

Why our congregation gives directly to a church school in Haiti

As Père Diegue surveyed the unfinished classroom, he remarked: “I’m beginning to understand why I am here.”

by [John Stifler](#) in the [January 2, 2019](#) issue



Father Joseph Tancrel Diegue with children at St. Matthieu's school in Bayonnais, Haiti. (Photo by John Stifler)

In August 2015 I stood outside l'Eglise St. Matthieu, a small church in northern Haiti, looking at a low rectangular arrangement of stones, concrete, and rebar that was

supposed to be the foundation of a new school building. Beside me were a fellow member of Grace Episcopal Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Père Joseph Tancrèl Diegue, a 61-year-old Haitian priest. We were all frowning.

Three years earlier, Grace Church had raised money to pay for the construction of classrooms for St. Matthieu's School. With a new classroom building, the school's five teachers would no longer have to try to teach five different grades simultaneously in the church's sanctuary, a room smaller than a basketball court. Children at the school had carried stones for the construction. Workers had dug trenches for the foundation, poured the concrete, and set the stones and rebar. Now the foundation was covered with weeds, and the rebar was starting to oxidize. There were no walls and no rafters. No more money, either; it had all been spent, somewhere.

Père Diegue walked to his car and came back with a tape measure. Under the baking August sun he measured the foundation and did some math. "These dimensions are not right," he said. "The classrooms need to be larger."

Diegue had been called to serve l'Eglise Episcopale Saint Basile in the city of Gonaïves, and along with overseeing a high school and a health clinic, his duties were to include tending to St. Matthieu and its school in Bayonnais, a farming community 10 kilometers outside the city.

Grace Church had first gotten involved with St. Matthieu's out of a desire to work on one of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Amherst being a college town, we decided that education was the development goal on which we would focus. We also decided that, rather than send money to a large development organization, we wanted to be directly involved in the mission.

In 2008, Grace parishioner Sandy Muspratt, a retired doctor with volunteer experience in developing nations, contacted the Episcopal Church's diocesan office in Port-au-Prince to inquire about what might be achieved if our church contributed \$3,500 per year. The response came back almost as an imperative: "You are assigned St. Matthieu's School in Bayonnais. The teachers have not been paid for six months, and the school is about to have to close. Your contribution will fund the teachers' salaries and allow the school to continue. Please send the money right away."

We sent it, and so began our partnership. Beyond providing funds for teacher salaries, we have contributed money for books and classroom materials, children's lunches, and school uniforms. Every other summer, we have funded a two-week camp focused on arts and reading.

The classroom building was a separate fundraising effort. In 2012 the Grace Church committee raised \$15,000, to which a New York parish added \$7,500. We hoped that \$22,500 would be enough to pay for four new classrooms. Now, three years later, there was nothing to show for this money but a weathered foundation. Standing at the site, we wondered what we were going to say to people back in Amherst who thought they had already paid to cover the whole cost of the building.

In Haiti, work estimates can be haphazard, and the concept of accounting is often rudimentary. As far as we could surmise, what seemed to have happened to the money was this: the pastors who had served before Père Diegue had found that the financial demands of running a large church, a couple of smaller ones, a clinic, and three schools exceeded their resources. Whenever a crisis arose—a broken-down truck, a medical emergency, a food shortage—the person in charge had to find the money somewhere. The fact that there also had been a series of priests at Gonaives meant there was no continuity in leadership.

There was good news, however. Along with his ecclesiastical training and pastoral experience, Père Diegue has a background in construction. As he surveyed the uncertain foundation, the bent rebar, and the weeds, he remarked, "I'm beginning to understand why I am here."

Père Diegue outlined in detail what it would cost to complete the work, and the precision of his explanation was impressive. We went back to the congregation at Grace Church. With the vestry's blessing, the Haiti committee embarked on a short, intense capital campaign. In three months we raised more than \$40,000—enough to build four new classrooms and to renovate a shed that was being used for two additional classrooms.

