

Virginia Tech Agricultural Team visits Haiti
Hope for the food insecurity of Haiti

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It is with great hope for the reduction of food insecurity, following the visit of the world renowned Virginia Tech Office of International Research, Education, and Development (www.vt.oired.edu) team to Haiti, that I want to share the events of the visit in December 2007. The Diocese of Richmond has a committee dedicated to education about sustainable development in Haiti. This sustainable development committee was formed about 28 months ago and is led by AJ Kelleher. The Richmond Sustainable Development Committee has been working with its counterpart in Haiti, the Diocese of Hinche over the last two years. The Hinche Committee is chaired by Father Romel EUSTACHE, Vicar of Foreign Relations, and Father Jacques VOLCIUS, Director of Caritas. Father Jacques is the Caritas project manager for a new joint project under development by Virginia tech, the Diocese of Richmond and the Diocese of Hinche.

Over a 2 ½ year period both the Richmond and Hinche committees have been meeting to develop a relationship, identify common goals and a mission statement, develop joint bylaws, and explore the possibilities of a joint sustainable development project in Haiti. Last spring, Virginia Tech, the Office of International Research, Education, and Development (OIREED) became interested in the possibility of helping the Richmond and Hinche committees to develop a project in Maissade, Haiti. Maissade is located in the upper central plateau and the parish is lead by Father Leveque Bien-Aime. This land was particularly attractive because the Maissade parish owns several tracts of land which could be developed and Father Leveque was willing to utilize the land for the project. Some members of the Richmond Sustainable Development Committee had an opportunity to tour the land on their previous visit to Haiti in January 2007. The land generated excitement because it was representative of Haiti itself; a country of deforestation, non-intentional misuse due to the need for survival, and endless possibilities for improvement. It was a beautiful piece of land spread over approximately 18 hectares which had several water sources on the property. The view from one of the ridges is one of the loveliest views in Haiti.

Five professors from the Virginia Tech OIREED department agreed to come to Haiti December 3-7th 2007 to perform a professional assessment of the land for a possible sustainable development project. The team included; Dr. Michael Bertelsen, Associate Director, OIREED and specialist in agricultural economic development, Dr. Theo Dillaha, specialist in water systems and water projects, Dr. Patrick Guilbaud, specialist in computer technology and a native Haitian, Dr. Keith Moore, specialist in rural sociology, and Dr. James McKenna, agronomist. The team was already very savvy in the assessment process with projects all over the world including the Dominican Republic. Virginia tech

had in fact developed their own unique assessment method and is a pioneer in this field. The team stayed at the Emmaus Center in Hinche (www.emmauscenterhaiti.com) and was hosted by the Hinche Committee and Director of the Emmaus Center, Father Romel.

Patrice Schwermer, Associate Director of the Office of Justice and Peace, Diocese of Richmond, and I were fortunate to be present representing the Richmond Sustainable Development Committee during the three day assessment. Keith Moore was the facilitator and led the group throughout the process. Our first afternoon, we met as a group to get to know one another, discuss our hopes and goals for the process, and development of a potential project. I will not forget our exercise of trying to bounce tennis balls on the rocky terrain to each other as part of our bonding process. The next morning we divided into three assessment teams and headed to Maissade to view the land. Our teams marched approximately 30 minutes to the site where we assessed the water sources, led by Theo Dillaha, looked at soil and crops, led by Jim McKenna, talked with local farmers to determine their methods of farming and needs they may have. Keith Moore, Mike Bertelsen, and Patrick Guilbaud also interviewed the local peasants farming the land.

Over the next two days we visited the local markets of Hinche and Maissade to survey produce, determine pricing, and methods of selling products. We divided into our teams and met with “middle men” in the sales of products including a gentlemen who had brought eggs from the Dominican Republic to the Hinche market. The teams met with two vendors of seeds and fertilizer, and visited the Save the Children organization to determine this NGO’s work in Maissade. My team, led by Keith Moore, visited an agricultural school run by the Petites Soeurs et Les Petits Freres de St. Thèrese (Little Sisters and Brothers of St. Therese) which educates high school graduates to become agricultural technicians. The full group also visited the Little Sister’s and Brothers of St. Therese’s compound which produces some of Haiti’s finest Manaba (peanut butter), Jellies, and Kasav. Kasav is a dry wafer made from the root of manyouk and it ground, compressed into a circular wafer, and then cooked over a hot wood burning oven. It is a staple of the Haitian diet. As we were visiting Maissade, we saw one of Haiti’s newest Digicel towers being erected. However our most important meeting occurred with a group of approximately 30 residents of Maissade who were formed into a group whose primary purpose was to clear land. We met with them in Father Leveque’s rectory. They were our resource for the size and types of farms that they had, types of crops growing, and hopes and desires for the land in Maissade. Each member of the group, both men and woman had an opportunity to share information about their own lives and hopes for Maissade. Throughout the assessment, the Virginia Tech team covered every possible area to obtain an understanding of the needs of the people of Maissade. As the week progressed, I could see the excitement building within the team for the potential to make positive changes in the lives of these people by working together as partners in the project. We had encountered many possible resources and identified areas for improvement.

On Thursday afternoon, the assessment concluded with an evaluation of the properties we had visited, three in all. We made the decision to proceed with proposal development

for the land located closest to the homes of many of the 30 residents we had met with. We did not want to disappoint them and look forward to continuing to work together in the future. This piece of land did not have road access and the Hinche Committee agreed to build a road to the site and the Virginia Tech team agreed to write a proposal for a project. Keith Moore will be the primary writer of the proposal. With all three partners committed to continuing the relationship and with the expertise of the Virginia Tech OIRED department there is hope for the people of Maissade. This hope is that over time the land can be transformed with new technology, information can be transferred throughout the Central Plateau, and perhaps food insecurity will someday be a thing of the past for the people of Maissade. The Diocese of Hinche Parish Priests spoke to the people attending mass during the feast of the Immaculate Conception, held two days after the assessment ended, to tell them about the visit of the OIRED team and the possibilities that the future holds for the people of Haiti.

Look for updates as the project unfolds. If you would like additional information about this project or are interested in helping, please contact Patrice Schwermer at pschwermer@richmonddiocese.org.