



## **Religious art expo in Blaine to benefit Haiti Water and Foot of the Cross projects**

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**by Elyse Kaner**

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The next time you turn on your tap for instant warm or cold running water, enjoy it. Others aren't so fortunate. Especially in a Haitian town, where cardboard boxes double as homes, a sewage system is nonexistent and 54 percent of the population does not have access to clean water.

But a small Christian group is out to change all that.

The Toast of the Towns - about 15 area residents who gather after church on Sundays, will hold its First Religious Art Expo, featuring artists, authors and recording artists Feb. 20, 7 to 10 p.m., at Hankering's Restaurant in Blaine.

A \$20 donation is suggested. Proceeds will benefit the Water Project and The Foot of the Cross Project.

Enjoy wines, cheese and hors d'oeuvres. The first 200 guests receive a complimentary wine goblet.

Items will be for sale to the public.

People will have an opportunity to purchase religious paintings, graphics, CDs, books, holy cards, greeting cards and more. Participating artists from throughout Minnesota include: Doris Pease, Mark Sanislo, artists/authors Anne Tristani, Anna Mae and Lyle McCallum, photographic artist Gregg Vilina and more. Some authors' works being featured are: Rev. Kenneth P. Kathe, Linda Causton and Dr. Harold Kletchka.

Also among the participants are recording artists Sue Stanaway, Gary Johnson, Janie Welte, Mary Donohue, plus more.

Proceeds for the expo will go toward providing safe drinking water for Haitians and to fund a Foot of the Cross project, intended to erect 24-foot crosses throughout Minnesota.

Out of eight million people, only 46 percent of Haitians enjoy safe drinking water.

"That's unreal," said Rev. Bernard Reiser in a phone interview from St. Nicholas Church in New Market, where he is a pastor. Reiser, the founding pastor of Epiphany Church, Coon Rapids, is helping to head the Haitian water project for CitÈ Soleil, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. CitÈ Soleil, with an estimated population of about 250,000, ranks last out of 147 countries, according to an international poverty scale index, Reiser said.

"When you've got the worst poverty reported by the Center of Ecology and Hydrology in Great Britain - that can tell you what's happening," Reiser said.

CitÈ Soleil residents live in shacks made from heavy cardboard or corrugated metal. The shacks - double the size of a refrigerator carton - have dirt floors. There is no sewage system and the suburb has minimal electrical. "That's real slums," Reiser said.

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The drinking water has become contaminated after a hurricane hit the area. Reiser said residents could buy it, but they can't afford it. Or they could collect rain water, but rain is not abundant.

That's where his water project comes in. A priest started a water distribution center in the area in 1974, but it fell into disrepair in 1998 after he got sick and died.

Now, the water distribution center, a conglomeration of elevated tanks attached to hoses, is partially operable. It serves about 30,000 people, by distributing 120,000 gallons of water during a 10-hour day. The town people - men, women and children - come from miles around, fill five-gallon containers full of clean water and carry them on their heads to their homes. Reiser hopes to have the center in "good operation" by this summer.

Another part of the Religious Art Expo proceeds will go toward setting up 24-foot crosses throughout the state.

Toast of the Towns member Marcie Sparks and her husband, Don, were on the way to a wedding in Milwaukee one night last year when their headlights shone on a large cross alongside the road. On the return trip, they vowed to look for the cross, thinking it would be hard to find in the daylight. But their efforts paid off.

"We saw it as plain as can be in the day light; it just stood out," Sparks said.

Sparks thought it would be a good idea to put up crosses throughout Minnesota to "bring thoughts back to the Savior," she said.

The Toast of the Towns liked the idea and The Foot of the Cross Project was born. The six-foot high crosses will be placed on private property.

"Word hasn't even gotten out and already people want to put up crosses," Sparks said.

Sparks believes that people are drifting so far away from God that, perhaps, a symbol in their backyard will serve as a reminder, she said.

"We decided to take one little part of Minnesota to put up crosses," Sparks said.

For more information call 763-757-8420.