

# A THIRST FOR LEARNING ON THE ISLAND OF LA GONÂVE

// OCTAVIUS DELFILS



The author (upper left corner) with Haitian trainees

It was 8:45 in the morning on a sunny day in November 2016 when Foreign Missions associate general secretary Douglas Clawson and I passed through the gate of the office building of the Ministry of Education's local training and school supervision center. The employees in this Haitian government office kindly host the training seminars of the OPC Haiti Mission in their facilities. When we arrived, almost all the seminar participants were in the room, waiting. They were all ready to listen, to ask as many questions as they could, and to learn good theology. Most of the pastors who came to the seminar left their homes before dawn and walked for hours to get to the training center. Others rode a taxi-motorcycle to come. They planned to spend the night in Anse-à-Galets, the main city on the island of La Gonâve, in order to avoid the weariness of the road and not to miss the next day's session. The eagerness to learn was, as always, palpable in the joyful faces of these men who treasure the opportunity to get training in the Word of God. The interest in learning was at its highest point for these servants of God.

The island of La Gonâve is located northwest of the capital city of Port-au-Prince, and it takes more than three hours from Port-au-Prince to get there. This time is split between driving to the dock and crossing the ocean on the ferry. More than 120,000 people live on this island of 743 square kilometers. If you live on the island of La Gonâve, you need to be prepared to face the everyday challenges of life. Clean water, decent transportation, basic infrastructure, healthy food, and other basic needs are missing. Driving on the rocky and hilly roads of the island is quite a challenge. The island is only fifteen kilometers wide, but it can take hours to get from one side to the other. When it rains, transportation is dangerous and quite impossible in some areas. When Pastor Douglas and I arrived on La Gonâve, Hurricane Matthew had recently added to the difficulties of the island and its people.

Matthew had devastated the southern peninsula of Haiti less than a month before, and its winds and rains had damaged the roads, which were already very bad.

Although the economy and infrastructure of the island are poor and life is hard, I saw, especially in the churches and at the training sessions, Christian people whose hearts are devoted to serving the Lord. Thirty men and women were on time and ready to learn more about Reformed theology. Some of the leaders came from churches that work with the OPC Haiti Mission. Others were pastors and church leaders from other denominations who were interested in learning from the Bible and in getting better acquainted with theology. They are not aware of all the differences between various theological perspectives, and I am so glad that the Lord provides this opportunity for them to get some basic training in Reformed theology and biblical teaching. It will take time for them to understand and grow, but the Lord allows the seed to be planted slowly but surely.

For the training session in November 2016, Pastor Douglas was teaching on the subject of eschatology. Most of these church leaders had previously only heard dispensational views; from us they heard a different perspective. For some of them, it was a shock to realize the differences between the doctrines they had been taught and what the Bible actually teaches. Some of them have as their only theological tool the French notes of the Scofield Bible, and others do not have access to anything but the Bible. For most of them, this seminar was a new learning experience—which is the case with most of the seminars we have taught on the island.

The need for training seminars for church leaders is very great in Haiti in general, and even more so in rural areas such as on the island of La Gonâve. It is rare to find even one pastor on the whole island who has completed his theological training. Most of the pastors have no academic training and can barely read and write. The poor academic level of the preachers and their lack of biblical and theological education affect the

state of the church on the island. This situation is similar to that of villages and rural places across Haiti. Pastors who are not well nourished are under obligation to nurture their flock. You can imagine the results.

When the OPC started the church-planting ministry on the island about twelve years ago, one of the basic needs that had to be tackled was the training of leaders. Most of the churches were “pastored” by deacons who were not officially trained and ordained. Seminars on the basic teachings of the Reformed faith were organized on a regular basis. Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism was extremely useful as a basic tool to equip them. These basic training sessions soon attracted pastors, elders, and deacons from other denominations. Pentecostals and Baptists joined the people from our churches to hear these new teachings. The seminars turned out to be a huge blessing, not only for our churches, but also for more than a dozen other churches and ministries on the island.

The teaching ministry of the OPC Haiti Mission, both in Port-au-Prince and on La Gonâve, is bringing hope to a people in great need. The repairing of the roads, the raising of good crops, and the providing of clean water are huge needs to be met. But an even greater need is for the training of officers to lead the churches in a more biblical way and to teach and preach the gospel accurately. That will bring lasting blessings.

The people who are involved in these training sessions understand that need. They understand the necessity and the usefulness of trained officers for the church. That’s why they are so eager to cross the mountains, ride on hilly and rocky roads, brave danger, and walk several kilometers to come to the training center in order to spend the whole day learning the Word. I am sure that what they hear, they will bring back to their churches and entrust to faithful men, who will in turn be able to teach others. The only hope for La Gonâve is the true preaching and teaching of the gospel of grace. The people won’t be able to hear if there is no one who can preach the gospel, and the proclaiming of the good news requires good training. It is wonderful to see so many pastors and elders from OPC and PCA churches come and share their time and the gifts that the Lord entrusts to them to teach the Word on La Gonâve and in Port-au-Prince. The seed sown patiently over the years will surely receive the Lord’s blessings, and I pray that it will fall on good soil and produce a good crop, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold.

I hope and pray that the vision for this training program will be enlarged and that the work of the church will continue to prosper on this barren island and in Haiti as a whole. The training of officers is one of the greatest needs on the field. Churches need to be planted, and elders need to be raised up to nurture them. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are



*Pastor Lexene (seated) and church leader Elissaint using materials from the training conferences to teach Sunday school at the Doglas church*

few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37). Thank you for your prayers to the Master to equip his church in Haiti and on La Gonâve with well-qualified officers to carry out his plan for the work of the kingdom.

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## What’s New

### // Comings/Goings

Completing twenty-three years of service with the Committee on Foreign Missions on a number of mission fields in Africa, **Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Brian T. (Dorothy) Wingard** returned to the U.S. and retired from their missionary labors at the end of 2016.

**Rev. and Mrs. Mark E. (Jeni) Richline**, having concluded an eleven-month furlough in the U.S., returned to their labors in Montevideo, Uruguay, in December.

**Mr. and Mrs. Michael W. (Melanie) Caldwell** (Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church, PCA, Greenville, S.C.) and **Mr. Donald J. McCrory** (Harvest OPC, Wyoming, Mich.) completed their service as missionary associates in Asia and returned to the U.S. in December and January, respectively.

**Rev. and Mrs. Markus G. (Sharon) Jeromin** completed their eleven-month term of service as missionary associates in Montevideo, Uruguay, and returned to the U.S. in December.

**Rev. Eric R. Hausler** concluded his labors as a part-time missionary evangelist to Haiti at the end of 2016 in order to devote his energies full-time to Christ the King Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Naples, Fla.