

Haiti

March 6 – 12, 2016



Introduction

I had heard about Compassion International many years ago at a retreat. The program supports children all around the world through sponsorships. I have been sponsoring children through Compassion International for many years, starting with a child in Tanzania, and later another child in Haiti. Compassion believes in finding the most needy children from around the world and providing for their basic needs.

After a wonderful experience visiting a child in Tanzania back in 2010, I had planned another trip in March of 2013 to visit my other child in Haiti. God had other plans for 2013, however. Although I had already put a deposit on my trip, I found out that my child had unexpectedly left the Compassion program shortly afterward. I had also sponsored another child in Haiti but for only a very short time - the country seemed quite volatile. I had the option to start sponsoring a new child, or reschedule the trip and get the deposit back. God must have had a keen sense of humor, since I got married with my wonderful wife Nisha in February of 2013, and the Haiti trip would have been at the same time as our honeymoon in Kauai!

Haiti would probably be the poorest country I had ever been to, not only in a material sense, but also spiritually and politically. Haiti is near the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International (scoring just 17 / 100). Corruption and poverty often go hand in hand, and most of the country lives on barely a dollar a day. My \$38 / month contribution through Compassion would go a long way. The devastating earthquake in January 2010 and ensuing cholera outbreak only exacerbated the poverty.

Postponing the trip by 3 years would give the country a little more time to rebuild, as well as for time for Nisha and I to get to know our new sponsored child Jean Bedson. We had been blessed through the consistent letters we have received through the years and the

knowledge of how he has grown up. Since we don't have our own kids, sponsoring children through Compassion has been a wonderful outlet for our nurturing instinct.

I was happy to be able to meet everyone virtually through Facebook shortly before our trip. As is often the case with trips where I am taken far from my day-to-day world, I would feel a sense of anxiety and disconnectedness from my surroundings. Connecting with the other sponsors gave me a reassurance that I was in God's will, and that He was in control.

March 6-7

I couldn't believe the trip was already happening! It was bittersweet knowing that Nisha wouldn't be able to join me for the next week, though I felt confident we should be able to stay in touch somewhat in our increasingly connected world. I was glad to be able to think of Jean Bedson as *our* child now, not just *my* child. During the days before the trip, Nisha has helped in so many ways! Her mom had just arrived from India the previous day, and both she and her mom helped me gather gifts and supplies to donate. Nisha and her mom had been wanting to go through some boxes in the house for a couple years to go through some old mementos, and we came across a box of teddy bears, still in almost-new condition, school supplies, and some kids' toys. They had been forgotten over many years, but they turned up just in time to find a new home. We took a stroll through our local Target store, looking for baby clothes, blankets, and school supplies, knowing that even the "bargain" items would be like gold to children in Haiti. Nisha's mom had also brought back an old suitcase from India intending it to be on a 1-way trip, but with a little extra duct tape, we managed to secure it enough to use it one more time, for a 1-way trip to Haiti! I expected checking luggage to be expensive, but I didn't plan on taking much back. I would be reminded of this shopping trip for many weeks afterward when I went back to Target, and a lingering regret remained that I could have brought more supplies to the needy children.

It was a late-evening flight to Haiti, connecting first through Miami. Nisha and her mom took me to the SFO airport - our second trip there in 2 days since we picked up her mom the previous morning. I would have about a 5-hour layover in the early morning in Miami before catching an 11:00 American Airlines flight to Cap-Haitien. If I was ambitious enough, maybe I could catch a cab to the beach and bum around and have a nice breakfast or something. But then again a 7:00 breakfast would feel like 4:00 for me, so maybe not...

Almost all the flights were listed on time - just a few delays on some west coast flights to LA and San Diego. It had been mostly a wash-out weekend in the Bay Area - the predicted El Niño was in force and I was glad to have the rain. The forecast for Haiti was rain in the beginning but clearing throughout the week, so I was eager to enjoy some sun. I was watching the raindrops around the lights outside our gate, waiting for our plane to pull in so we could start boarding. But when I looked at the screen, instead of 9:30, it showed 10:00 - shoot, a 30-minute delay. Not too bad - I had hours to kill in Miami anyway. I was FaceTiming with Nisha for a bit, walking around the terminal. She remembered some of the same sights from the previous day picking up her mom! I

walked into a SF souvenir shop and came across a cable car replica with “San Francisco” on it - it was cheesy and probably made in China. I showed it to Nisha through my phone, and for \$5, we both thought even though it was cheap, it would make a memorable gift for Jean Bedson. I picked it up.

I was starting to doze when my phone buzzed and it was AA saying my flight was now 11:00 - hmmm, really? The screen still said 10:00. I asked at the counter and they said there were some FAA delays - our plane was indeed coming from LAX, and the rain on the west coast was having a ripple-effect causing many delays. 11:00 came and went, and I decided to check FlightAware on my phone - it said our flight was delayed, so I clicked the “Incoming flight” link. I thought the website wasn’t reloading properly - it didn’t even give a status of the incoming flight - it showed it was still parked at the gate in LAX. Hmmm - something wasn’t right. I asked at the counter and they confirmed my worry - the flight was grounded due to FAA delays, but he said they expected to push back any minute. I was starting to worry about them canceling the flight altogether.

My phone buzzed again, now saying it was 12:55. I said a quiet prayer that I would be able to make it down safely and be able to glorify God through my visit and not stress too much about it. A wave of calm came over me and I felt my hands warming back up - the anxiety had caused my fingers to lose some circulation. I checked my phone again, and the FlightAware site said the flight was 7 minutes into its 1 hr journey, arriving at 12:25, so 12:55 was realistic after all. Even though we were delayed 3.5 hrs, I would still have enough time to meet the team and get caught up in Miami after all - just instead of relaxing and strolling the beach in Florida for a couple hours, I spent the hours biting my nails at the gate in SFO instead - oh well.

The plane arrived and AA managed to turn it around efficiently. The flight was over-full, as usual, and the luggage bins were even more full with people trying to carry on bigger bags to avoid the increasing baggage fees. I was in the last boarding group - somewhere between zone D and F but I didn’t care - I just wanted to get on. But the lady at the gate didn’t let the last few people carry their bags on board - I had to check mine. It would come out (with a small miracle) on the other end at baggage claim at our final destination. I’m sure I was mis-pronouncing “Cap-Haitien” since they didn’t know how to print a tag for my bag, but after showing my other boarding pass, they seemed to understand - I kept my fingers crossed. The lady in front of me was a bit less fortunate - apparently her suitcase had some important items she couldn’t fly without and she didn’t have enough time to go through it next to the door of the aircraft, and after a bit of ruckus she was told she could take the next flight the next morning - bummer.

The lights were turned off - people wanted to be able to sleep. The rain had stopped by now, making for a smooth take-off. The seat next to me was one of the only empty seats - perhaps from the lady that was denied boarding right at the gate. Other than a few jolts of turbulence from winds over the Sierra crest and parts of the deserts in NV, the red-eye flight was uneventful. A blazing sunrise greeted the day somewhere over TX, and we were soon in Miami. I hardly slept a wink during the flight (I can never sleep on flights) but my energy was rejuvenated with the light outside and the reassurance I would soon be

with the team.

Walking over to our connecting gate, I almost immediately came across a familiar brown Compassion nametag. It was Carolina - I had remembered the name from our list we were given earlier. Carolina was from South Carolina - easy to remember, and her relaxed southern accent welcomed me. Her sister Mary Susan was in line for an Einstein Bros bagel and I joined her to grab a NY style smoked-salmon bagel and coffee. The rest of our team trickled in one by one and I felt the camaraderie building already. Kim showed up shortly afterward - she was one of our leaders. Marc was also working with Compassion in Colorado Springs - he was doing IT work. I would love to be able to use my skills for non-profit work like Compassion like he was, and it was encouraging to see others in the field.

Our group was all together - we had 18 people:

- Kim and Marc our leaders
- Toni and Michael Kleine from Indiana
- Kevin & Marietta McCarthy from Wisconsin
- Katie McCarthy from Texas
- Jim & Rita Schunk from Wisconsin
- Tim & Caroline Frye from Colorado
- Kelly Gusset from Texas
- Shan from Japan (though originally from the US)
- Mary Susan & sister Carolina Hughes from South Carolina
- Nikki Permenter from North Carolina
- Wendy Bettar and me from California

I hadn't bothered with malaria medication or any other shots - my immunizations from India and other trips from 2014 were still good. A couple people soaked their clothes in permethrin to protect from mosquitoes - although the Zika outbreak supposedly hadn't gotten to Haiti yet, some people were quite worried. We were going to one of the poorest countries in the world, even if for just a week. One of the guys in our group was telling us about the story of Dan Woolley who had visited Haiti back in 2010 and had unfortunately gotten caught in the devastating earthquake in Port-au-Prince. He had written a book "Unshaken" about his harrowing 65-hour ordeal buried underneath the rubble of his hotel in the city before rescuers miraculously found him and got him out. It would go on my reading list. I said a prayer for our safety during the next week. I knew the week wouldn't pass without its surprises, but I knew God would be in control.

The plane pushed back with an on-time departure and we soon hit the skies, climbing out of Miami past the half-dozen cruise ships lined up in port and the hotel-lined beaches to the blue ocean. The crystalline blue waters around the Bahama Islands reminded me of my scuba diving days years ago in the Caribbean - I longed to go back. Numerous cenotes were visible - deep blue pits of underwater sinkholes and cave systems that had formed during the last ice age when sea levels were lower. I dozed for a bit - my lack of sleep would catch up with me, and I awoke when my ears popped as we started to

descend. Clouds had filled most of the sky as we approached Haiti. The land was quite green and rural as we passed low over many acres of farms and fields on our way to the Cap-Haitien airport.

