

(BP) -- FEATURES

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Haiti: A Congo
In the Caribbean

by W. C. Fields
Director, Baptist Press

PORT AU PRINCE, Haiti (BP)--No country in the western half of the world has a more fascinating religious life than the island republic of Haiti. "The Pearl of the Antilles" is a haunting land. It also has tribulations that are biblical in scope and apocalyptic in ferocity.

High in the mountains above Port au Prince, a Baptist missionary home has hallway display cases filled with voodoo fetishes given up by Haitians when they became Christians. This assortment of pin dolls and pottery, crude carvings and soul bottles, pathetic charms and primitive bric-a-brac, symbolizes the despair and the hope of a mysterious and appealing land lying, largely unknown, right at the doorsteps of the United States.

Haiti is rich in tropical beauty, with purple mountain vistas and deep shadowed valleys. White orange blossoms, bougainvillea, scarlet poinsettias, fuchsia begonias, yellow Allamanda flowers splash the tropical vegetation with colors and aromas that only God could have contrived. It is a land of bananas and plantains, coconuts and breadfruit, cassava, guava, and waving fields of silver-green sugar cane. Palms line crescent bays and form embroidery on the edges of a cobalt-blue sea.

Amid the innocence and grandeur of nature are now the trappings of modernity--a jet-age airport, attractive hotels, a golf course, television, taxis and taxation. This baffling and engaging place also has a paganism unsurpassed anywhere in our hemisphere.

Once France's richest colony it is now one of the poorest countries on earth with a per capita annual income of about \$70. Few can expect to live beyond 40 and dying is almost prohibitively expensive. Next to the USA it is the oldest republic in the Americas, founded in 1804 by the only successful revolt of slaves in history. Yet it's friendly, rustic people have known more savagery than freedom.

Since the night Toussaint L'Ouverture set out to kill every white person in the realm and free his people from bondage and butchery, this black nation has never had a good government. Toussaint is revered as "this great man whom nature owes to her afflicted, oppressed and tormented children." Sadly, the promise of his revolt has yet to be fulfilled.

The aboriginal name, Haiti, means "high country." One of the smallest countries in the western hemisphere (about the size of Maryland), it is the most densely populated (254 people per square mile). About 90% of the people are Negroes, the remainder are mostly mulattos, with a tiny minority of whites. It has much to attract visitors--mystery, intrigue, dramatic history, beneficent climate, and exotic culture. Since 1957 this western end of the island of Hispaniola has been under the iron hand of a country doctor turned politician, Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier, now self-proclaimed President-for-Life.

Haiti, "guardian of the windward passage," is a fantastic mix of the West Indies, West Africa and the South Pacific. The major city, Port au Prince, with its rusting corrugated roofs and gingerbread houses, its eternal summer, its dark skinned natives moving languidly among the mango trees, might just as well be Papeete in Tahiti, Conakry in Guinea, or Brazzaville in the Congo.

Flying skyhigh in a sleek Air France Caravelle out of Miami, the traveler crosses the north shoreline of Haiti at about the place where 477 years ago Columbus' caravel, the Santa Maria, struck a reef and sank, a few days after Christmas, 1492. From high altitude, Haiti looks very much as it must have appeared to Christopher Columbus--just one more island like numerous others in the Caribbean Archipelago, formed by the convolutions of under-sea volcanoes, shaped by wind and wave through aeons of forgotten time. The view is deceiving. Haiti today is far more African than Caribbean, more African in fact than much of Africa.

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With the mantel of darkness, Haiti's mystery deepens and its visceral rhythm rises to the beat of voodoo drums. Visitors can see colorful voodoo rituals staged in the city with the incantations of houngans, the swaying of mambos, the hypnotic cadence of the drums, the sacrifice of a chicken or two and other stage effects, but it is pure theater touriste. The genuine voodoo is for the native initiates alone. Every village and commune from Jacmel to Port-de-Paix, from Jeremie to the border of the Dominican Republic, has its priest of the West African deity, Vodun.

Voodoo is a mixture of superstition and magic, salted with Christian symbolism and occult lore brought over with the ancestors of these people when the slave ships carried them away from Africa. Officially the country is Catholic. Mostly it is voodoo. Many who wear crucifixes around their necks also wear occult charms under their garments.

One recalls Vachel Lindsay's memorable poem, "The Congo." It might have come out of Haiti's brooding mountains of Artibonite or from the Valley of the Rivere du Nord. "Then I saw the Congo, creeping through the black, cutting through the forest with a golden track!" Here is the true African ethos, 700 miles south of Miami, "a roaring, epic rag-time tune, from the mouth of the Congo to the mountains of the moon."

