

Admit it, you've forgotten all about Haiti, one year after the quake

By Jerry Davich on January 11, 2011 8:31 PM

Has anyone even thought about Haiti over the past several months, let alone thought about donating more money to that country's rebuilding efforts?

Be honest now - especially today - on the one-year anniversary of the devastating earthquake that hit there, killing more than 200,000 Haitians, injuring another 250,000, and leaving 1.5 million homeless.

One year ago, if you recall, America was all "We are the World" about giving charitable donations to that country and its ever-beleaguered citizens. It was the thing to do.

Until I visited Haiti four months after the quake, I didn't send one dime to aid Haiti's relief efforts despite all the social pressure to do so.

Instead, I wrote at the time, "This is not an easy confession these days while watching endless footage of the country's death and destruction, poverty and malnutrition, desperation and hopelessness."

I caught hell from readers for admitting that, but I also echoed the view of many other readers who felt their money could be better donated elsewhere on the planet, or in this region.

Well, after a year of watching where the billions of dollars in relief aid went - or should I say, didn't go - I can confidently say I'm still glad I didn't donate any money through mainstream channels. (Instead, I gave cash to a few Haitians who I met during my trip there.)

From what I can tell these days, Haiti is still in shambles, many of the basic needs of its people are still not being met, and many of those promised pledges of international aid have yet to be delivered.

Making matters worse, the country's flawed (if not rigged) presidential election in November, coupled with a deadly and ongoing cholera epidemic, have stifled many relief-aid efforts.

As a culture-clash footnote to the cholera epidemic, more than 50 Haitians (most of them voodoo priests) have been lynched by angry mobs who blame them for the disease epidemic. Oh boy.

Just as I told a church group that I shadowed there last April, the place is, simply put, "one big cluster(expletive)."

In other words, a lot of that charitable money is not getting to the people or to reconstruction efforts. It's probably lining the pockets of mid-level officials, street-level criminals, and the ruling class elite.

Christian Rath of Crown Point, a deacon with Living Hope Church in Merrillville, has traveled to Port-au-Prince seven times to help relief efforts.

"I've seen an incredible amount of support coming from various organizations, but as the year went by, this effort has diminished, partially due to the increased frustration from having to operate in an environment filled with bureaucracy, to say

the least," said Rath, who is the church official I shadowed on my trip there.

"The overall situation is still very chaotic, with politics, bureaucracy and corruption still very predominant," said Rath, who led a team of engineers to assess the damage and create a master plan for reconstruction.

A good example of such chronic chaos takes place daily at the port of Port-au-Prince, the major transit and import point of Haiti.

"If you don't know somebody and watch your container closely, it can take several months before you can actually get access to it," Rath said. "The economy is still very precarious, to say the least, and the incredible amount of people without a job and without a roof over their head is astonishing."

As with countless other churches in this country, Living Hope and its affiliated Assemblies of God World Missions jumped in quickly to support its related ministries, such as Convoy of Hope and Builders International.

"Our effort has not waned during the course of the past 11 months," Rath said. "To the contrary."

But their efforts are the exception to the rule, I say, and most Americans (as well as most region residents) who donated money to relief efforts have likely forgot all about Haiti. And who's to blame them.

Even relief workers with the best of intentions, a bank vault of financial backing, and Jesus in their hearts can get discouraged about this situation.

It's no secret that Haiti is infamous for its rampant graft, bribes, and corruption. The country also has been raped, pillaged, or plundered for centuries by other countries, including the U.S.

One year after the quake, I'm wondering if there is an aftershock of regrets, second thoughts, or misgivings from people here who hurriedly and happily donated to "Operation Haiti"?

Or do they simply chalk it up to "doing the right thing," regardless of where their money went? Feel free to let me know either way.