

Press Conference January 18, 2010

Good morning. I am Chuck Dietsch and I am a Permanent Deacon in the Archdiocese of Hartford. For 14 years, now, I have had the privilege of serving here in Sacred Heart parish. And for the past couple of years I have also been working with Haitian Ministries for the Diocese of Norwich, CT.

For 25 years, Haitian Ministries has been working with and for the people of Haiti to improve their lives and empower them. Haitian Ministries has maintained a permanent presence in Haiti for 23 of those years with our Norwich Mission House in a suburb of Port-au-Prince. We provide food, shelter and education through our support for several orphanages and for individual parish communities throughout the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince. We provide support for Haitian artisans, allowing them to earn a decent living and provide for their families. We also provide medical care through the medical missions which use the mission house as a base of operations. Besides this, we support education through our scholarship program, which actually provides schooling, text books, meals and medical care for approximately 150 students. And we have responded with emergency relief in the areas we serve whenever there has been a catastrophic event, such as the three hurricanes which struck Haiti less than 2 years ago. This is work that has been making a difference in the lives of Haitian people for a quarter century.

My wife, Dorne, and I have been involved with Haitian Ministries since 2007, when we first went to Haiti on a cultural immersion trip with a group from Sacred Heart. We were touched by the people and their obvious needs, and by the work being done through Haitian Ministries. Since then, I have served as a group and spiritual leader for Americans traveling to Haiti for the first time and, most recently, as a consultant and advisor to the Board of Directors.

I last traveled to Haiti on January 6th and was in our mission house, working with Jillian Thorp, the acting Director, when the earthquake struck. When the ground began to move, she did not recognize what was happening but, because I lived for several years in California, I knew exactly what it was. I pulled her into a doorway, as I had learned, but I never expected an earthquake of that magnitude in Haiti. The second floor of the mission house and the concrete roof collapsed onto us. We were protected, through the grace of God, by the way in which the debris fell. We found ourselves in a small air-pocket. I was pinned on my back and unable to move. Jillian was lying partially across my body, but she could not move herself off me because the roof of our air-pocket was practically on top of us and one of her feet was caught in rubble. We spent 10 long, frightening hours in that small space. We owe our lives to the Assistant Director of the mission house, a young Haitian man, and two other employees, who found us two hours after the quake struck and worked through the night to dig us out, literally with their hands. We were finally freed at 3:00am on Wednesday, and at 9:00 we were taken to the American Embassy, from which we were medevac'd to the Dominican Republic. We were hospitalized there over night. At 12:30am on Thursday, I was finally able to call my wife and assure her that I was safe. Dorne and I had not spoken since about 4:45pm on Tuesday...just minutes before the earthquake struck. From there Jillian and I flew home; I arrived in Hartford at about 9:00pm on Thursday. Since then, much of my time has been spent at Danbury Hospital's emergency department and various doctors' offices, where my injuries have been thoroughly evaluated and treated.

I spent much time in prayer during the 10 hours Jill and I were buried in the rubble of the house. Because I survived, I know that God has further plans for me. I will need some time to discern what those plans might be. Haiti has once again been thrust onto the world stage as the result of unimaginable tragedy and horror. I pray that, this time, the world will take action – yes, to bind up the wounds that are now so raw and bleeding – but also to work together to solve the problems that plague Haiti and her people. My prayer is for Haiti to be supported now with much needed emergency aid, and in the future with equally important economic, educational and social rebuilding which will provide a future of hope and dignity for her people. I will continue to work with Haitian Ministries to be present to the people of Haiti and to support their efforts to build just such a future for themselves and their children.

My family and I will be eternally grateful to Dom, Ti-ton and Milot, the three Haitian men who worked to free Jillian and me. They are our heroes. We are also grateful for the love and support shown to us by friends all around the country and especially by the overwhelming care and concern demonstrated by our parish family here at Sacred Heart.

Thank you.