President Duvalier himself is a cagey advocate of voodoo. Yet he has guaranteed religious freedom to all so long as church leaders do not dabble in politics. He has been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church for deporting the Catholic archbishop. This, however, did not stop him from expelling the Episcopal bishop in 1964 and, in recent months, nine Catholic priests.

As long as the churches do not seem to be tampering with his business, Papa Doc does not interfere with theirs. Religious leaders, however, move warily. As long as they are no threat to the kingdom of Duvalier they are quite free, by his grace, to preach the Kingdom of God.

Protestantism is by all odds the most progressive force in the country. The churches have led in an ambitious campaign to reduce the dead weight of a 90-per cent illiteracy among the people.

Protestant missions operate more schools than the government itself. Church-related hospitals and dispensaries perform miracles of healing among an impoverished and vulnerable people.

Several Baptist groups do missionary work in the country. The American Baptist Home Mission Society sponsors work with 84 churches and 599 mission stations. Their constituency is around 100,000.

Conservative Baptists work with 70 Haitian churches, 36 preaching stations, and 75 mountain schools which serve 2,200 children.

There is also some mission work in the country sponsored by Negro Baptist groups from the USA, the Czechoslovakian Baptist Convention of the U.S. and Canada, and one or two independent Baptist groups.

Southern Baptists have no work in Haiti, because of the well established work of other Baptist groups already there. SBC work has recently begun in the Dominican Republic, which occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola. The SBC Home Mission Board sponsors work among Haitian people in New York City.

Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Methodists, Episcopalians and other mission groups have done outstanding work, ministering to the enormous physical, educational and social needs of the Haitians, as a part and parcel of their living demonstration of the Christian message. There is no evangelism-versus-social action debate here among a people for whom poverty is a euphemism.

To see the centers of renewal and reconstruction of a better Haiti, visitors will have to go to the churches.

The gleaming white National Palace, the mini-nation's most imposing structure, is a fortress, with camouflaged tanks and anti-aircraft guns nearby. Nearby, on the Champs de Mars, is the statue of Jean Jacques Dessalines, one of the founding fathers who proclaimed himself emperor in the early days. Also nearby is a military barracks with some of the muscle behind a police state that can turn on the charm when it wants to. Right now it wants to!

The enigma of Haiti deepens with the growing awareness that the visitor today is quite safe anywhere in this contradictory land, day or night. Soon you realize that all of the people, from Papa Doc on down are now knocking themselves out to make foreigners feel welcome, safe and satisfied.

Hope wells, again in the hearts of a people of vast endurance. Papa Doc is once more mending fences. Some of the old excesses are being toned down. Friendliness is the new order going out to all of the functionaires. Visitors, now rapidly increasing, are being given the glad hand and a fair shake, as they alight from airplanes and cruise ships. The wobbly institutions of the country, including the religious ones, are permitting themselves some cautious optimism. Maybe better times are ahead. For a long-suffering and hospitable people, they are long overdue.



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January 3, 1970

Minister to Sunset Strip
Begins Trek to Washington

HOLLYWOOD, Calif. (BP)--Arthur Blessitt, a Southern Baptist evangelist known popularly as the "minister of Sunset Strip," has started a 3,000 mile march to the nation's capital, carrying enroute an 80-pound wooden cross and calling America to spiritual revival.

Blessitt, founder of a "gospel nightclub" named "His Place" where he operates a ministry to hippies, drug addicts, motorcycle riders, tennyboppers and topless dancers, said the purpose of his "pilgrimage" is "to emphasize the need for a spiritual awakening throughout America."

"The cross shall represent the crisis of our nation, and the Christ of the crisis," Blessitt said. "We shall walk, signifying the simplicity of the message and person of Jesus Christ."

Blessitt is being accompanied on the the journey by his wife Sherry, and their three children, ages five to six months' and four young men who will take turns in pairs carrying the 10-foot, rough-hewn cross. Blessitt will carry the cross into each city they reach.

Two camper trailers, one pulled by a car driven by Blessitt's wife and carrying their three youngsters, will pace the walkers.

Blessitt, an evangelist with a flair for the dramatic, said that he was not making the journey for publicity. He said he made no advance announcement of his departure on Christmas day because he didn't want the complications of undue publicity.