The rain had stopped just before we de-planed, which was nice since we disembarked down a ladder directly on the tarmac. A small Creole band greeted us with drums and guitars as we entered the single-room terminal of the international airport. A crisp \$10 bill was a necessary rite of passage in immigration - luckily our guides had all the logistics figured out and we shuttled through pretty quickly. Our luggage soon showed up on the single-belt baggage claim - the "belt" was actually just a bunch of metal rollers. One by one our bags showed up with the recognizable blue Compassion tags.

I thought we were all about to head out and get on our bus when Wendy said her bag still hadn't showed up yet. With the chaos of the baggage shuffling and seemingly random bureaucracy, I wondered what the chances were. And amidst the commotion, one person had stepped outside, thinking we were all following and getting on the bus, and wasn't allowed back inside with the rest of us. However, we were still inside tending to Wendy's lost bag. In the meantime I met a couple ladies from Rotary who were doing some work to provide clean water around Cap-Haitien. I was impressed seeing such a variety of humanitarian work going on. After at least 30-40 minutes of explaining and re-explaining through multiple translators, we eventually were allowed out with the bags we had, and we got on our bus. A couple local staff members joined as well - Junior and Wawas (pronounced wah-wah) would be with us the rest of the trip.



Marc, Tim & Caroline, Mike, Jim & Rita, Kevin & Marietta, Nikki, Kelly, Shan, Mary Sue & Carolina, me, Katie, Wendy, Toni and Kim

The drive to the Villa Cana hotel was only a few kilometers, but as expected, took nearly a half hour to traverse the crowded streets, dodging pedestrians, motorcycles, bicycles, multi-colored taxis, trucks full of people riding in the bed and even with people clinging to the roof, goats grazing by the roadside, and the occasional wheelbarrow with a whole roast pig inside. The "Home Depot" store was a bunch of boards leaning up on a fence

and a guy making cinder blocks from a mold. Just outside the chaos of the street, however, the countryside was beautiful - lush green hills soaking in the moisture of the rain, palm trees and the ocean.

The hotel felt like a palace and we were treated as royalty. A secure gate and high wall topped with barbed wire protected us from the outside world. Haiti is one of the most corrupt nations on earth, and for the next week, we weren't supposed to venture out on our own for our own safety. Of course most nights we were so worn out that venturing out and exploring were far down the list anyway. The hotel was grand - a beautiful pool and bar lined with lounge chairs made it feel like a tropical vacation spot. A second pool was under construction along with an outdoor gym. During the week we were there, they had nearly completed work - the workers were efficient. At first I was a little sad to be disconnected from the local people - it was as if we were on the Elysium space station far above the crapsack world below us. But I knew each day was probably going to be exhausting and we would need a safe place to rest and recover for the next day.

The rooms were decent - comparable to a Best Western Plus in the US, with queen size beds, two refrigerators, A/C and a lush tiled shower. I could watch the construction workers from my balcony. I ended up having my own room - although I didn't pay the single supplement, since there were no other male participants who didn't mind sharing a room, I got a single room anyway. The same thing happened in Belize and Nepal and India in 2014. I was thrilled to find we had decent wi-fi in the hotel, and I looked forward to having a refuge at night in my room to catch up with Nisha each night.

Dinner the first night was pretty simple - staple foods of rice, beans, well cooked chicken, conch (lambi), goat (cabrit), soup and salad. This was in fact what many of the locals ate. I was happy to not be totally disconnected from the local culture living in a "first-class" environment the whole time. I believed in incarnational ministry, and sharing the food helped to bridge the gap. We declined the salad, however - the washed lettuce and tomato were not necessarily processed with treated water. We would miss our salads throughout the trip, but having GI issues wouldn't be particularly fun. The meat seemed to almost always be overcooked as well, but better to make sure the food was extra safe. I had actually developed a bit of runny nose on the airplane and couldn't taste most of the food - I hoped it was just allergies and not a more serious cold or flu - that would be a bummer of a way to start the trip with. I prayed for good health as well as the health of the rest of our team.

After dinner, we got to meet several people from the Leadership Development program - they were former sponsored children who had graduated from the program and were now giving back to the program. It was great to hear their stories, how they were raising their own kids, working as teachers and electricians, selling their own crafts, and volunteering their time with Compassion. They all remembered their sponsors well. I know our former child in Tanzania Samweli Ulimboka was working as a taxi driver after he graduated, and I wonder how Jean Bedson would fare after he graduated. I always feared that once the children finished the program that they would lose the support they needed, and they would end up on the street or begging. Providing immediate relief from poverty

is one thing, such as after a disaster, but long-term rehabilitation is so important as well. Samweli from Tanzania managed to find me on Facebook, and after some scrutiny, we connected. I say “scrutiny” since I’ve heard accounts of “sponsored children” connecting on social media, but they turn out to be scams - people posing as children and asking for money or favors and laying on a guilt trip.

We had all brought extra supplies for the kids, and after meeting with the folks with the Leadership Development program, we all met in Kim’s room to divide out the supplies. We had a total of about 14 soccer balls to be divvied out, jump ropes and other sporting goods, piles of coloring books, various crafts, bottles of bubbles, baby clothes, teddy bears, and other gifts. The generous response of the sponsors was encouraging, though a bit overwhelming as well - how would we give everything fairly?

Although it was only around 7:00 CA time (10:00 in Haiti) I was pretty exhausted, and I was hoping to kick the bit of sickness I may have picked up early on in the trip. I connected with Nisha, Skyped a couple photos and check in - she was thrilled to hear back! Her job had been going through a very busy cycle, with repeated deadlines that seemed increasingly unattainable, compounding her work stress. I was glad her mom was able to be in town while I was away.

March 8

I had a good night sleep and felt much better in the morning - praise God. Breakfast was a buffet at the hotel - eggs, bacon, pineapple, toast and coffee. My taste returned as I was sipping the coffee and I figured I should be out of the woods health-wise. In addition, the weather was clearing and patches of blue sky were starting to break through the clouds. The long-range weather forecast was for partly cloudy, and then sunnier and warmer throughout the week - nice! I noticed a couple cute turtles just outside the dining area - standing proudly on a rock in a pond and sunning themselves.

A local artist named Louis had visited the hotel. He had about a half-dozen paintings from local villages around Cap-Haitien, clad in vivid tropical colors. Wendy wanted to buy a painting, and we banded together to purchase a couple paintings for just \$20 each - not bad for a 20x24 canvas. I would probably pay more at home to get it framed! Knowing we were in a gated hotel complex, Louis would have been a “sanctioned” artist to be let in to sell his works, not a rip-off from the street. I was glad to patronize a local artist, knowing the \$20 would have gone a long way for him and his family.

Our first Compassion center was HA-845, based in Plaine du Nord, about 40 minutes west and south of the hotel. I actually had no idea at first which way we were going, and even in fact had the map upside down initially - the road markings were confusing to non-existent, but thankfully our bus driver knew the route well like the back of his hand. It wasn’t until we got back to the hotel and I pulled out Google maps that I could tell where we were. I even recognized some of the landmarks such as a church and cemetery in Plaine du Nord from the satellite images. We drove through many miles of open fields and farms, plantations of plantains, bananas, rice and various vegetables. The land was quite green - I had images of Haiti being desolate with deforestation with swaths of

muddy brown hills, but I was pleasantly surprised. Cows and goats were grazing in the fields dotted by occasional palm trees.

We passed by a couple voodoo temples, marked with flags. Aside from the flags, they were obscure, but voodoo runs deep in Haitian culture. Much of the country is very economically poor and politically poor as well with much corruption, but they are also very poor spiritually. Spiritual poverty is the basis for much of the rest of the poverty, and I was proud to be participating in Compassion's mission to bring the love of Jesus to so many needy people. Wawas and Junior were emphasizing the 4 main aspects of Compassion to combat poverty. Physical, Spiritual, Socio-emotional and Cognitive poverty all existed. I had already been experiencing a bit of culture shock through recognizing these different forms of poverty - especially the most visible forms like physical and spiritual. But I know when we come back to America, there will be some reverse culture shock, seeing people isolated socially and emotionally, cynical and alone and buried in their phones, oblivious to the needs around them. This form of poverty may be more subtle but still exists.

After hearing about the 4 aspects of poverty, I quickly noticed the 4 aspects of danger on the streets around Haiti. Entire families on motorcycles, not wearing helmets, motored along the bumpy roads, dodging traffic left and right. People carrying entire baskets of coal, wood, groceries or other supplies on your head being careful to not trip on the uneven streets or step in a puddle. Electrical wiring in the biggest birds nest I've ever seen, somehow connecting entire neighborhoods. A construction worker was standing on a narrow ledge about 6 inches wide and 10 feet above the ground littered with rocks, delicately holding a welding iron to attach some sections of re-bar. It seemed no wonder that there would often be power cuts or accidents or things stolen – families had learned to “make do” – in fact the Haitian Creole language had a term for it – “dégagé”.

A row of tattered posters lined the streets of an upcoming election. Many posters appeared to have come and gone, perhaps with candidates dropping out of the race or new ones entering. Supposedly up to 54 candidates had been running at one point. A recent election in the end of January was not successful in choosing a candidate, with protesters setting fire to cars and buildings, blaming the system for being rigged and fraudulent. Elections have been postponed. Haiti has been politically unstable since the end of the Duvalier dictatorship that ended in 1986, and even now a stable democracy has not been attained. The US has even joined several other western nations, chipping in tens of millions of dollars to try to stabilize the political situation in Haiti. I guess people managed to “dégagé” politically as well. We had a taste of election difficulties in 2000 with the famous “hanging chads” and the Supreme Court had to step in to finalize Bush's victory over Al Gore. With as much divisiveness of so many candidates like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz in this year's election, I'm thankful that even amidst much turmoil, our country's government has remained solvent and its system of checks and balances has held for hundreds of years.

We arrived in Plaine du Nord just as the sun was coming out. Entering the gated complex, we were soon greeted with children with beautiful blue beads in their hair and

smiles on their faces. A couple of their staff workers came to greet us, and soon we were following Wawas and Junior to their church. Each of the Compassion projects worked with a local church, and soon we were greeted by the pastor. These children were part of Compassion's Child Sponsorship program. Junior translated our greetings. Most of the projects had a school as well, and most of these schools were regarded highly as providing an excellent education, contrary to most other Haitian schools.

