

FLM Haiti

Founded 1982

Rev. Dr. Leon Pamphile

A son of Haiti



JUSTIN MERRIMAN/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The Rev. Leon Pamphile, founder of the Functional Literacy Ministry of Haiti, is returning to Haiti at the end of June with his wife, Rozelle, to dedicate a new medical center there.

HOPE FOR HAITI

Groups have made helping the troubled nation a sacred mission

BY ERVIN DYER

THE EVENING IS WARM and clear, and the sun still hugs the rolling green hills of Haiti's rural Kenscoff region when the young mother approaches. The makeshift clinic, set in a small stone church, prepares to close for the day after seeing more than 150 patients. Wait, the mother protests. Her baby is sick. Swaddled in a thick blanket and layers of clothing, the infant has been unable to take the mother's milk for days and refuses to suckle anything. Severely dehydrated, the baby lacks the energy to even cry.

Leon Pamphile, a Haitian native and founder of a mission group that's brought healing hands to this mountaintop, stands at the clinic's door and waves the mother through. The doctors and nurses rub the baby with a glucose lotion that provides immediate nourishment. Unable to give an IV because the baby's tiny veins are collapsed, they squeeze a saline solution into its mouth drop by drop. At last, the 3-month-old whimpers. Doctors say the infant was only a few hours from death. Its revival is a miracle, they say.

Pamphile, a tall dark man with chiseled features and a gentle spirit, watches and smiles. He knows miracles. After all, 52 years ago, the encouragement of Pentecostal ministers helped lift him from a two-room village schoolhouse to an education in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital.

The journey paved the way for him to come to America, where he is now a minister and a retired teacher living in Pittsburgh. At this point, Pamphile has spent most of his life in the United States, but he's never forgotten his roots or his good fortune.

His mission work is among faith-based and nonprofit efforts that have poured into this tiny island nation from all across the United States. They include the Albert Schweitzer Hospital, which provided care for thousands during its 52 years in Haiti, and groups that assist women in

reading and writing skills. It built a school in his native village on land donated by his father, a 91-year-old preacher. And it supports struggling schools by providing scholarships to help with books and clothing.

Pamphile's vision came to fruition with the help of David Robinson, a Presbyterian minister in suburban Pittsburgh whose sweat and conviction were vital in expanding the ministry until he died four years ago. Pamphile's clinic is called the House of David in his honor.

Pamphile returns to Haiti for about two weeks every summer with as many as a dozen volunteers who provide medical attention in a country that has only one physician for every 10,000 inhabitants, and one hospital bed for every 1,000. In the two decades since he founded the charity, it has raised about \$1 million to support its missions.

The school he supports educates 500 children, the future of the country as Pamphile sees it. Through the ministry, he also supports a literacy training program that gives up to 1,200 people a year the building blocks to a better life. The clinic, which still needs electrical work, plumbing and flooring, had its groundbreaking in 2003. During Pamphile's annual summer mission, it can serve up to 1,000 people in 10 days. This summer, mission leaders were excited that a small circle of Haitian physicians and nurses expressed interest in working with the clinic and helping to establish a more stable presence in the Thomassin community, a busy place about 25 miles from Port-au-Prince where mounds of garbage and shanty communities share space with gated pastel-colored homes, shops and restaurants.

The illnesses and trauma that Pamphile and his group face during the missions can be crushing. Hundreds of patients come to the clinic with high blood pressure, malnourishment, infections, worms and fever. The appreciation for their work is easy to see. In fact, it's all over the smiling face of Wendy Nestor, a 12-year-old boy who walked in one humid afternoon wearing a thick wool cap on his head.

A year ago, Wendy was severely burned when boiling oil spilled onto his head. His wounds, inappropriately treated by a Haitian physician, became badly infected. His parents brought Wendy to the mission clinic. Sam Roberts, a West Virginia physician long active with the group, was on hand and had brought with him the medicines and dressings necessary to attend to Wendy. Under sedation, his wounds were cleaned and he was given antibiotics. Still, the road to recovery was a lengthy one. With the help of Pamphile's group, arrangements were made to transport the boy to Boston for two surgeries, one of which was a graft to help his hair grow back.