"With Père Diegue in charge, we knew this was our chance," said Mary Hocken, cochair of the Haiti committee. "We were very open about it. And we had no problem raising the money." In September 2016, the new building was completed in time for the beginning of the school year.

Haiti is sometimes wryly known as the Republic of NGOs. Many of these organizations are doing profoundly important work. The Episcopal Relief and Development agency, for example, has provided emergency relief following the 2010 earthquake, advanced health care, created microcredit programs, and promoted education. But we believe our own work at St. Matthieu's, on a much smaller scale, has been particularly efficient. Our committee has no paid employees, we don't rent an office or house in Haiti, we don't keep cars there, and we buy our own plane tickets. Officially, the funds we raise for Haiti are supposed to go to the partnership office in Port-au-Prince, then be disbursed, minus 10 percent for administrative expenses. But with some determined diplomacy we reached an arrangement whereby we send money instead to a bank account in Gonaives controlled by Père Diegue so that all of it goes directly to St. Matthieu.

"I believe we are way more efficient and effective than many more ambitious projects," Muspratt observed. "All but a tiny fraction of funds we raise actually go to—and are spent in—Haiti. We have never failed in our basic promise to pay teachers, nor have we failed in amount or timing in delivery of funds under supplementary promises. I stress our policy of defined promises completed because I am appalled at the frequency of promises broken in the field of international aid."

Recognizing the ongoing challenge of verifying that funds are spent for their intended purposes, we regularly remind our Haitian partners of the need to provide signed receipts. This concern is sometimes hard to translate. When we first asked to see evidence that the teachers had received their monthly pay, what we got were photos of each teacher holding a pen, not of the actual signatures on the receipt. Communication via email is effective only when there's enough electricity to operate a computer or recharge its battery. In Gonaives, power outages are common.

We try to make the most of our personal contacts. At least two or three members of our committee visit Bayonnais every year to meet with Père Diegue and the principal and teachers at the school. The teachers are getting paid on what seems to be an increasingly reliable schedule, and nearly every child has a uniform. We get reports on the children's progress and data that help us understand how the school measures up.

Some 85 percent of the pupils at St. Matthieu would not be in school at all if Grace Church and a partner congregation, St. James Episcopal Church in Indian Head, Maryland, had not made the schooling essentially free. Eighty percent of the schools

in Haiti are private, and almost all charge tuition, and on top of that most students need to buy their own uniforms, textbooks, and *souliers noirs*, or sturdy black shoes. National (state) schools do not charge tuition, at least not formally, but they are not cost-free, as students' families must buy class materials and uniforms. Wayward payment of salaries undermines teacher attendance. Pupils must pay a fee before they can take the exams to proceed to the next grade. We've heard many stories of children who could not continue with schooling because their families weren't able to pay the fees. We are making a difference.

One of our next projects is to provide scholarships enabling children to study past sixth grade. Another is to ensure that children who need eyeglasses get them. Another is to help the school create a *jardin ecolier*, a garden where pupils can raise vegetables to sell in the local market as a way for the school to generate some funds to support itself. Through all such work, we keep reminding ourselves of the importance of not fostering dependency, but of helping enable people in Bayonnais to direct their own future. The children we visit in Bayonnais repeatedly talk about how they want to continue their education.

Will our efforts contribute to real long-term change? We think so. We are encouraged by these words of James Boyce, a development economist at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst: "When you saturate a project like this with care and attention, when you establish a real personal relationship, intangibles are a large part of what you provide—and those count for a lot. When there's a high ratio of love to dollars, the payoff per dollar is higher."

Many children growing up in Haiti are still likely to be deprived of an education. By current estimates, 30 percent of them will be illiterate as adults. But not the children at St. Matthieu's. They will contribute to the country's development. In all this work, we remind ourselves that we are partners. The teachers in Bayonnais are our friends and fellow Christians. L'Ecole St. Matthieu lifts us all.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A partnership in Haiti."