Entering the church, we were soon surrounded by hundreds of kids. The older ones were in the back, probably 15-16 years old, and the youngest ones were in the front, maybe 3 or 4 years old. They started clapping in rhythm to welcome us - it was overwhelming! I should have had my earplugs - they were all shouting Amens of joy and clapping for Jesus! They were so organized and sitting so calmly, it put kids in America to shame. Kids in the US are so used to being entertained constantly in our ADHD culture. Their matching blue and white uniforms and blue beads in the girls' hair gave a sense of unity and coherence.



Inside the church in Plaine du Nord

A brass band came down the aisle with at least a dozen trombones and trumpets, welcoming us with an anthem. Three girls came afterward and performed a couple numbers. Each girl sang a bit of solo before the whole group came forth in a sonorous trio. I was amazed at how musical the people were in Haiti. A group of dancers took the stage, twirling to a couple songs. A couple kids came afterward, competing in a challenge of who could recite the most Bible verses from memory. The game was declared a draw after at least 20-25 rounds back and forth - they could have gone on for an hour!

We all took turns introducing ourselves - saying our names and where we're from. I knew Creole had a lot of French words, so I got some mileage from my rudimentary knowledge of French - for example knowing "Bonjour" and "Je m'appelle" for "hello" and "my name is". A couple people had been practicing their Creole phrases to say where they were from, but I wasn't quite so brave - I used the translator for that part.

Seeing the sea of kids seated on the pews from the stage was a bit intimidating. I knew as soon as the service was finished, they would be let loose and we would soon be over-run!

We started to assemble in the courtyard outside the church - the kids were free to play for a bit. It turned out Katie's sponsored child Emmanuela was in this project, and they got to meet! She was thrilled! Meanwhile, we got out some craft supplies, soccer balls, Frisbees, and jump-ropes for the kids. I had brought some coloring books and boxes of crayons. I took a few kids to one of the classrooms across the courtyard and started handing out crayons and tearing out pages of a Minions coloring book. The first dozen or so kids were excitedly coloring away and using their imagination. And then another wave of kids started coming. The room was starting to fill up. When I peeked outside, to my dismay was a seemingly endless line of eager kids!

Both boxes of the crayons soon ran out - only the white ones were left, and for a few minutes I was the only adult. I was trying to get the kids to share the crayons, and I didn't know the French or Creole word for "share" - I hoped some kids would understand "compartir" but apparently the kids didn't know much Spanish. Somehow, when I'm in another country, Spanish tended to be the default "foreign language" for me. After a couple rounds of charades and playing peek-a-boo through both empty boxes of crayons, the kids figured out they needed to share after all. One girl in the middle was hogging probably a dozen crayons, and in the nick of time, a staff member showed up and showed the kids how to distribute the crayons better.

The Minions coloring pages were soon finished and we started handing out blank pages. One boy thought outside the box, and instead of using a crayon with a blank page, he simply folded the paper into an origami rose - it was beautiful! The kids loved getting their photos taken and seeing their pictures on my phone screen. It was a win-win, since I got to keep the photos in the end, and I managed to get my phone back in the end - whew!



Kids with their coloring pages

We visited the office and enjoyed a buffet lunch afterward. I was exhausted after even just a couple hours with so many kids, and the peace and calm of a table full of adults was refreshing. The food was excellent (my taste was fully back now), rice, beans, shrimp, chicken and vegetables. And for dessert they had a cake - nice! We got to hear from another staff worker named Benjie, who had been living in the US in Orlando, FL, but was working in Cap-Haitien now. And as another round of dessert, we were treated with a wonderful gift - a bunch of kids had made paintings for us! When I saw one of the staff members carrying over a dozen canvases and starting to pass them out, I knew they were serious. Shucks - I had just paid \$20 for the painting in the morning - oh well! I'll have to figure out how to hang both of them now...

Afterward, we got to visit homes of some of the children in one of the local neighborhoods. We broke into 3 "family groups". I with with Marc & Toni, Jim & Rita and Kim as my "family" - we visited a single mom with 4 kids. The middle 2 kids had sponsors. Their house was a simple cinder-block construction with a rusted corrugated metal roof. The kitchen was off to the side, not part of the main house (probably so the smoke of the cooking fire wouldn't overwhelm the house). They had several dozen ears of yellow corn drying outside, probably to grind up into a corn meal.



Home visit

We were invited inside, and coming up to one of the girl's bedrooms, I noticed a stack of letters on a table, apparently from her sponsors somewhere in Texas. She reached over to the side to retrieve something and she soon came out with a beautiful red dress! It had been given as a gift from her sponsor recently, maybe for Christmas. A \$25 gift had gone a long way to provide the dress for this special occasion! A Mickey Mouse doll lay by her bedside as well as some photos showing the love she had been receiving.

I was nominated as the gift-giver, handing out a bag of goodies for the family. I started pulling out the items one by one - it was like Christmas for the family - God's goodness and abundance was made evident as I pulled out bars of soap, a bottle of bleach, some cooking oil, kitchen utensils, and a bag of rice, as well as some sheets. Again, these items

may have been less than \$20 at the local Costco, but in this remote village, they were treasures to sustain the family with much needed supplies.

As we were about to leave, I saw an entourage of neighbors and kids had gathered outside their fence, curious on-lookers to glimpse what was happening. I was a bit concerned about the family's safety, that they wouldn't get raided by jealous neighbors, after they had seen all the gifts being handed out. But after seeing how many kids were in the church from a fairly small area, I was pretty confident that the wealth was shared fairly. Walking back to our bus, we passed a duck and a flock of baby ducklings - multicolored yellow, white, brown and orange. A goat was grazing in a nearby empty lot. A rooster announced his cock-a-doodle-doo.

Back on the bus to our hotel, I started to process what I had seen. For Haiti being so dark and poor in so many ways, the artful taxis, the music, the bright clothes on the children and the beautiful beads and ribbons in the kids hair brought a sense of hope to an otherwise bleak society. Murals of Mickey Mouse knock-offs, Donald Duck, Tom & Jerry and various other cartoons brightened up the streets. Open-air street vendors selling cassava, roast corn, and grilled meat brought an inviting aroma, though none of us were brave enough to ask to try any of the street food. Snatches of the "miserere nobis" ("have mercy on us") from Beethoven's Mass in C were going through my head - we were learning it for a Schola Cantorum concert shortly after I got back.

We got news about Wendy's bag. Actually it was good news and bad news - good news that the bag had arrived and was at the airport. But the bad news was that they couldn't deliver it, and we couldn't pick it up, since the counter was "closed" at 3 pm and we would have to wait until it re-opened the next morning at 8:00. Wendy arranged for Wawas to take her to the airport first thing to (hopefully) retrieve her bag and then go straight to our next project site.

We had a couple hours to sit by the pool, journal and just relax. Even if we could wander around outside and explore on our own (I had done this in Nepal, India and other countries), I was just too mentally overloaded to think about much else anyway. I could hear the songs of birds brining in the sunset - they sounded like whippoorwills. Dinner of chicken, rice, beans, and soup was simple but satisfying. We enjoyed a time of debriefing and sharing about our experiences of our first day. We had all experienced elements of culture shock while sensing joy and sorrow. Joy of what God was doing, but sorrow of realizing how much poverty there was all around us. We watched the geckos scampering around the walls above us as we let our minds start cementing the memories.

Back in my room it was time to reconnect with my world back at home. Nisha's manager was pressing her team on a work deadline, and I had a flood of emails from work as well - although I was "OOO" for the week, I still couldn't help but stay current with what was going on. An issue with our Image Service would keep me busy for a while, but would have to wait until the following Monday. The Warriors were still winning, undefeated at home, and had a shot at breaking the record set by the Bulls in 1996 - I wondered if they would make 73 wins (just like the HR record in baseball). The connectedness of modern

society was bitter-sweet - it was nice to know what was going on, so I didn't have to worry as much, but it was harder to be fully disconnected from work.

March 9

It was a simple but nutritious breakfast - spaghetti with sausage sauce, cantaloupe and coffee. We had a bit longer drive planned today, following the main highway 1 west for about an hour before turning onto highway 14 at Limbe, then following the Riviere de Port Margot a ways north to the town of Fauche. Wendy had already left with Wawas to try and retrieve her lost suitcase - I was hoping all the best for her, since her sponsored child Loudwige was in Fauche.

The drive was quite scenic - passing through villages and farms as we meandered through many rural parts of Haiti. We would finally be able to get up to about 40 mph several times, before the driver miraculously noticed a deep pothole or speed-bump in the middle of the road just in time - he knew right when to hit the brakes to keep the bus from going airborne. Out in the countryside, the land was beautiful. I had seen similar rural towns in India but where the streets were full of litter and trash, but in Haiti I guess people didn't have access to the plastic bags and bottles that made up much of the non-biodegradable trash elsewhere. The large bay adjacent to Labadie was visible to our right and the top edge of a large cruise ship was even visible - Labadie is known for its beautiful beaches and is one of the few tourist stops in Haiti. A plume of smoke was coming from one of the fields - possibly people making coal. Coal was still an important source of energy.

I had started to doze when the bus slowed down and Junior said we were getting close. A banner stretched across the roadway announced project HA-311. Apparently there had been a party on Jun 14 of last year and the invitation banner had never been taken down! We turned into a gravel driveway and soon arrived at our destination near a cinder block church building. I was just futzing with a water bottle in my pack when I saw some musicians come up - another brass band! Two trumpets, clarinet, saxophone, snare drum and a bass drum. They played us a couple welcome anthems - I never seemed to get tired of the music. Coming up next to us, Wendy appeared with a big smile - she had picked up her lost suitcase!

