered by the U.S. military on February 16. After over a month of not knowing, it was a relief to be told it was clear that Jeanne had died quickly. I experienced grief and many other emotions over my loss, the trauma, the provision of God allowing Katie and me to survive, the warmth of the family’s welcome, and the loneliness I was facing. The ups and downs came to a crisis point one night as I was in the process of brushing my teeth. I began yelling and crying, and threw my plastic toothbrush holder, which broke against the wall. My brother and sister-in-law came quickly and within a few minutes I had calmed, but I had scared both of them as they had not experienced this type of behavior from me before.

Despite the turmoil of the healing process, I enjoyed the simplicity of life in Waco: lying in the warm spring sun on the patio, gaining the mobility to take a shower without assistance, running errands, family time, limited workouts at the YMCA, and especially the hot tub after swimming.

By October I had made enough progress to travel to Indianapolis to meet with FMWM leaders, and then on to Pennsylvania and New York for interactions with friends and a few speaking engagements. I had never thought of myself as a public speaker and had preferred to hand that baton to Jeanne, who excelled in that area. But God helped me in my weakness and showed His strength. The responses of the congregations were supportive, loving and kind.

Thinking Back, Moving Forward

Jeanne’s favorite movie was *The Last Samurai*. This totally amazed me until I realized the theme that motivated her choice – being committed to the emperor (God, in our case) enough to willingly die for Him, and to show

this through actions, not just words. Jeanne hadn't just died in Haiti – she had come alive. I can only imagine her joy when she met Fanya, well and whole, at our Heavenly Father's gate.

Every writer wants a big ending to their story. This part of my journey is complete but the story is always moving forward. I have learned a great deal from my experiences:

- If we think we have control, we fool ourselves. Our perspectives of events, people and places are just that – our perspectives, which are not always accurate. We are not perfect or in control. But God knows and cares about us exactly where we are.
- Only someone who is desperate can pray a desperate prayer. But there can be a certain peace at the point of our death.
- There are still heroes in the world: men and women who will risk their lives to save yours.
- Anti-depressants, pain killers and sleeping pills are not “of the devil.”
- We all have earthquakes, tremors of 7.0 and more ... financial, relational, emotional and physical. But our God is sovereign and our God provides. If we let go of everything and everyone but hold on to Jesus, we will get through the earthquakes. Don't give up if you get trapped. Keep believing in our God!



Jack and Katie visit the graves of Jeanne, Erlin, Gene and Merle in Haiti