

Haitians struggle to live in South Florida

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Franz Brinache knows about family separation. Franz left his home in Haiti in 1994 to escape the political chaos following a military coup that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He left behind his three children.

During the next five years, he made repeated attempts to bring his children to the United States. His personal pleas to the Haitian government and the payment of several hundred dollars to immigration assistance agencies resulted in nothing.

“The Haitians continue to come here for both economic and political reasons,” says Rev. Luc Dessieux, pastor of the United Methodist Haitian Mission, a 350 member church in Ft. Pierce. “There would not be economic problems without the political problems in Haiti,” he says. Rev. Dessieux says that many Haitians are sent to jail with out trail for their political views.

The recent public outcry over whether to return an orphaned Cuban boy rescued at sea to his father in Cuba or allow him to remain with relatives in Miami has focused attention on U.S. immigration policies related to family reunification. (See CT March 6, 2000). Six year old Elián Gonzalez was the sole survivor of a group of Cubans who tried to reach the United States from Cuba last Thanksgiving Day.

Meanwhile, the Haitian community in Miami has been working to remind politicians and the public that there are up to 350,000 Haitian refugees in the south Florida area stretching from Palm Beach to Key West, most of whom have arrived since the late 1970s. Haitian leaders charge that these immigrants receive unfair treatment in comparison to the Cubans who receive automatic asylum if they are able to reach America’s shores.

While massive attention has been given to the Elián story, almost ignored has been the case of an overloaded fishing boat with more than 400 Haitians aboard that was turned away by Coast Guard cutters on New Year’s Day. Other than a few refugees who were hospitalized in Miami, the boatload was immediately returned to Haiti without any hearings.

One pregnant woman who was taken off the boat for medical treatment was separated from her two children, ages 8 and 9. They were sent back to Haiti with another relative. Apparently stung by the inconsistency of advocating family reunification for Elián while separating the mother and her children, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) eventually brought the children back to Miami to be reunited with their mother.

“The very long wait the Haitian people must endure to get a green card from INS is horrible,” says Rev. Bill Hagewood, pastor of the 580-member Stanton Memorial Baptist Church, a predominately Haitian congregation in Miami. “During this long and stressful wait, they cannot get legal employment although they are eager to work.” Hagewood says

that because many Haitian immigrants are here illegally, they are often given work far below the minimum wage. He says that in addition, many are handicapped by not being able to speak either English or Spanish in this multilingual city, and others are “conned” by unscrupulous people who charge high fees, promising to help them with immigration papers, only to deliver nothing.

Many leaders charge that the policies affecting Haitians are racist. “It certainly has been part of the problem,” says Cheryl Little, Executive Director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. “With the way the Haitians have been treated over the years, politics do not explain it. You have to say that the color of their skin has something to do with it.”

Tom Willey who has headed up World Relief’s refugee efforts in Miami for almost 20 years does not quite agree with that assessment. “It is easy to make this a very emotional racial issue while forgetting that about 40% of the Cubans are also black,” he states.

“The Cubans are the ones who are treated differently,” Willey says. “Everybody else is treated the same.” Willey points to the 34-year old Cuban Adjustment Act that gives automatic asylum to any Cuban refugee “because they come from a Communist country.” Willey, who grew up as an MK in Cuba, says that the sharp contrast between the treatment of Cubans and that of Haitians is highlighted because “both of them happening to be coming to Miami the same way, they both are coming by sea.”

“The Haitians do not have the political muscle that the Cubans do in local, national and international politics,” reflects Hagedwood who served for over a dozen years as a Southern Baptist missionary in the Dominican Republic. “They are making gradual progress as more of them are becoming citizens. Recently, El Portal (a predominately Haitian city in Miami-Dade County) elected a Haitian councilwoman, giving this city the distinction of being the first in the country to elect a majority of Haitians to control its government. I believe you will see many Haitians becoming more politically active because they are quickly learning that there is power and influence in the ballot box.”

Nevertheless, World Relief and other organizations are actively advocating for Haitian and other refugees. “We are supporting the Refugee Protection Act that is currently before congress,” says Ami Henson, Director of World Relief’s Washington office. The bill would prevent the INS from deporting any person seeking asylum without an appeal. “The law would give them due process,” she says. Under a 1996 INS policy still in force, any applicant may be deported based on a single decision by a low-ranking officer.

Meanwhile, south Florida churches are reaching out to assist Haitians. “We offer spiritual support through prayer, Christian love and acceptance,” Hagedwood says. “We help them find good qualified legal assistance and offer English as a Second Language classes during the week.” A Haitian doctor who is a member of the church also offers medical check-ups.

Further north, in Ft. Pierce where 16,000 Haitians reside, Rev. Dessieux was able to help Franz and his children. The pastor sent a letter to the Haitian government and received a

reply within three weeks. Three months later his two younger children were able to seek asylum in the U.S. An older son was reunited with his father last year.

“Our first responsibility is to preach the Gospel and save as many souls as we can,” says Rev. Luc Dessieux. “Through some difficulties, we try to see how we can do social services to keep the community moving.”

Dessieux’s ministry is now in jeopardy due to a lack of finances. The church is closing its food and clothes pantries due to lack of support. A grant from the United Methodist church has run out and will not be renewed. The church is also closing its day-care center because it cannot find adequate staff.

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