Entering the church, we were greeted by dozens of moms with their babies! The entire left half of the sanctuary was filled with at least 50 women, some of them pregnant, all with babies. But the babies were so peaceful - hardly a peep or a whimper or cry from any of them. Many were adorned in their "Sunday best" - with beautiful dresses of all colors - pink, yellow, white and others, and the girls with multi-colored beads and ribbons in their hair. A soloist with an amazing voice performed a worship song in Creole. Somebody read a psalm. A row of kids were peeking through the window - blue ribbons in their hair, in front of the lush palm trees outside.



Brass band

We got to hear about Compassion's Child Survivor Program where babies up to 3 years old were cared for. For so many years, Haitian culture was steeped in superstition and voodoo, and a simple ailment like a fever or stomach cramps might be attributed to some sort of devil. Now, the moms and nurses were taught to think systematically and diagnose conditions methodically. A few people acted out a skit, where a baby with diarrhea was brought to the center and the ailment was diagnosed with tests for worms, viral infection, or food poisoning. The condition would be treated with proper care in a clean and sanitary environment. I had just signed up for a Wilderness First Aid course and looked forward to learning how to diagnose and treat injuries and illnesses in a backcountry environment far from cell signal and a hospital. Staying calm and thinking clearly was a key to proper assessment of the situation.

After the service wrapped up, we got to interact a bit with the moms and their babies. Near the front I saw a mom with a vibrant black and white dress, with a beaming smile when we met, holding a wonderful daughter - she looked to be less than a year old. She had a white frilly dress and yellow beads and white ribbons in her hair. I held out my hand to stroke the girl's arms - they were smooth like silk. A moment later, the baby was in my arms! I hadn't originally intended to hold the baby just yet, but the mom was so trusting in my care that she let me hold her little treasure. Her eyes were closed and she appeared to falling asleep the moment I started holding her. Of course I was expecting any minute a burp or gurgle or something indicating "now it's time to come back to mommy", but she just slept like an angel. I started to get a bit emotional when I gave the baby back - I felt a bond had already started to develop even in the minute or two she was in my arms.

I had in my pocket a little bottle of bubbles. I remembered with my nieces Stella and Vivian were around 2, we were at Deep Creek Lake, MD and they loved playing with the bubbles. Thousands of miles away in Haiti, I had a similar experience when I opened the small jar and pulled out the wand and started blowing. Their eyes lit up with fascination when they saw the glistening spheres of transparent soap coming from the wand. One of

the girls next to me saw how I was doing it so I gave her a try - she figured it out almost immediately! By her 3rd breath, the bubbles were streaming like from a magical fountain.

Reaching for my phone, I decided to get a couple photos when I saw a bunch of eyes light up with the glowing LCD screen. Setting the camera on selfie mode, I watched as the kids started to crowd around the screen as if to see how many of their faces could fit all at once! One of the kids figured out which button does the picture-taking and she started clicking. I managed to get my face in as well - they appeared equally fascinated with seeing this big white face surrounded by their little black faces on this magic screen that made clicky noises when you hit the photo button. It was a win-win for me as well - I came back with at least 20 photos with the wonderful children! I had a couple sheets of stickers - I think every kid had at least one or two glittering stickers on their hands and foreheads. I saw Wendy on the other side of the room with Loudwige - she had given one of her gifts to her - her suitcase did indeed arrive not a moment too soon! I was so happy to see what God was doing.

A moment later, they were calling us for lunch. An hour had passed like nothing - of course my rumbling stomach reminded me pretty quickly what time it was. Rice, roasted & fried chicken, and veggies made a satisfying meal. A sweet Fruit Champagne got me on a sugar high in no time! At least it wasn't full of high fructose corn syrup like in America, but next time I would have to dilute it with a lot of water!



Junior talking about the Child Survivor Program

We got to tour the “Stimulation room” after lunch - it was a full nursery for dozens of babies. Countless toys lined the floor of all colors. Mickey Mouse and other cartoon characters lined the wall, hand-painted with a variety of different proportions. A boy was pedaling a tricycle around us, fascinated by what all these Americans were up to. Junior showed us how they kept track of all the babies - a board showed their names, birthdays, height and weight, as well as all the immunizations they've had. A full pharmacy lay behind a counter by a filing cabinet - knowing that a proper hospital was at least an hour

away on rough roads, they had to be somewhat self-sufficient. I had brought some baby clothes and some baby swaddling blankets from home, and I was happy to be able to present them right there, knowing they would be in good hands.

We broke up into groups like in the previous day to visit the homes of some of the children. I was in a different family group this time - with Shan, Mary Susan, Carolina, Tim and Caroline. It was just about a 15-minute walk to the house we were going to visit. Of course all the houses had to be within easy walking distance - it's not like the moms had fancy cars to drive 20 miles for 1/2 hour to day care. Fauche wasn't all that big - maybe just 1000 people or so, so you could probably walk from one end to the other in 1/2 hour.

We walked a short distance on the main road. A motorcycle passed by with 4 people precariously perched on the 125 cc bike. For them that was the family van. Just to the right was a small unsigned trail that looked like a hiking path. It was a main neighborhood street for maybe a dozen houses. Following the path past a number of lush green plantain and banana plants, we came to a small grey cinder block building with a corrugated metal roof held in place by a bunch of uneven wooden poles. This house, not more than about 12 feet by 20 feet, held an entire family of a single mom and 9 kids - 6 boys and 3 girls! Her husband had left her (which was all too common in Haiti). The house appeared to be under construction, but in a suspended state. I guess they had built as much as they could with the money they had, and planned to continue work as more money became available.

Sunlight streamed into the living room onto the earthen floor through a bunch of holes in the roof. Thankfully it hadn't rained for a few days, so the hard-packed dirt wasn't muddy. The kitchen was in a small thatched shack outside the main house so the smoke of the cooking fire wouldn't swarm the living quarters. A cow was grazing by a tree near the banks of the broad Riviere de Port Margot just a few yards back. The river had a broad floodplain visible from the house in a broad panorama - they had some prime real estate! The family was growing peanuts and plantains for food, even growing enough to be able to sell some to raise a little money.

We all assembled in the living room where we could give some gifts. I had brought several teddy bears from home - I had forgotten about what I had brought until Tim pulled out the bag of gifts, first pulling out some hygienic supplies like toothbrushes and toothpaste, then some cleaning supplies for the house, and finally some teddy bears - they were the ones I had brought! I recognized the blue and white pinstriped bears. I was thrilled to know that my gifts had made it seemingly halfway around the world and were now being enjoyed by the children in this remote village. And as icing on the cake, Tim had brought his guitar and we started singing some Sunday school songs like "Jesus Loves All the Little Children". A couple of the kids knew the song (in Creole) and followed us as we sang in English.



Home visit

Back at the Compassion center, we were waiting for one of the other groups to arrive when a bunch of kids came up to us, doing cartwheels, playing with a big toy truck and dancing. The guitar came out again and Benjie started playing this time - even though his singing was slightly off-key he was having a ball with it! Tim took a turn, playing a couple other songs - he had a songbook with the chords. And then I took a turn with it. "Father I Adore You" was easy - just repeat D, Em, A, D. I hadn't played in a while and my lack of callouses reminded me of that, especially on the 6th or 7th verse. Somewhere in the song I wasn't sure if I was just getting tired since the strums seemed a bit uneven, but then I noticed there seemed to be some extra strums as if my shirt sleeve was catching in the strings. But when I looked to my right a little girl was smiling at me and strumming the guitar along with me!

It was getting late and it was getting time to say bye and get back on the bus. We walked past a large stone building seemingly lost in a state of suspended animation of construction. Tall grass and weeds were growing up from the foundation, and strands of re-bar were sticking out in various places. A goat was grazing in a grassy patch near one of the windows. It was supposedly going to be a large church building, when and if they money arrived to complete it. The work seemed to have been abandoned years ago - I wondered if it was still safe to continue work on it if the resources ever did come in, or a bunch of it would have to be taken apart to make it safe enough again to work on.



With the kids

Benjie was being the “radio host” on our long drive back, taking requests for hymns and praise songs. Tim had his guitar out on the bus and we took turns singing “How Great Thou Art”, “Amazing Grace” and others, most of us singing in English and Junior and Wawas joining in on Creole. I was surprised every time how beautiful and musical the people were in Haiti. I had my eyes glued to the window quite a bit - a surprise was always waiting outside. The broad floodplain of the river filled a panoramic view to the right. Crossing the Limbe River a ways further, we saw dozens of families doing their laundry in the river. The water was pretty clean and very little trash littered the banks - I was pleasantly surprised. At one moment as we got closer to Cap-Haitien, I saw we were going by an “auto parts” store full of paraphernalia for motorcycles - parts of engines, wheels, tires and chains, and then on the other side of the street, somebody was building a bunch of wooden boats and waiting for the wood to cure before they could be finished. And just before getting to our hotel, we followed a most interesting truck for a while - it was full of cases of Fruit Champagne!

We had a little time to relax before dinner - a few of us hung out by the pool, listening to old 80’s and 90’s pop music blaring through the speakers. Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On” and Bryan Adams “Everything I Do” reminded me of the time around high school. Tim and Caroline were in the pool, enjoying the late afternoon sun. I joined them for a few minutes, letting my thoughts consolidate from the day as I soaked in the cool water. I was happy to have wi-fi so I could keep updates going on Facebook and my email. Nisha was always thrilled to get a buzz from me on Skype - she had just finished lunch at work (it was 4:30 in Haiti = 1:30 in CA). I felt even though we were worlds apart, we were never more than a click apart with our phones.

Dinner was the usual meat and rice and beans. I opted for the Coke instead of the Fruit Champagne - at least the Coke didn't taste like bubble gum. After dinner, we had our debriefing time - one of my favorite times of the day since we could process our thoughts together and recollect our experiences. I really enjoyed the day, seeing all the smiling children and getting to visit the home of one of the families in what appeared to be in a tropical paradise. I found out, however, one of the small boys I had played with in the morning actually had typhoid fever and had barely survived. Looking at the photo with him, I would have hardly been able to tell. I also found out that the home one of the other groups had visited was also unfinished like the one we went to, but the reason there was that the father had died, leaving the house unfinished, and they had a 1-year old baby who had to sleep on the floor because a proper crib was never built.

