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Haiti missionaries ask: 'Why (not) me?'

G. Jeffrey MacDonald Religion News Service | Jan. 28, 2010

A child and a dog walk past a mural depicting a saint on an earthquake-damaged building in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 24. (CNS photo/Shannon Stapleton, Reuters)

Having survived a devastating earthquake during a 10-day mission trip to Haiti, Freedom Gassoway now savors every minute she spends at home with her family in Beaverton, Ore.

But for this 33-year-old mother of two, some of life has also lost its sweetness.

Meals no longer taste good, she said, since she's always thinking about the thousands of homeless and hungry people in Haiti. Her closet seems to have "too many clothes," she said, and she feels a duty -- by virtue of her survival -- to share Haiti's suffering with other Americans.

"I didn't even know where Haiti was before this trip," Gassoway said. "But now I feel like I have a responsibility for Haiti and helping people be aware of how they can be involved."

As the dust settles from Haiti's devastating quake, mission workers of all types are pondering the deeper meanings of their survival. They're wondering why they survived, why others didn't and what they're supposed to do with their new leases on life.

"As long as you've got something to occupy your mind, you can keep it off the horror of what's just happened" in the field, said Randy Strash, strategy director for emergency response at World Vision, a massive Christian relief agency with almost 800 aid workers in Haiti.

"But once that [urgency recedes], I think you'll find that many of them are really struggling -- in their families, in their personal lives, in their health and in their theology."

While theological interpretations vary, missionaries who survived the quake are consistently professing a heightened sense of calling. They speak of feeling new "responsibility," both to God and to the Haitian people, because they've been blessed to live another day.

As one of the world's poorest nations, Haiti is a magnet for Christian ministries. An estimated 1,700 career

missionaries serve in Haiti, according to Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of World Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Hundreds more travel to Haiti each year for short-term trips of a week or two at a time.

For many of Haiti's surviving missionaries, the distance between life and death was only a few feet when the Jan. 12 quake struck. Tragic episodes left missionaries wondering "why?" and believing that God must have a plan in mind.

"I know that God has our family here for a reason and he kept us alive for a reason," wrote Leslie Rolling, administrator of the Christian aid organization Clean Water for Haiti, in an e-mail from Haiti. "We now have an even greater responsibility to carry out the work we're doing."

On the night of the quake, Leslie's husband tried to save a young girl named Jacqueline, buried in the rubble of a collapsed school. Unable to reach her, he eventually left the scene late at night to prepare for a work crew's arrival. He later confessed on his blog.

"How could I leave someone who was dying, trapped in a building! That's so wrong!" Chris Rolling wrote. "Leaving her was one of the hardest things I've ever done ... I think this is going to trouble me for a long time."

(Jacqueline later died. She had suffered such extensive injuries, Leslie said, she likely wouldn't have survived even if she'd been pulled out alive).

Kay and Gary Walla of Indianapolis felt similarly helpless after the quake rocked the mountain community where their United Methodist church group was helping repair a school and orphanage. The Wallas, both in their 70s, were in "survival mode" -- foraging for wild coconuts and grapefruit by day, huddling close to other missionaries for warmth by night -- when they heard scratching beneath a pile of rubble.

Buried alive were a 21-year-old woman who had been training for a religious order and the 18-month-old boy whom she had recently adopted. Unable to save them, the Wallas instead held a memorial service for them two days later.

"My husband and I said, `Why did we survive and all of these Haitians have not?'" Kay Walla asked. "We know there's more work for us to do ... God just spared us to help the Haitians."

World Vision has dispatched a critical incident response team to Haiti to help its aid workers cope with emerging personal challenges. Some may fall victim to survivor's guilt if they lost colleagues, World Vision's Strash said. Others may grapple with the raw, unnerving fact that God doesn't always protect his servants.

And then there's the challenge of suddenly being seen as God's ambassadors on a desolate landscape.

Aid workers "are wrestling with [God's allowance of disaster], but they don't want to say it out loud," Strash said. Local "people are relying on the word that (workers) have been passing on to them about God's care and provision. They search for a way to explain disaster that is consistent with how they've been teaching and living up to this point. And it's a struggle."

As missionaries try to make sense of their survival, they're considering anew why disasters happen in God's world. In Kay Walla's view, God has nothing to do with deaths from natural disasters, but God does actively spare the ones who survive. Why God spares some and not others is unknown, she said, but survivors surely inherit special responsibilities.

Others echoed a similar sense of duty.

"We do owe it to those who lost their lives," World Vision spokeswoman Maggie Boyer e-mailed from Port-au-Prince, "to commit to building a Haiti that they would be proud of."

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