INDESCRIBABLE HAITI
Reflections on a medical mission trip to Haiti

“So...how was Haiti?” I’ve been asked this same question many times by friends and co-workers who were supportive of my endeavor to “make a difference.” The first word that jumps to mind is TOUGH...incredibly tough.

As we entered Port-au-Prince it appeared as though we were entering a war zone. Nothing prepared me for the sights. It was worse than I had pictured or imagined--rubble in every direction, homes collapsed floor on floor, crumbled. It was apparent this earthquake stopped life in mid-action. I spotted mattresses half-buried and chairs twisted. Some buildings looked as though they would fall any second. The few structures still standing had jagged cracks through the walls.

And then I noticed the people, their expressionless faces, no sadness, no anger. This became the staple of those whom I spoke with, treated and prayed for--what an overwhelming feeling of loneliness. The children weren’t playing, mothers were scooping water out of the ditches for their families, and fathers were still digging through mounds of debris with bare hands. As we drove through the streets, I heard our team leader give the latest report: 100,000 dead and 100,000 to die from infection and malnutrition. All of this devastation in a mere 26 seconds.

I worked with Miami Hospital which “set up camp” at the Port-au-Prince airport. Although severely understaffed, they were one of the few hospitals still accepting patients. I entered what would be my station for the next week and was faced with a large tent, about the size of half a football field, with cot after cot shoved together to allow as much room as possible. Rope was strung precariously through the tent. IV’s hung by gloves, tied to the rope in an attempt to provide a makeshift IV pole. We had 175 patients, and I was to be the fourth nurse providing care. I plunged in with all I had, running at breakneck speed from one cot to the next. I felt as though I was on an episode of “MASH” gone terribly wrong.

Supplies had been donated from around the world, and I had to ‘make do’ with what I had. Foley catheters were used as chest tubes and tape was holding IV tubing together, but somehow it worked. It seemed as though every patient had an amputation. Limbs had been removed with the explanation that it was better to lose a limb that to become septic. I didn’t have time to give these patients their IV antibiotics, let alone pain medications. And yet, there they sat, no complaints, no emotion showing on their faces. Yet...if I stopped to help, they smiled and gave a quick “thank you” in broken English. Many were now quadriplegics, paraplegics, total brain injuries. But they all had one common denominator--a story of that eventful earthquake.
But I feel I must temper the tough by stating it was also miraculous. We stayed at the Haitian police headquarters located directly outside the palace. Word had spread throughout the tent villages that a clinic was in town. Every night was an opportunity to experience some sort of excitement. My first night I was in deep discussion with a fellow team member when I noticed a lady running in our direction. She was holding a small child who appeared to be 10-12 months old. She was yelling and in a panic. We quickly became aware that the child was limp and not breathing. Immediately we sprang into action. What a sight...the panicked scene of CPR being conducted on a baby while a group began to pray. Time seemed to speed by as we counted the seconds the child had been oxygen-deprived. Prayers intensified until...he began to breathe! Although I don’t know what the final outcome was, the rescue impacted my life.

Another miraculous intervention happened days before our arrival. A mother had not felt her eight-month-old unborn baby move in weeks. A wall had fallen during the earthquake, leaving her trapped for hours. No heartbeat was heard, and she was told the baby had died. Once again, a small group began to pray for her and to ask God to show mercy. Suddenly, the mother began to feel movement. She was quickly checked, and to everyone’s astonishment, a strong heartbeat could be heard. God worked a miracle! Yes, I can confidently say my time in Haiti was miraculous.

Did I make a difference? I hope so...for the few I was able to treat. I felt like a very small drop in the very large proverbial bucket. If everything depended upon me, you or the Haitians, then it would be hopeless. But there is hope--hope in Christ. I can only be humbled that God worked through and most of all, in me.