We had a big day the next day - Vacation Bible School! We thought the kids were crazy the first day at Plaine du Nord, but there we only had them for less than an hour. Tomorrow we had several hours of VBS planned with multiple activities! I was a bit nervous, not really knowing how we were going to handle so many kids, but I was assured that God was in control and He was going to provide a way. I was in the "games" group along with Katie, Kelly and Wendy - and Benjie was going to be our translator. I was excited about having Benjie - his English was good and he had a lot of energy to work with the kids. We talked about ideas of what to do - playing volleyball, under-over with balls, relay challenge races, and red light-green light (though we would need a good bit of translation to make sure the kids figured out the rules properly). Tim, Caroline and Jim were going to do songs (thanks Tim for the guitar again!). Mary Susan, Nikki and Rita were going to do crafts - with things like yarn and pages of a coloring book of the story of the boy Jesus at the temple (from the end of Luke 2). The rest were going to act out a skit with the kids on the same story.

Seeing the brilliant clear skies afterward, a few of us stepped outside to admire the bright stars. The Milky Way shone overhead - of course not many people have electricity in Haiti, creating wonderful dark skies. Orion blazed overhead along with the Pleiades. The Orion Nebula M42 was visible with the naked eye. Jupiter was near opposition and the brightest I had seen in a while. I managed to actually get some photos - by setting my camera on a large rounded barrel using it as a tripod, and setting my setting to long-exposure night mode, I could use my full optical (18x) zoom and digital (4x) zoom for a total power of 72x and I was able to capture the bright disk of Jupiter. I hadn't expected to see them, but I managed to catch 4 pinpricks in a line next to Jupiter in the same photo - the 4 Galilean moons!



Jupiter and moons

It was 10:00 before I could finally start to unwind in my room. The crickets seemed to be chirping usually loud, and a dog seemed to be barking a bit in the background, but I was glad to just lay down. I turned on the TV for the first time - only about 4 of the 50 or so channels had something beside noisy static, but alas none of the channels were in English. I think 2 were in French and the other 2 were in Creole. One of the French channels was a movie on “Action TV” of an old Japanese samurai movie of a bunch of people dressed up as Japanese warriors fighting a bloody battle with swords. 5 minutes of the gore was enough before I just shut it off and called it a night.

March 10

We got to sleep in a little longer today since we didn’t have quite so far to go. The project site for today would be right in town in Cap-Haitien. Breakfast was pancakes, cassava tortillas with Nutella hazelnut spread, fruit and coffee. I don’t think I’ve had Nutella since a Death Valley camping trip years ago, but I had many fond memories of that trip, and tasting the hazelnut sweetness instantly brought the trip back to mind - funny how tastes can bring back distinct memories. I was looking forward to visiting Death Valley with Nisha and her mom in a few weeks after this trip.

It was only about a 20-minute ride to HA-744. On the way, we passed by the Battle of Vertrieres memorial. The battle in November 1803 was a decisive one in Haiti’s independence from French rule. The nearby Citadel Laferrière just south of Cap Haitian was built soon afterward and was instrumental in defending Haiti against the French. Haiti is one of the few nations in the world where slaves organized a successful revolt.

We pulled into a gas station next to a large church under renovation. Gas was around 189 gourdes / gallon for 95 and 91 octane. Diesel was 149 and kerosene was 145. It was about 60 : 1 for gourdes to dollars (about the same as Indian rupees), so gas was about \$3 / gallon, similar to CA prices (though they didn’t sell “regular” 87 there). I realized we pulled into the gas station not to get gas, but to turn around - the entrance of HA-744 was up an awkward back alley, and the most reasonable entry was by turning around and

backing in.

Coming in the back entrance we were soon greeted with some kids and staff members. I could already see through a couple of the windows of the school, and it looked like a dam was about to burst of eager kids! I had to swallow a gulp, bracing for the chaos of the VBS we were about to do! We entered through the side of the church that was under renovation - that was the church for this site. It was good to see here they apparently had the money to finish proper work on the building. Kids started streaming in, filling row by row of the pews. There was a balcony overhead and even that had a bunch of kids lined up. There were about 450 kids in the project, typical of many of the Compassion projects in Haiti. Of those kids, maybe 80% of them had sponsors, and they are always looking for more.



Kids at HA-744

A brass band came again to welcome us - this seemed to be a tradition in Haiti! They played a couple songs - a welcome anthem, followed by another regal sounding anthem which I thought I recognized parts of - I found out later that this was indeed the national anthem of Haiti - "La Dessalinienne". A soloist came out afterward - a girl who started out with a bit of a timid voice - the brass band was a tough act to follow. But once she got warmed up, her voice carried through the entire auditorium as she joyfully belted out the words in full grandeur - she could easily audition for the next American Idol!

There was a scripture reading - being read in alternating Creole and English, of Psalm 100 - "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth". I loved hearing how people worship in different countries around the world. Katie gave a wonderful bouquet of flowers, thanking them for welcoming us. I was falling more in love with the people each day as we interacted with them. Instead of trepidation about the VBS coming up, I was looking forward to it. We took turns on stage introducing ourselves.

Back in my seat on one of the pews, I noticed a bunch of kids next to me were stroking my arms - fascinated by who I was, a stranger from a far-away land, so unlike them. I had my phone to get some pictures, and the kids once again loved the selfie feature! I wonder if some day they would ever be able to see those photos! We sat quietly while the pastor talked about the Compassion program and then some of the staff started to divide us up into our VBS activities. I was going to be with the Games group. The beach

balls were blown up and ready – the last time I had seen a beach ball was when my Mac computer was about to crash and my applications started “beachballing” with the cursor changing into a brightly colored spinning ball...

We were relieved in a way to find out many of the kids had exams this week, so not all 450 kids would be at the VBS program - maybe only about 1/2 of them. So the chaos would be cut in half - whew! Benjie was with us and soon we had our first group of kids. We had a 4-way rotation going, where kids would cycle through the crafts, music, skit, and games, so at any time, we only had about 50 kids - a lot more manageable!



Games with the kids

We had to be careful to hide the balls before each round of kids came out, and put them away as soon as we were about to rotate - once the kids saw the balls, keeping them in order was no small feat. We had games of volleyball going for the first round (if you let the ball touch the ground, you were out, and the last one in each circle standing was the winner). We tried with red-light green-light for the second round, though this took a bit of translation for the kids to figure out the rules. The next round was “over-under” - get the kids into 4 teams of about 12 kids each, and they pass a ball alternating over their heads or under their legs to the next kid. The line getting the ball to the last kid first was the winner. This game was a hit, so we used it again for the fourth round. Finally after each round, there was a bit of free time so the kids could just have free play afterward. Soccer turned into the prevailing activity for the free play - they all loved it and it was so simple! The kids just loved being around us – they would love to start climbing on us and swarming us. At one point I thought Katie was literally going to drown in a sea of kids!

Lunch was in the office upstairs - it seemed so quiet again! Like when you’ve been traveling on a rough 4WD road for many miles and come back to a paved freeway. The meal was again nutritious but mostly simple staples of rice, plantains, chicken, but this one had a special treat - conch with peanut sauce, a delicacy! During lunch, Wawas showed pictures on his laptop of a malnourished and desperate looking 4-month-old baby

boy that had been abandoned by his parents when they separated. So many families in Haiti have split, leaving needy children in even more desperate situations. But this story had an encouraging ending - the baby had been left with a mom who was able to adopt him and take care of him. Through Compassion, the family had the resources they needed to properly care for the baby, and several years later, pictures showed the baby in pretty good health again.

It is encouraging to hear how Compassion has changed so many lives. Years ago, South Korea had so many needy children that many of them were being sponsored through Compassion, and now South Korea was no longer on the list of sponsees, but now many sponsors were in South Korea - I wonder if any other countries will someday turn around and be able to give back. I'm sure there are so many needy children in North Korea as well and we continue to pray about the political situation there. The door has been tightly shut for so many years.



Clean water

We got a tour of a water filtration system just outside the church at the project. A combination reverse-osmosis and UV filter system can efficiently provide the clean water needed by so many people. At just the equivalent of 16 cents / gallon for families within Compassion and 32 cents / gallon otherwise, it provides an easy means of clean water. So many diseases are transmitted through unsanitary water. The earthquake in 2010 was devastating, but a lot of people don't think about the devastating cholera outbreak that resulted, caused by a broken infrastructure. I was proud of the people we had met at the airport who were on a Rotary project to provide clean water. My dad had just retired a couple months ago and has gotten more active with Rotary, and I hope someday to maybe join a Rotary effort to provide clean water.

We did a brief tour of the office there and presented our gifts - a bunch of soccer balls, frisbees, beach balls, jump ropes and school supplies. This was the last of our supplies - even though I felt we had given so much, there was still so much need. Perusing a couple

files in one of the file cabinets, we saw some of the letters that had been exchanged and copied between one of the children and his sponsor in Canada. It was great to hear how sponsors were from all around the world - there are sponsors in Australia, some countries in Europe, and now South Korea. I guess some letters would have to be translated from Creole to Korean! A stack of blue sheets was on a desk, ready to be given out during one of the classes coming up. I recognized the sheets as the ones where the children write their letters and can draw pictures.

We broke into our family groups to visit some of the homes of the children. The two homes we had visited were quite different experiences, and the experience today would be a whole other ball game. I was in the same family group as the previous day - with Shan, Tim & Caroline, Mary Susan and Carolina. It was a short walk just a few blocks to the house. At first I didn't realize we had even arrived - it just looked like a bunch of small shops and restaurants. Maybe the house was an apartment upstairs? But we entered through a narrow corridor between two buildings - only about 3 feet wide. It was dark and musty. Coming around a dark corner, we had to be careful to not trip and fall into an open well. Just across from the well was a small door, and inside were a mom and a small kid in a bright yellow Batman T-shirt.

