

**DAVID A. VARGAS' MESSAGE DELIVERED AT THE
INAUGURATION
OF THE CONASPEH BUILDING,
PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI
FEBRUARY 5, 2011**

It is an honor and a privilege to be in Haiti this day and to be part of this feast of inauguration, dedication and thanksgiving.

It is, indeed, a joy to be here and to be part of this significant celebration; but I also need to say that the reason for my presence and participation in this event this morning is not because I am representing Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, or because Global Ministries and our congregations have been providing much needed resources for the construction of this beautiful new home for CONASPEH, . . . but, on the contrary, I am here because for years we, Global Ministries – we Disciples and United Church of Christ – have been recipients and beneficiaries of the testimony and faith of each member church, each pastor, each lay leader that forms the National Spiritual Council of Churches of Haiti. That's why I am here.

Last April, just three months after the earthquake, the Rev. Glenn Stewart, Regional Minister of the Disciples of Christ in Tennessee and who was visiting Haiti with a group of church leaders the evening the earthquake destroyed this city, shared in a powerful sermon delivered at the General Board meeting of our church about his experience that evening of January 12, 2010. At the end of his sermon, Glenn made a reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan, but in a very different and unique way. He said:

“When the people hear the story of the Good Samaritan, they hear the twist at the end when the despised person cares for the beaten and robbed person. But, my question today is,” he said, “What would it be like if, as the Samaritan approached, the robbed man had pulled himself up to his knees to wash the feet of the Samaritan?”

In response to his own question, Rev. Stewart concluded his sermon saying:

“Friends, Haitians have given me much more than I have given them.”

That is why this morning Felix Ortiz and I are here; and I am sure that is also why other sisters and brothers from the United States

and from Puerto Rico are here today: because Haitians, and especially the churches (our Christian family) in Haiti, have given us much more than what we have ever given you.

The scripture reading for this time of reflection is in the book of Job. We all know that the book of Job is about the suffering, the challenges and the tests that a person of faith had to encounter throughout his life, and how those challenges gradually attempted to destroy that person's integrity. But we also know that the book of Job is about something else; . . . and that's why I want to invite everyone this day to listen carefully and attentively to two verses in chapter 14 of that book which, for me, contains (in a capsule) the essence of what God's redeeming, restoring and reconciling power really means.

This is what Job 14 verses 7-9 tells us this morning:

“At least there is hope for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a new plant.”

Many years ago, when Felix and María Ortiz were serving in Haiti as our companions in mission assigned to CONASPEH, I received a telephone call one evening from them because they wanted to share with me a beautiful and inspiring story that came out on the TV news in Port-Au-Prince that same day in the morning. At a time when this country was experiencing turmoil and the possibility of a significant political transition, Felix and María were surprised to hear the following story:

That morning, and apparently without any advance planning, poor children, youth, adults, and entire families were suddenly in the streets of this capital city, not for another political protest or to burn tires as a sign of discontent and anger, but this time to sweep and clean the streets, to wash the sidewalks and to perk up their neighborhoods.

When the media finally decided to visit one of the communities to find out what was happening – what the reason was for that unexpected activity?, Felix and María told me that the answer from one of the persons being interviewed was:

“We are poor,” a woman said, “but we want to make a contribution to the new day in our nation that we hope begins very soon. This is our contribution toward that date. This is our contribution.”

For Felix and María, and also for me, that was certainly good news to hear that day. In the poorest nation of this hemisphere – with a horrendous history of military dictatorships, violence, fraud – that morning, in the blink of an eye, there were signs of **HOPE** again; . . . Yes, **HOPE**. . . because **HOPE**, my dear brothers and sisters, is always the last to die.

HOPE is the last to die not only in yesterday’s and today’s Haiti, but throughout the entire creation of God. Among the poorest and most oppressed nations in our world, among the survivors of natural disasters, among those who suffer hunger, persecution, and injustice, . . . **HOPE** is certainly the last to die.

As we reflect this morning on those poetic verses that I read from the book of Job, and as members of the universal church of Jesus the Christ, it is not difficult for us to realize that God’s mission and our presence and witness in today’s world is still

something that occurs basically in the midst of trees that “have been cut down” (Job 14:7) in God’s creation; . . . in the midst of ...