The 29-year-old evangelist, a native of Mississippi, spent 28 days last summer chained to the same 80 pound cross he will carry on the trip. He fasted for the entire four weeks. He said he did this to protest his eviction from the building housing "His Place." Later, he was able to raise funds to move to a new location.

During his six-month march to Washington, Blessitt will lead several city-wide evangelistic rallies along the way. Spots on the route include Phoenix, Ariz.; Albuquerque, N.M.; Amarillo, Tex.; Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Okla.; Springfield, Mo.; St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati.

The trip will come to a climax July 18-19 in Washington, D.C., with plans for a mass prayer rally at the Washington Monument.

Blessitt said he hoped a half-million Christians would attend the rally. Each person attending was requested to "bring a Bible, a flower, and two gifts--one to give personally in D. C., and one gift to put on the lawn of the Department of Health Education and Welfare for them to give out."

He asked that during the six months of the walk, Christians everywhere pray one hour each day for spiritual revival in America, to "rap (talk) about Jesus daily," to "receive soul food" (read the Bible) daily; and to "lend a hand to a needy friend."

Those who will not be able to attend the mass rally in Washington next July were asked to keep their churches open July 18-19 for prayer, to have fellowship prayer meetings and brotherhood projects of community help for the needy, and to give a local gift and send a gift to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for them to give out.

(Blessitt did not indicate what arrangements, if any, he had made with Washington officials for use of the Washington Monument area for his rally, or with Health Education, Welfare officials for distribution of the gifts.)

He said that a daily telegram would be sent to President Nixon during the hike, but did not indicate the nature of the telegrams.

The next week before he left on the march, Blessitt spent several days in the Glendale Hospital here for tests to determine the cause of what some called "precarious health." His physician reportedly gave permission for the march only reluctantly.

"I'd rather die trying this," Blessitt said, "than to succeed at just about anything else I can think of."

The ultimate purpose of the trek, he said, is "that the Christian of America will be revived in such a manner as to let our nation know that Jesus Christ is alive today and all sufficient to meet every need."

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Arizona Board Sells
\$5½ Million Hospital

1/8/70

PHOENIX, Ariz. (BP)--The Executive Board of the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention voted 18-3 here to sell the Baptist Hospital of Phoenix to a local corporation for \$5½ million.

The hospital was bought by the James Allen Guinn Jr., Charitable Foundation, which agreed to assume the hospital's \$2,825,000 liabilities, pay the convention \$2.4 million for its equity in the hospital.

Last November, the messengers to the annual Arizona convention voted to sell three of the state Baptist hospitals, and provided that 40 per cent of any funds received in the hospital sales would go to Grand Canyon College, the convention-owned school in Phoenix.

The Phoenix hospital is the first of the three to be sold following the convention action.

In other major related action, the Arizona Baptist board voted to set aside the 60 per cent income from the hospital sales not going to the school to establish an adequate ready cash reserve for the convention's church loan and church bond funds.

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South Carolina Pastor
Named To Welfare Post

1/8/70

COLUMBIA, S.C. (BP)--R. Archie Ellis, pastor of the 4,000-member First Baptist Church here for nearly 17 years, has resigned to accept appointment to a top state welfare position.

Ellis said in his resignation that he would become on April 1 the deputy director of the South Carolina Department of Public Welfare "with the understanding that I will succeed Dr. Arthur Rivers as director of the department on July 1."

A former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1958-59) and former chairman of the administrative subcommittee for the SBC Executive Committee, Ellis said in his resignation that he was not leaving the ministry, simply changing the direction of his ministry.

"From the day I announced to my home church that I felt called to the ministry, I have had no thought other than to serve the church and humanity, and the fact that I am changing the direction of my ministry is no less an expression of my original commitment," Ellis said in a statement read to members of the church.

His resignation was to be effective March 31, with a request that the church release him from duties on Feb. 28.

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New Literature Samples
Available for Churches

1/8/70

NASHVILLE (BP)--For the first time, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board here has produced sample church literature kits for Southern Baptist churches that want to have a preview of literature for the 1970's.

The kits will be available in time for "Church Literature Selection Week," slated for Southern Baptist churches June 15-21, 1970.

The materials will include a Sunday School kit with 20 pieces of literature, a Training Union kit with 13 pieces of literature, and a church music kit with three pieces of literature.

"The kits will contain samples which are representative of all the new series of literature for the quarter beginning October, 1970," said James Clark, manager of the board's church literature department.

Clark said churches may order the kits from the church literature department, Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, any time before June 1, 1970.

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