The house appeared to have just 2 rooms - the living / dining / family room was about 5 feet by 8 feet, and through a curtain would have been the bedroom, perhaps of a similar size. The mom named Katherin actually had 3 kids - her son Kali, as well as 2 daughters. One daughter was 12 and living there as well, and another daughter was around 22 and in school. They had an old TV and shelves lined with some teddy bears and other homely knick-knacks. It was a pretty humble living situation with a slightly rank smell but it was pretty clean otherwise. We had a bag of gifts for the family - basic supplies to cover their needs. The house was quite small so we didn't stay too long, but we said a prayer for God's provision for them. As we were walking back, I learned the kid in the Batman shirt was actually the same Kali we had seen pictures of on Wawas's laptop of the baby with the distended belly at 4 months old. Flipping back through my photos and seeing his smiling face, I had a whole new appreciation of God's goodness and provision. I started to notice some other small elements of God's love - sometimes a Bible verse would appear on one of the walls of a building, or sometimes I would notice a window was a concrete grating where the beams were in the shape of hearts.

Back at the hotel, a few of us got to enjoy a beer by the pool. The pilsner Prestige was light but satisfying. John Legend's "All of Me" was playing - I had seen a lot of curves and edges and perfect imperfections over the last few days, but I knew everyone was beautiful in God's eyes. I knew the hardest part of the trip was finished now, and for our last full day, we would be able to enjoy a good amount of time with our own sponsored children. Dinner was at the usual time - 6:45. I watched the turtles for a couple minutes still hanging out on the same rock. The stars were shining brightly - I got to show the moons of Jupiter again as we watched the slender crescent of the moon setting. The moon had just passed in front of the sun in the last 24 hours on the other side of the Earth - a total eclipse was visible in Indonesia.

After dinner we had a more extensive debriefing time - people shared about their experiences with the Vacation Bible School and the home visits. I thought our home visit was more difficult than the last two, but for Kim's group, they had one of the most difficult visits in their lives. The home they visited was down an even narrower corridor - so narrow that your back would sometimes scrape one musty, algae-covered wall while your stomach would bump the opposite wall as you stepped down the narrow pathway. You couldn't tell if you were walking on carpet or dirt or something else as the light faded into darkness. The stench increased with each step. Down a flight of stairs the hallway continued - you had to be careful to not slip on the stairs. Being the lowest point and knowing how water and swage and who knows what else was flowing downhill, the floor there was pretty disgusting. The only light was from a single kerosene lamp (and a couple cell-phone flashlights). You had to watch out for the spiders and hope none of them would give a poisonous bite. A single mom named "Deliverance" was there with 3 of her 5 children. One of them was 2-year-old Samuela who was in the Compassion program. They couldn't get out of there soon enough from the "hell-hole house". Armed with some photos, they were able to share their experience with the Highly Vulnerable Children program, and I hope and pray that Compassion would be able to take some action to move them to a better living situation soon.

I would have many dreams that night as my mind consolidated a variety of thoughts. Paddling down the Tuolumne River in Yosemite down Lyell Canyon up to the top of the 1st waterfall in the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne. I was starting my first day at SpiderCloud (where Nisha was working), though I realized I had forgotten to give a 2-week notice to my current company. I was visiting a Duke's of Edinburgh pub (a British pub in Cupertino), but there was one in Haiti. I had to give a demonstration of Archimedes' principle of water displacement on a boat. I was on a flight back home to CA for one day to take care of some paperwork, then immediately I was going to fly right back to Haiti to continue this trip. The variety of dreams seemed chaotic and jumbled, but I guess that was the way my mind was processing so many different experiences.

March 11

Today was our big day - our "summit" day, the climax of our whole trip! We were all going to get to meet our sponsored children. A few of us had already seen our children in the different Compassion project centers, but now they will all be there. We were told they all came in the previous night and were staying right near our hotel. They were all there - yay! I remember on my Tanzania trip years back that one of the sponsored children couldn't make it that day to visit his sponsor, and I know that I've had 2 children in Haiti already leave, so I was thrilled knowing Jean Bedson was very close! Wendy's child showed up earlier than the rest, and as we were getting seated for breakfast, she saw her, and immediately ran out to give her a hug. Junior was saying "wait - wait!" - not time yet - they weren't supposed to see each other yet, so the hug wasn't "sanctioned" - but who cares!

Breakfast was a little later so we got to sleep in. We didn't have to go anywhere today - the kids were all coming to us! Breakfast was pancakes, cassava tortillas with Nutella, fruit and coffee - the usual. We had a few minutes to go back to our rooms to pick up an

“ice-breaker” gift for the introduction. I went to grab a photo I had framed of me and my wife, my brother and his family, and my parents that we had taken in front of the Christmas tree this last December. Seeing a large circle of the translators and Compassion staff gathering for a meeting, I realized this was real and that the children were coming soon - my heart started to race.

We were gathered by the pool, and one by one the sponsors were called to meet their children. Jim and Rita’s kid showed up and they stepped down to meet their girl Roodny. I think Tim & Caroline were next, and then my name was called. I wasn’t quite ready yet, but my heart started pounding as soon as I walked down the stairs and took a right toward the parking lot. I saw a bunch of the other sponsored children waiting for their sponsors, then I immediately recognized Jean Bedson - he was smiling as soon as he saw me! I could hardly contain myself as I ran up and gave him a big hug! With him were his uncle Henrizier-Sain Duc, staff member Dacius Yrosette, and our translator Jean-Pierre Fedy. I first thought his uncle and the staff member might have been his parents, but since he was over 10, he wouldn’t have come with his parents, so we made our introductions.

I was thrilled to show him the photo from Christmas and almost forgot that the next sponsor was waiting for me to step out of the way - I was so immersed in the moment. At first I wondered how I would spend all day with Jean Bedson - we had 6 hours from 9:00 to 3:00, so the previous night I had drafted up a list of different games and crafts and things we could play. I had the “tracks” of our “train of thought” mapped out ahead of time, but I soon realized those tracks were meaningless - God would steer the train and the track would appear just in time where it belonged as He decided (one of my favorite scenes in “Inside Out”). We went from talking about my nephew Evan (who played soccer) to his soccer idols Ronaldo and Ronaldino and mine & my brother Geoff’s idol Pele when we were young. Then onto basketball and the Warriors. Then Stella & Vivian’s gymnastics. Then Nisha and India and some of our travels. Then the rest of my family. The range of climates around California. Then my long flight, connecting through Miami to get to Haiti. I drew a map of the US to show where my family was from. Yrosette was listening intently, and Jean Bedson’s uncle was filming as much of our conversation as he could on his old flip-phone. Jean Bedson had remembered my stories about my Nepal trip in 2014 and the photos I had sent of climbing the mountains. I still had a number of photos on my phone and his eyes lit up when I showed them to him – it was great knowing he had been indeed receiving and enjoying my letters!

Unfortunately his memories of his family were not quite so fond. He was still living with his mom in Gonaives (about 3-4 hours south and west of Cap-Haitien). But his parents had separated around 2008-2009, and his dad was living in Port-au-Prince. In 2010, there was the devastating earthquake whose epicenter was near there, and his dad wasn’t heard from again. He is suspected to have died in the earthquake. Although he’s grown up with a fair amount of tragedy, you would never know, seeing his enthusiasm and smile on his face.



Jean Bedson with his uncle and staff worker

The hotel had an outdoor piano just behind our table that surprisingly sounded like it had been tuned and kept in decent condition. I started playing an old song - one of the first I had learned on the piano since I was a kid - "Heart & Soul"! I hadn't played it in probably 20 years, but still remembered the simple C - Am - F - G repetitive progression. After a couple cycles of singing the melody, I turned around, and not only was Jean Bedson and Fedy singing along, we had accumulated a gaggle of half a dozen others singing and dancing along! Music seemed to be close to so many people's hearts in Haiti - everywhere we went, we made immediate connections through it.

Jean Bedson knew the praise song "How Great is Our God", and I started plunking out some notes on the piano - key of C was the easiest. He was singing, then Fedy joined on an upper tenor harmony and I joined with a lower harmony, making a full 3-part harmony! We also started belting out "This is My Desire", another favorite. I heard Jean Bedson singing the Creole and Fedy trying to translate mid-stream, but we found it easier to just sing in whatever language we knew best! I suddenly realized, since we had wi-fi, I could just Google the Creole words to the song, which I found right away.

Lord I give you my heart
I give you my soul
I live for you alone
Every breath that I take
Every moment I'm awake
Lord have your way in me

*Senye m ba ou ke mwen
Mwen ba ou nanm mwen
Map viv pou ou selman
Ak chak souf ke mwen pran
Ak Chak moman m leve
Met fe sa w vle nan mwen.*



Fedy on the piano with Jean Bedson singing

I could sing along in Creole now! I had to get a recording, so with one hand holding the phone with the words, and the other hand holding the camera (double-fisting technology), I managed to get a couple verses down. A little shaky, but it was a keeper! I managed to teach Jean Bedson and Fedy some basic Solfeggio and music notation, so we could write out the notes of the song. I banged a couple chords on the piano and figured out C, Am, F, C, G, etc for the first line. I heard Tim playing his guitar with Caroline and their sponsored child Dialande just around the corner, and they said we could use the guitar after lunch - I was excited about getting a whole band together!

The time was flying by - it was already 11:00 - we were having so much fun already. A couple others nearby asked us if we wanted to try the pool table - sounded interesting. They've probably never tried shooting pool before, so I showed them which way to hold the cue stick, how to aim it and which balls to hit. After placing the balls in the triangle and setting the table for a break, I had Jean Bedson try a break. "Hit it straight and hard!" In his enthusiasm, he had the right idea, but was holding the stick too far back, making the aim difficult. Swing and a miss - whoops! I mentioned to try holding it a little closer, and the second try, he made contact - good. But the cue ball glanced a bit to the side, falling directly into the corner pocket and missing the entire triangle of balls - a scratch - whoops! The third try, he got a clean break, scattering the balls down the table - nice! After a couple rounds they got the hang of it and were sinking shots right and left. But they didn't like the idea you were supposed to hit the cue ball (the white one) first! Fedy would get silly at times and secretly move one of the balls - at first I don't think anybody noticed his bit of cheating, but after a couple more shots, I caught him in the act!