He's improving and he was back in the clinic that day to thank his friends for the new hair now puffing up from his scalp.

"If there was not this clinic," said Wendy of the help he received, "I don't know if I would be

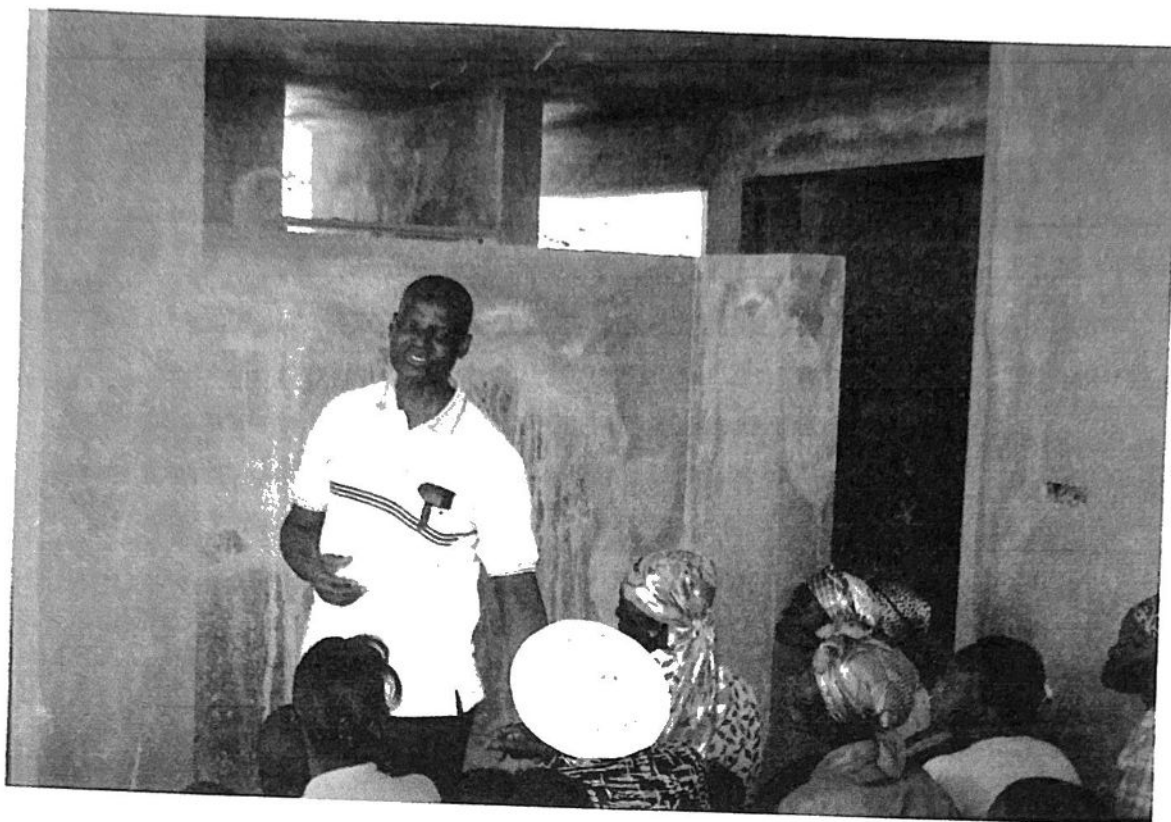
here. I thought I might die."

Sitting on a wooden bench in the shade outside the clinic, Pamphile said he has sometimes been a "weary traveler along a heavenly road," but the possibility of such a Haitian/American partnership fills him with hope.

"I believe in empowering community development and in the empowerment of people to help themselves," he said. "This has not been my vision all my life, but after my training as an educator and theology student, I knew service would be a cardinal principle of my life."

