

Local man, parish come to Haiti's aid

Published October 20, 2016 at 11:46 am

By John Gessner



A hurricane-damaged home in the village of Gris-Gris. (Photo courtesy of St. Rose of Lima parish)

Hurricane Matthew leaves devastation

“Beyond a mountain there is a mountain,” Junior Obrand said, paraphrasing a foreboding Haitian proverb.

More than six years after the earthquake that displaced 1.5 million Haitians and killed up to 316,000, Obrand’s home country was struck by Hurricane Matthew, which raged across the Western Atlantic in early October. The death toll in Haiti is estimated at 1,000, with an estimated 175,000 Haitians left homeless and 12 percent of the population needing assistance.

Obrand arrived home Monday from four days in Haiti. A native of the village of Gris-Gris, he moved to Apple Valley in 2009, but the bond with his Caribbean homeland is unbreakable.

Obrand, 32, has family back home, including nine siblings, five of whom live in Gris-Gris with their mother. He’s a member of Church of the Risen Savior Catholic parish in Burnsville, a sister parish of Obrand’s boyhood church in Gris-Gris.

Obrand is also regional program coordinator for the Caribbean for Feed My Starving Children, the Coon Rapids-based Christian charity that sends nutrition-packed meals to hungry people

around the world. It was in that capacity that he visited last week to assess the devastation and need in a country that Obrand said was already the largest national recipient of Feed My Starving Children food packages.

“What I saw in Haiti this week, it’s almost unbelievable,” said Obrand, 32. “And pictures do not do it justice.”

The country’s south and southwest regions, including Gris-Gris, bore the brunt of the storm, Obrand said.

“Before the hurricane the roads were not that good,” he said. “From the cities I observed in Haiti this week, there’s pretty much nothing left. Houses are destroyed or partially destroyed. Trees have no leaves anymore.”

Many homes, crudely built to begin with, are without roofs. Crops and coconut trees were destroyed and livestock killed, said Obrand, who fears a coming crisis of food scarcity and price inflation. The black bean harvest in Gris-Gris was wiped out, he said.

But Obrand said his family and friends appear to be unharmed.

“We could talk over the phone,” he said. “I was less than 50 miles away, but the bridge to get to Gris-Gris is washed away.”

Risen Savior parishioners began raising money for hurricane relief on Oct. 8. A prayer service was held Tuesday night. Between hurricane-related fundraising and an annual collection for their sister parish, parishioners have given about \$40,000 in the last month, said George Kohler, co-chair of Risen Savior’s sister parish committee.

The sister parish in Gris-Gris is St. Rose of Lima, led by the Rev. Fayant Cazeau. The bond was formed in 1998. Kohler estimates that Risen Savior’s donations to St. Rose of Lima have exceeded \$1 million over the last 17 years. Projects have included new wells, a new parish school, agricultural projects, medical and dental missions and earthquake relief. Risen Savior has sponsored numerous mission trips.

“There are other denominations, even in Gris-Gris,” said Kohler, of Burnsville. “We make no distinction in terms of who can have the water, who gets the food. Father (Fayant) is kind of an administrator for the poor, regardless of who they are. It’s always been our hope that we’re serving the least of them down there. Father’s our feet on the ground to do that.”

The Minnesotans helped a young Obrand attend school to learn English, and Obrand – who also speaks Creole and French – became an interpreter for the group. He met his future wife, Paula Zimmer, in 2008 when she was on a Risen Savior mission trip. The couple now have two children, 5 and 2.



Water, food and home repairs are the pressing post-hurricane needs, said Kohler, who has been in contact with the Haitian priest.

“He identified a fourth need because they’re in the mountains and a lot of the mountain roads got washed out or filled with downed trees or debris,” Kohler said. “He was asking us to help pay some of the locals to clear the roads and re-level them so that traffic could move through there. That’s going to be extremely important in order to establish good transit lanes. Not only will that help rebuild the roads and make it easier to get supplies to Gris-Gris and the other chapels, that will also put some money in the pockets of the locals so that they can in turn help rebuild their homesteads.”

Despite the gloomy proverb about mountains beyond mountains, Obrand said Haitians are uncommonly optimistic and very resilient people.

“It’s really special for me being able to do what I do and see the people I love and the country I love so dearly,” he said. “I wish you could see what I see on people’s faces when you tell them good morning.”

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