

'No breakfast on Friday'

By John Hogenson - Lead Pastor

As the bus pulled up to the tired pink building that was the only source of help and hope in the community, we saw a sign on the blackboard outside of the building that read, "No breakfast on Friday. Thank you." As the Mission Jamaica first-timers stepped off the bus, tears welled up in their eyes as they looked at the slums just outside of Callaloo Mews, the basic (preschool) school in Kingston, Jamaica where we were going to serve. Of all the places in the world that I have been to, there is no place that has grabbed my heart and moved my soul more than Callaloo Mews.

The poverty is unimaginable and impossible to describe. First-timers just stood looking at the slums saying, "I can't believe..." and "I have never..." The only thing more overwhelming than the poverty is the joy of the people. As we stood looking at the community trying to take it all in, Miss Angie, the director of the school, and the 54 children came out to greet us. The children, aged 3 to 6, were in their uniforms. They started singing, "This is the day that the Lord has made." After singing more songs, the children ran up to hug all of us and thanked us for coming. If ever there is a place to live out our mission statement -- "Proclaim, Live, Serve!" -- this is it.

Our job on this Mission Jamaica trip was to paint and do plumbing and electrical work. On Monday a friend who is a senior pastor of another very large church e-mailed me to report on his mission trip to the Congo. I told him I was on a mission trip in Kingston and he replied by writing, "Are you preaching, teaching or leading seminars?" When I responded with, "I am busting up concrete and painting," he thought I was kidding. One of the many reasons I want people to go on mission trips is because of what the Holy Spirit does in people's souls -- and on this mission trip the Spirit took charge. One person was so moved that he bought a professional paint sprayer so we could do more faster. By the time we left to return home, the tired pink building was bright "Bali" blue and neon "sporting" green. One team member met a little girl without shoes. That night he bought 20 pairs of shoes and some Legos because Miss Angie told us that the children have no toys at home. She showed us "toy" trucks that they had constructed out of their milk cartons. Miss Angie also needed a computer printer that makes copies. By the time we left she had one. Miss Angie told us that when she had to make copies of worksheets for the children she had to copy each one by hand. This was also true of other teachers we had observed on the trip.

One of the privileges of being a pastor is that I get to meet lots of inspiring people, but Miss Angie may just be the most inspiring person I have ever met in my life. Miss Angie was living a comfortable middle class life yet felt "called by the Lord" to go into the slums of Callaloo Mews. Everyone there knows Miss Angie and everyone respects Miss Angie. We walked with her deep into the slums on several occasions. We kept meeting people who lived in the neighborhood, visited in their homes; somehow the more people we met the more natural it felt to be in the neighborhood.

Some time ago Miss Angie sent St. Andrew's an e-mail telling us about a community "breakfast program." In the e-mail Miss Angie told us that the children were eating one meal, at the most, and could not learn because they were too hungry. When we told you about this last year you gave \$900 dollars which funded the program for two months. On this trip we found ourselves getting up at 4:30 in the morning to serve breakfast on the street. Some of us were slicing bread, some of us were cooking eggs, others were passing out food, and others were greeting people as they arrived. This truly is a community breakfast program. Young and old from all over came for breakfast, all of them hungry, all of them grateful. The breakfast program is now in two communities, and an additional program for the elderly has just started. By the time we were finished serving breakfast, my wife, Ruth, I and others had given a donation to the breakfast program once again because we saw that it is literally feeding a community.

It is amazing how life comes full circle. In the afternoon when we sat in the bus ready to leave, we looked at the building that had been transformed. As Miss Angie sang and closed our time at Callaloo Mews in prayer, all of us had tears coming down our cheeks. We had worked hard and long. We were tired -- but the Holy Spirit had worked harder on us and we come back changed.

Thank you for your commitment to our mission and ministry which makes the Gospel come alive as we "Proclaim, Live and Serve" in our community and around the world.