Meanwhile, on the mountain at Kenscoff, Pamphile and crew continue packing up to leave. Mission accomplished. They are heading down the stony dirt path with two more people than they arrived with. Rachele, the mother who came late to the clinic, and her infant son, Stevenson, now crying softly in his mother's arms, are being taken to a nearby orphanage where they will be given special care. Before his two-week stay is done, Pamphile hears both are well. He is pleased. It's yet another sign that Haiti can be healed, even if it happens one person at a time.

Ervin Dyer is a Pittsburgh writer who covers health and issues related to the African diaspora.



the arts and put men to work in the coffee fields. These groups, large and small, offer Haiti a lifeline of hope.

It's difficult to get an official number of how many are touched, but physicians, aid workers and development officials estimate it could be millions.

The brute shock of just how much help is needed came to Angel Aloma one hot summer day. Aloma, executive director of Florida-based Food for the Poor, was in Cite Soleil, a sprawling, shanty neighborhood near Port-au-Prince where hundreds forage for food in garbage dumps. The group has a feeding center in Cite Soleil where it serves hot meals. Aloma went to visit one couple and their seven children who rely on the center. Their home was a dilapidated shack: dirt floor, no windows and a corroded roof. In the hot, cramped structure, Aloma looked up and saw light streaming through the many holes. When it rained, as if often does in Haiti, the family slept in the mud.

Through its network of missionaries and food donations, which come in by the trailer load, Food for the Poor reaches some of Haiti's most destitute people. "We fight the battle against generational poverty and starvation," Aloma said. "We have tripled our shipments of food to Haiti and the needs there are still tremendous. Haitians are thankful and appreciative. To many of these hardworking and long-suffering people, this aid means the difference between life and death."

The global food crisis has magnified the importance of the aid provided by Food for the Poor and other groups. While the price of food staples has soared around the globe, the spike is felt more acutely in Haiti, where families struggle to

Leon Pamphile speaks to a group at the House of David clinic in the rural village of Thomassin.

survive on incomes averaging \$2 a day. Beans, corn and rice prices have risen 50 percent to 100 percent above their typical costs. A 50-pound bag of rice that was \$13 a year ago now costs \$52 or more. The poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti stands at the epicenter of the crisis as up to 60 percent of its 9 million citizens are left with empty bellies. The crisis has battered the country, threatening a rare but fragile stability.

To fill their stomachs, the poorest Haitians eat dirt — in the form of small pies crafted from mud, sugar and oil that are sold on the street for a penny. This past spring, hundreds of people desperate for relief marched to the iron gates of Haiti's presidential palace crying "Nou grangou" — "We are hungry." Six people died in the ensuing melee. The president lowered food prices.

Food for the Poor and most aid groups work without fanfare. But the food crisis has given assistance efforts a broader exposure. The Rev. Jesse Jackson led a three-day fact-finding delegation in the spring that examined the roots of the Haitian crisis and what the U.S. could do to help bring relief. From 2004 through 2006, the U.S. government provided more than \$600 million to help Haiti with security and economic and humanitarian aid.

But even that amount pales in comparison to the massive debt Haiti faces. The Jubilee USA Network, a web of activist organizations that is pushing for debt relief, says Haiti owes \$1.3 billion in debt and pays \$1 million a week in debt service to overseas banks. In early summer, the Center for Human

Global Links

- Registered 501©3 non-profit organization that recovers surplus medical materials from U.S. hospitals and makes it available to hospitals that serve the poorest members of society in less developed countries.
- Dedicated volunteers help Global Links to maintain high quality standards and low costs. Global Links spend less than 3% on overhead costs.
- Located 4809 Penn Ave. 2nd floor Pittsburgh, PA 412 / 361-3424
- Every year U.S. hospitals throw away an estimated 2,000 tons of unused medical supplies worth over \$200 million. This still useful material often ends up in landfills or incinerators, thus adding to the pollution problem and the cost of health care in the U.S.
- Global Links gave more than \$50,000 in equipment, tables & chairs, etc. to FLM 2008-2009.
- FLM / Haiti has a proven record of using funds wisely.
- FLM / Haiti is funded & run by Haitians.
- FLM / Haiti knows community well.
- Has no administrative costs – totally all volunteer labor.
- Is totally dedicated to its cause.