

Grace in Haiti

A New School is Dedicated in Haiti

The new classroom building for St. Matthew's School, built with donations from many Grace parishioners and other friends, was dedicated in Bayonnais on September 25. Father Joseph Tancred Diegue, the priest in charge of St. Matthieu, presided over a religious ceremony in which he was joined by a half-dozen Haitian clerics. Several choirs, among them a large one from the nearby city of Gonaives, and a brass band took part. All the students of St. Matthieu were there in uniform, alongside dozens of students from La Redemption, the K-12 school in Gonaives that is also under Father Diegue's leadership. Most of the village seems also to have been on hand for the celebration, this being the most significant building to have been erected in Bayonnais in many years.

Three members of Grace Church went from Amherst: Mary Hocken, Meg Holladay, and Sandy Muspratt. They were joined in Port-au-Prince by Tahina Vatel, who, with Meg, co-directed Grace's first summer camp in Bayonnais in 2011. At the time, Tahina was an Amherst College student. She is working in Haiti this year on a fellowship from the U.S. State Department, and she was excited to join the party.

The school had been decorated with red rosettes and festoons. Sandy Muspratt cut the ribbon to open the building officially. Father Diegue then individually blessed each of the classrooms with holy water, as well as a wooden plaque that Mark Peterman had carved to decorate the school. It features an image of Grace Church and the words "Grace in Haiti, 2008- ."

There followed a procession to the nearby church of St. Matthieu. The band and choirs accompanied the procession, and the large card containing good wishes from members of the Grace community was carried high. Pere Diegue then officiated at a service and Eucharist commemorating the feast day of St. Matthew, which falls on September 21. It included a dance by young girls from the school, garbed in red and carrying large baskets of fruit and vegetables on their heads. One of the St. Matthieu students read an effusive and touching message of thanks that she had composed, in fluent French. Finally, everyone adjourned for a festive lunch in one of the new classrooms.

A marble plaque, bearing an inscription composed by Rev. Tom Synan, is still being made and will be installed later this fall. It will read as follows, in both kreyol and English:

By the grace of God,
the parishioners of St. Matthieu, Bayonnais and Grace Church, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA
dedicate this building to the education of God's Children,
in the Year of Our Lord 2016.

"All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children."
Isaiah 54:13

Our visitors pronounced the school very lovely, light and airy, with latticed windows and painted walls. The four large classrooms are arranged in a row. An arcaded "cloister" runs along the full length of the building, providing covered circulation for moving from room to room and casting welcome shade to protect the classrooms from the full force of the Haitian sun. The building is painted in soft turquoise and cream. Classroom furniture—tables, chairs, and teachers' desks—has been provided by the charity Food for the Poor.

Planning ahead, Father Diegue decided to replace the metal roof that had originally been in the design with a concrete roof. This allows a second story to be added at some future time. Ideally, two more new classrooms will be constructed soon, so that grades 1-6 will each have a room of their own. For now, two of these grades remain in their old spaces. As planned, the kindergartners, the most populous class, have taken over the entire church sanctuary, giving them at last lots of space to move about. Although the town of Bayonnais as yet has no electrical service, thanks to Father Diegue's foresight the new building has been wired, in anticipation of the future addition of solar panels.

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Already the new building is attracting more pupils. Enrollment this fall stands at 164 children, up significantly from 132 last year. Having this new building, the school telegraphs the clear message that it is a going concern. This seems, in turn, to be drawing new partners. One group is in discussions with Father Diegue about building the additional classrooms. A relatively new organization that trains Haitian teachers has placed two of its most stellar graduates at the school this year, where they are teaching the fifth and sixth grades. Look for more details about them in a future issue of *Grace Notes*. And a group from St. James Church in Indian Head, Maryland, will be visiting Grace on October 16, to talk about partnering with our Haiti Ministry in support of the school.

Thanks to you, generous donors from Grace, St. Matthew's School is entering a new, exciting chapter in its history, and even more children are having a chance at an education who otherwise would not be able to go to school at all. Come hear about the building and see videos of the dedication at a coffee hour sponsored by the Haiti Ministry after the 10:30 service on October 23, in the Parish Hall. And remember that, although the one-time campaign for building is over, the expenses of operating the school are ongoing. We hope you will continue to support teachers' salaries, uniforms, textbooks and school supplies through the October Fourth Sunday open plate contribution and/or by sending a check at any time, made out to Grace Church with "Haiti School" on the memo line. Donations are tax deductible within legal limits.