Somebody had brought a deck of cards and we had little time before lunch, so I quickly came up with a game I could teach quickly. We had a foursome - me, Fedy, Jean Bedson, and his uncle. I thought of Hearts, which is perfect with a foursome. Or Spades (which I remember playing a lot in Tanzania). But I didn't want to do anything too complicated. I had to dust off my old memory banks once again, and I remembered Crazy-8's. It was like Uno, which I remember playing with my grandmother when I was a kid. You started

with 8 cards and could get rid of a card as long as it matched the number or suit of the last card played. Eights were wild and you could change the suit with a wild card. They got most of the rules figured out pretty quickly though a couple of the details about how the wild cards worked must have gotten lost in translation down the road, when I noticed they had forgotten which suit to play - oh well.

It was lunchtime and they had a buffet ready for us - rice, beans, chicken, pork, juice and the signature Fruit Champagne. Lining up for lunch, I heard Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings" - one of my old favorites. I think the last time I heard this song was when I was dancing with my mom on my wedding night. I felt God was the real wind beneath our wings, blessing us in so many ways and allowing us to see each other, even though we were from worlds apart. All 5 of us were seated together. I got to give the blessing, translated line by line by Fedy. The pauses for the translation made the prayer easier - I had time to think about what to give thanks for!

After lunch I had us all write our names in longhand. I started with mine - just a simple "Matthew Blum". Jean Bedson wrote his in elegant cursive - just like how his letters had been written for the last few years. He wrote his name as "Petit May Jean Bedson". "Jean Pierre Fedy", "Henrizier Sain Duc", and "Dacius Yrosette" were the others. I had forgotten Sain Duc and Yrosette's names, since I didn't recognize Henrizier or Dacius, but I had to remember people typically wrote their last name first in Haiti.

It was pretty hot and sunny outside after lunch and a bunch of people were getting back into the pool. I had my swimsuit and a towel in my room, but the room service had forgotten to change the towels in the room that morning, and the pool towels were out. I had to run back to the front desk and ask for more towels. After a bunch of explaining and not really getting anywhere I just brought a couple spare towels I had brought from home - lucky I had them. Jean Bedson went to the bathroom to change and while he was inside, I did a quick spin to see what was going on with the other sponsors and their children. Some others were playing pool now. Tim and Caroline were playing volleyball with Dialande, Kevin and Marietta were playing with their kid Rodna. Mary Susan and Katie were doing coloring books with their girls. Carolina's little girl Woudnaika looked tired and not feeling real well - Carolina was just holding her and comforting her as her girl was holding a doll. A couple others were in the parking lot playing soccer, and Jim & Rita were doing crafts with yarn with Roodny. Rita had finally gotten to give a bookmark she had made years ago. She crocheted the bookmark by hand, and it got returned saying they didn't accept any cloth items. She then laminated it, but it got returned again saying they didn't accept plastic. The 3rd try was the charm! God is good in so many ways, and exploring the whole gamut of His love showed how his love was manifest to each person.



In the pool

Jean Bedson came out of the bathroom a minute later, but was a bit hesitant at first in going into the water. We walked in the shallow end. The water was cool but refreshing. Some others were playing volleyball and we got to join in. I was holding him to get him used to being in the water, sort of like how I held Evan when he was around 4 years old and was in the water too deep to stand in. Even though Jean Bedson was quite a bit older, he probably never swam before like that. Someone lent him a pair of swim goggles and his confidence got a much needed boost - he started splashing and grabbing for the ball. We saw that Fedy was still outside deciding if he was going to go in - seeing his antics earlier at the pool table, I was a bit surprised he hadn't jumped in yet. Maybe he didn't know how to swim either? No - I think he was just being shy... One of the other translators and I went up to him and picked him up and threatened to throw him in - I remember days of camp with InterVarsity back in college where we did the same thing. He obviously knew how to swim - he was just being silly again. A moment later he went up to me and picked me up, swung me around and threw me into the pool! Now this meant war!

He jumped in a minute later and started tossing the beach ball - we were all getting to be kids once again. I think the last time I was thrown into a pool was when I was about 10 - we had crashed at the Pike's place for about a week when my family moved to PA, and Mr. Pike (we called him "Bluto" from my favorite cartoon Popeye) would throw me into the pool! We were tossing the ball for a bit until suddenly the ball disappeared! Jean Bedson and Fedy and I looked at each other, thinking maybe one of the others got it or knocked it out of the pool. But Fedy was betrayed by his giant grin - he had gone "rogue" and stole the ball and was sitting on it! We had to wrestle him to get it back - we had a game of keep-away going. It was great to act like kids again - I knew both Nisha and I had issues at work and taxes to work on and some projects at home waiting for me when I got back, but all those cares were a million miles away. I felt as if I had travelled through the tesseract from "Interstellar", warping back to my childhood days for a while.

Tim had brought his guitar, and after we dried off, a bunch of us got our band going. I

still had the Creole words on my phone of a couple songs, and we were ready for round 2 of praise and worship. Jean Bedson's voice was warmed up - he was ready to be a rock star! I was strumming the guitar and Fedy was on the piano. Tim and Dialande were singing along now too. We could have gone on all afternoon praising and worshipping until they said since it was already 2:30 and the kids were only around until 3:00 that we had to start wrapping up and presenting our final gifts. Whoops - I had only given the picture so far, and I still had the rest of a whole bag of gifts in my room! I lied about saying I had to run and use the bathroom, but I ran back to my room to get the bag.

Walking back to Jean Bedson with the bag, I felt like Santa Claus with a big bag of toys. I didn't want to over-do it, but I thought a few things would be nice for him and his family. Fedy was as curious about the cable car toy as Jean Bedson - I doubted they had been to many other places, even within Haiti itself. I gave a teddy bear with "USA" on it, a reminder of my visit from the USA. I had made a paper crane the previous evening (I had to rehearse it a couple times to get it right) - I was hoping we would have time where I could show him how to fold the origami himself, but alas the time flew too fast - I just gave him the one I made!

I had a second picture frame with photos of me and Nisha. I hope to send Jean Bedson some photos with my next letter so he can fill the one of the slots with it. And for the finale, I brought him a brand new soccer ball! I knew he liked soccer, and when he started talking about his favorite players earlier in the day, I knew we would both be thrilled that I could give him one. We didn't have time to play since it was already 2:55 and we had to wrap up pretty soon. We all gathered for a final photo with the sponsors and their children, and with the staff. I was amazed at how God had orchestrated the whole day.



Sponsors and their kids - there is me with Jean Bedson, Katie with Emmanuela, Mark & Toni with Vanie, Ariel and Eleyson, Shan with Shaaida, Kevin & Marietta with Rodna, Wendy with Loudwige and her new sponsored kid, Tim & Caroline with Dailande, Nikki with Naika, Jim & Rita with Roodny, Mary Sue with Elshaime, Carolina with Woudnaika and Kelly with Stephanie

I had just enough time to help him get his things together before getting a final photo and walking him to the parking lot - his ride was waiting for him. Seeing him looking out the back window of the van, I went up to him, cleaned the dusty glass where I could see his face. Touching my nose to his through the glass, I sensed a deep connection and that even if we never had a chance to meet again in real life, that we would see each other in heaven someday. I caught a final glimpse of his smile when the van started to pull away and was gone.

Carolina was sitting with her little girl Woudnaika - she seemed to be crying as she and her mom would have to say good-bye. Her little cheeks were streaked with tears that sparkled like glitter. Kevin and Marietta's girl Rodna had given a basket of fresh mangoes and bananas from their village to share with all of us. When the last van pulled away with the last of the children, the silence was near overwhelming.

It was a quiet afternoon, exactly what I needed to process everything that has happened all week long. Our original itinerary was to spend a half day the last day to visit the Citadel just outside of town, but I was glad that we were just going to have lunch by the beach and do some souvenir shopping instead. I did a final walk around the grounds of the hotel, wandering through the church onsite, checking on the latest status of the construction, and enjoying the gardens around the hotel. We relaxed by the pool, enjoyed a beer with the fresh mangoes and bananas, while updating friends and family through Facebook of our experiences. Nisha was thrilled to get photos of me and Jean Bedson - she had just finished lunch at work (1:00 her time) when the pictures buzzed on her phone. Although we were miles apart, we were so close. I was excited that I would be home the very next day!

Dinner was the usual once again, but this time, we had dessert of fresh chocolate and coconut ice cream! Our final debriefing was pretty short - I knew it would take months to fully process and process what happened (even as I write this, thoughts keep streaming to mind). We all gave a one-word impression of our experience. "Thankful". "Amazed". "Beautiful". Mine was "Hopeful" - after seeing so much poverty and what God has been doing so far in Haiti, I had much hope that His work was going to continue. I said a silent prayer again for the family in the "hell-hole house" that there would be deliverance, just like the mom's name. Jean Bedson had mentioned his ambitions of being an actor someday - I hope he'll have a chance to fulfill his dream.

Again I had a flurry of jumbled dreams that night - dreams of a jigsaw puzzle with a ragged edge, with a similar shape as the puzzle we did at the Clair Tappan lodge on a recent ski trip, but with an edge like the pattern of the tiles at the Kathmandu Kitchen restaurant in Davis. Dreams of my first day in a new office at work, where it was the same people as I had worked with at Tellme back around 2007. Dreams about parking at a new garage around the building and fears that my car would get stolen (I had just read about another car break-in on the Nextdoor Renaissance site on my phone). I realized that dream later on was a clash to the hopefulness I had felt about Haiti. I would experience some reverse culture-shock upon returning, in the sense of lost hope about

things back home. Crime had been increasing around our neighborhood as things have been steadily getting more crowded, and as people have lost faith in humanity in many ways. When I returned back to the US, I knew my mission for God's kingdom would not be over. I had to pray that when I got back to the US that my mind could still look with hope to the Lord and not be overwhelmed with the prevailing cynicism in our modern society.