- Nations where the wealth that God gave to be enjoyed by everyone, has been stolen by a few;
- In the midst of fear and danger;
- In the midst of exploitation and abuse;
- In the midst of wars, widows, orphans, displaced people, refugees, repression, . . . and death.

With the exception of perhaps two or three relatively peaceful stories, the reality is that God’s mission through Jesus’ church in the world is a mission that basically occurs among “trees that have been cut down”:

the tree of democracy,

the tree of equality,

the tree of health and education,

the tree of dignity,

the tree of justice,

the tree of peace,

the tree of love, ... and many other trees that have been cut down viciously in God's creation.

For the church of Jesus Christ to go into the great fields where these trees are being cut down every day, it is not with the purpose of becoming an ally of those who cut the trees, . . . but to water those roots that are growing old and those stumps that are dying in the ground, . . . with the faith and the assurance that, with some water from the liberating Gospel of our Lord and Savior, those fallen trees “can (certainly) come back to life and sprout . . . like young plants.”

To engage in ministry and mission in the midst of those fallen trees is not for the purpose of becoming another accomplice of the principalities of this earth and those who oppress and exploit the poor, . . . but rather to walk with and to help shape the dream

of those who, sooner or later, will one day sweep the streets and wash the sidewalks on the eve of a new day of peace with justice, . . . when the kingdom, the real kingdom of God, will become a more tangible reality.

For the church of Jesus Christ, that is the call to mission:

To pour God's precious water of justice and redemption all over God's people and creation at the point of deepest need. That is our call to mission.

That is why you and I are engaged in mission, . . . from Port-au-Prince and throughout Haiti *to the ends of the earth*. That is the only reason why we are engaged in mission;... simply because there are too many precious trees that have been viciously cut down in God's creation.

- Because those who have accumulated much wealth want even more;
- Because racism and apartheid are still a reality in 2011;
- Because people are being massacred everywhere as a result of ideological and political differences;

- Because God's children still live in subhuman conditions and are treated like garbage;
- Because in the poorest nations of this planet people are still dying every day of hepatitis, tuberculosis and other diseases which, in rich countries, are treated and cured almost like a common cold;
- Because in many areas of this world, real democracy is just a fallacy;
- Because in 2011, war continues to be the savage solution to the problems of our so-called civilized nations; and especially ...
- Because there is hunger for pastoral care, for a helping hand, . . . for someone capable of announcing "that the time has come when the Lord will save God's people."
(Luke 4:19)

This morning, as we dedicate this building after having experienced the physical devastation and the human tragedy caused by an earthquake just one year ago, it is my hope that we

don't use this occasion just to celebrate the construction of this physical facility, or just to express gratitude for those whose financial (material) contributions made this dream a reality. Rather, I hope that we use this opportunity to celebrate, once again, -- with sounding trumpets, with tambourine and dancing and the clash of cymbals (Psalm 150) – that God's mission through Jesus' church did not collapse on January 12, 2010, but that it is alive in Haiti.

I hope that we use this opportunity to celebrate with deep gratitude to God that, in the midst of those "trees" that have been cut down so frequently throughout the history and the existence of this country, there is still hope that those "trees" will sprout again because the church of Jesus Christ, expressed in the ministry of CONASPEH, still believes in and is equipped with the kind of water that is capable of resurrecting those stumps which are dying in the soil.

I certainly believe deep in my heart that that should be our only motive of celebration this morning.

This new house for CONASPEH's ministries is certainly a solid and beautiful structure, ... but we all know that could also collapse

tomorrow. Therefore, it is also my hope that, as we consecrate today this building, we also (and more importantly) use this opportunity to recommit ourselves to spread that “resurrecting” water from the doorsteps of this building, as well as from the doorsteps of our houses of worship in North America and in Puerto Rico, . . . *to the ends of the earth*. And, if this morning we discover that our reservoir of that precious water is low, . . . let us not panic. Instead, let us use this opportunity to refill it, . . . so that we may be able to go back into the streets of this world to clean the roads, to wash the sidewalks, and to perk up our lives on the eve of a new day of peace, justice and love for all.

Yes!, let us refill our reservoir, so that we may go back to the streets of this world to announce Jesus’ good news to the poor, Jesus’ good news and freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, . . . and to announce the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18)

May the source of that precious water be with you this day and forever. Amen