March 12

We enjoyed one final buffet breakfast at the hotel before checking out. It was the usual pancakes, cassava tortillas with jam, fruit and coffee, but with a bonus this time of fruit muffins. I was mostly packed already from the night before, and we were soon checking out. It had been a wonderful week together, and we developed a bond that would last for a lifetime. We got one final group photo by the lobby before packing everything in the bus.

We had a little time to do some final souvenir shopping at one of the markets. I exchanged some dollars for gourdes at the front desk. The money was worn and tattered, even though the bills were less than 2 years old. I rarely use cash anymore in the US, but money had changed hands often in the street markets. I had a tradition of picking up certain things from different countries - a CD with a recording of some of the local music, a magnet (Nisha had been collecting magnets long before we were married), some food item, and a turtle or elephant. We had a couple shelves at home with a "march of the turtles" and a "march of the elephants". I picked up a blue soapstone turtle and a couple hand-painted magnets. I had a couple pieces of artwork already, so I picked up some small things as gifts for friends and family. They didn't have any CD's so I would keep my fingers crossed at the airport. I ended up not using any of the gourdes – vendors preferred to trade in dollars, so the gourdes would become a souvenir instead.



By the shore

We were right by the shore where a nice concrete path lined with palm trees went along a rocky seawall. A couple of us went up to the water to see how warm it was - you had to

touch the water to say you “properly visited” a beach. A minute later as I went to get a photo, I saw Marc with a nice trophy - I thought it was a rock, but when I saw it more closely, it was a beautiful conch shell, about 8 inches across! Shoot - I must have walked right by it! He was taunting us with it, egging us on to find a better one. I managed to find a small one about 3 inches long and someone else found another small conch too. Of course I wasn’t sure even if I did find one, how I would get it home. Since I had left my big suitcase behind, I was stuffing everything in my carry-on instead.

We had spent a little too much time and had to get rolling to the airport, so we ended up getting lunch to go from a seaside burger place. My cheeseburger was a bit dry and there were way too many fries, but the salty snacks and sugary Coke was satisfying. I had to peel off the lettuce and tomato since we were never sure if fresh vegetables were safe. Inching our way in traffic through a sea of multicolored taxicabs, weaving around motorcycles, Mack trucks and open-air shops, we made our way to the airport terminal. With the mis-adventures of some of the logistics around our arrival, I wondered how our departure was going to fare. I was glad to just be carrying on a bag this time. They had just one counter open, which probably took 45 minutes to process all of us.

Shuffling through various immigration / emigration / random passport checks, we got to security and finally to our gate. Ours was the only departure at the time. A police unit with K-9 unit was wandering around. I was waiting for the dog to start barking near my bag, but luckily he didn’t find anything amiss with any of our bags - any contraband must have been well packaged. I was in luck at the terminal - they had a few small shops, and one shop had a couple CD’s left with some traditional Haitian Creole music that wasn’t aimed at tourists - most of the CD’s had a picture of a cruise ship like the one at Labadie, I wonder how much of the music had been Disneyfied to appeal to the masses. I found a small bottle of Haitian hot sauce to replace my Belizean “XXXX” sauce that had run out recently. I wondered how many X’s the Haitian sauce would have been rated. A \$2 bottle of coconut rum was a nice treat as we started lining up to board our bus across the tarmac to our awaiting 737.

The engines started up and we started taxiing directly down the runway - again, ours was the only flight for several hours, so it wasn’t like we would be hogging the runway from another flight. We turned into the wind and soon hit the skies. The flight was smooth and on-time, passing over the slums around Cap-Haitien. Some appeared flooded, like the water had encroached right to the doorsteps of many houses. It had been a whirlwind of a trip with many pages of journals and thousands of photos. I prayed that God would continue His good work there. As we climbed over 10,000 feet, we made a left turn, and peeking out of my window I could see a coral reef and breaking waves offshore, stretching for many miles like an enormous ribbon. Thoughts from the trip flashed before my eyes while seeing Cap-Haitien from the air. The boundary of the reef, dropping thousands of feet into the deep blue ocean gave a sense of finality, sealing the memories of God’s goodness in the beautiful country of Haiti.

I was thrilled to be back in Miami - back in the US, where I could take my phone out of airplane mode and get caught up with some phone calls where I wouldn’t be charged an

arm and a leg for international roaming! We would be able to eat salad again! We still had to get through another rat-maze of immigration, customs, passport checks and security, which seemed to take twice as long as Haiti, though we didn't care so much anymore about the hassle - it was always harder getting back into America.

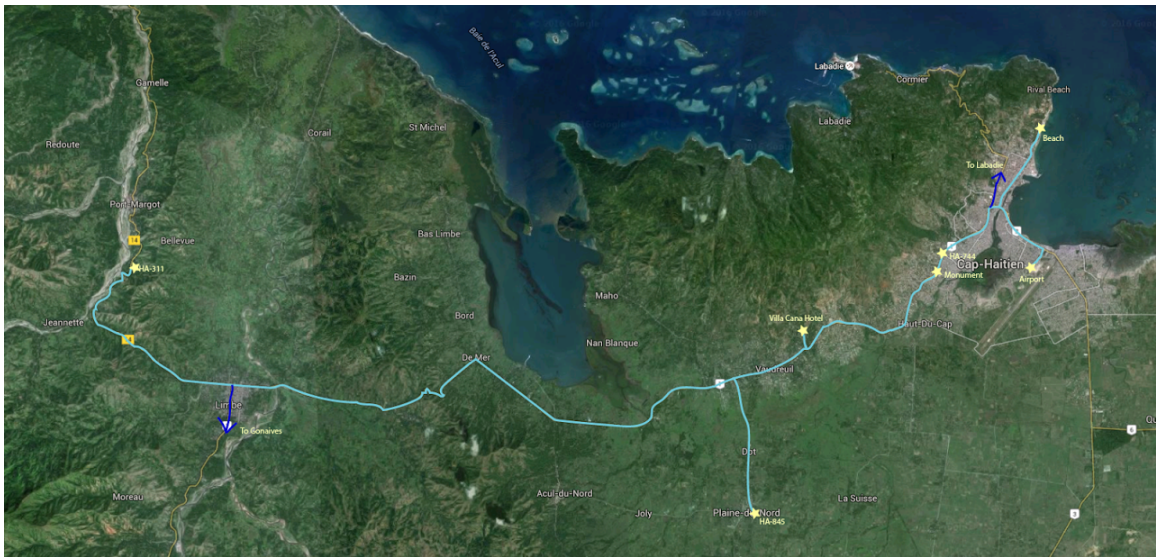
Unfortunately, our group had gotten split in one of the lines when a large rush of folks came in on another flight, setting them probably 1/2 hour behind us. Some people were staying in Miami and flying out the next morning - the beaches were enticing as we landed, but I looked forward to just getting home.

My flight wasn't until 9:30, still several hours away, so I would have many hours to kill. To my dismay, however, when we got to a set of monitors, I saw it had been delayed until 10:20, nearly an hour. I wouldn't get home until around 1 am (which would feel like 4 am!) I saw a 5:00 flight had been delayed until 6:00, and it was around 5:30, so if I was quick, there might be a chance I could get on it if there was room. Luck was with me and they did indeed have a couple seats available. I would have to pay a \$75 change fee, but since the fare was the same, that would be it. I would be able to leave at 6:00 instead of 10:20 and maybe be home by 9 pm. It was bittersweet, since I had to run off quickly to check the gate, and I wasn't able to say good-bye properly to the rest of the team. I missed them already as I sat down in my seat. I was glad to have carried on my luggage instead of checking it - I'm sure I wouldn't have gotten my suitcase at baggage claim otherwise!

We pushed back from the gate and taxied to the runway. However, halfway there, I thought I heard the engines shutting down - hmmm, that couldn't be good. We were delayed due to air traffic control in SFO - it was raining again, and because the runways were built too close together years ago, they were only able to use one at a time during inclement weather - bummer. We were delayed 3 1/2 hours for the same reason leaving SFO and now we were delayed on the return. I hadn't gotten to make any phone calls in the terminal since I expected to have hours to kill, but it was nice to catch up with Nisha for a bit. They had already said to turn off your phones since we were taking off, but since we were parked for a while, I didn't see any harm. I was just wrapping up the call when the engines revved back up and we started moving again - phew!

It was a smooth flight over most of the country. A dazzling crimson sunset greeted us as we climbed out of Florida and cruised over the Gulf of Mexico. It was a bumpy ride over the NV desert and the Sierra Nevada, but the weather cleared as we approached the Bay Area. "Creed" and Star Wars "The Force Awakens" were playing. Just a few months ago, people had been lining up for many hours to watch Star Wars, and here it was showing on the plane with most of the passengers actually sleeping through it. The hype and perceived scarcity of the experience back in December created so much hysteria that could have been avoided so easily by just waiting a couple months! We touched down right around 9:15 and almost reached our gate. I already told Nisha I was back when again the engines shut down. I thought we had reached the gate, so I popped off my seat belt and got up only to notice nobody else was up. We apparently didn't have a gate, so we were parked again in a waiting area just outside - bummer. We sat for probably 20 minutes before they let us in.

The Super Shuttle showed up in less than 5 minutes and I was on my way home - I was tired but so happy to be home. A guy next to me had come back from scuba diving in the Cayman Islands - seeing the coral reefs from the air made me long to go back and get underwater. It was around 10:30 when we finally pulled up and I got to greet my lovely wife once again. The whole trip felt like a fairy tale - I would have to review my camera photos repeatedly to convince myself it was all indeed real!



Our route showing the airport, our hotel, the 3 Compassion centers, and the beach. Our child is from Gonaïves (arrow on the left) and most tourists just see Labadie (arrow on the right)