



Kent Annan is codirector of Haiti Partners. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, he lived in Haiti and now travels there regularly from Florida, where he lives with his wife and their two young children.

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Calling Haiti Home: An Interview with Author Kent Annan

What made you decide to move to a volatile developing-world country, of all places?

Kent: Before attending seminary at Princeton, I'd worked in Europe with a refugee ministry. And in the middle of the six years in Princeton, I spent six months in Albania and Kosovo. These experiences of helping people who had lost everything, some of whom I became friends with—it stuck with me, kept me uncomfortable and wanting to get back to that kind of work.

I don't pretend engaging in this kind of thing is pure altruism or self-sacrifice. I'm searching for meaning, for God, for love, for a deeper faith, for understanding how things do and don't work—all this while I also want to search for good ways to help people who need it.

This was the motivation. There were some tense moments between my wife and me along the way, but we were also united in wanting to love God and love our neighbors. We found an organization whose approach resonated with our beliefs, and that had a good fit for each of us. Together we felt some of that peace that passes logic or good sense . . . and so we got on a plane to Haiti.

How does your own faith benefit from trying to serve in an “extreme way”—whether in Haiti or somewhere here in North America?

Kent: Our faith benefits from being stretched. Love strengthens when much is demanded of it. We find meaning when we help others not just as an afterthought, but with profound commitment. I found some of that grace in the demanding circumstances in Haiti. But I think it's partly my weakness that leads me to these extremes. If I were more loving, less selfish, more faithful, then maybe I wouldn't keep hearing Jesus' invitation leading me to hard places. Each of us has a different version of this invitation to follow.

But it does seem we want to avoid thinking we're following Jesus if we're actually just following the version of Jesus that we've created in our own image to comfort but not challenge us. That's not the Jesus we meet in the New Testament. And so if we find Jesus only keeps comforting us and not challenging us, then it might be time to try something extreme for love to see whether it's really Jesus we've been listening to.

What kind of living conditions did you experience in Haiti?

Kent: We lived with a family in the countryside for the first seven months. It was a little

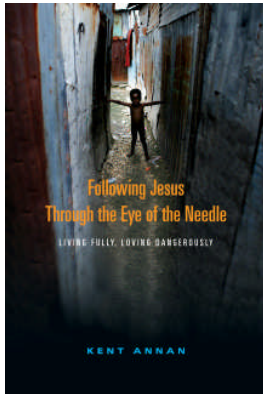
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concrete-block, tin-roofed house. They were basically subsistence farmers. My wife and I lived in one small room. Other members of the family lived in the barely separated other rooms. Still more family members lived in a thatched-wood house right next door. No running water or electricity. We bathed outside in a makeshift enclosure pouring cold water over ourselves. But there was lots of love in the family—always more important than any other house conveniences, right? Oh, and there were rats . . . which quickly make you—okay, make me at least—start to question the very existence of love. Beauty and suffering, love and need: these kinds of things seem to battle it out right before your eyes daily.

Any life-threatening situations?

Kent: No near-death experiences, unless crazy public bus rides count. But the possibility was there. It was incredibly tense at times. People were getting killed in political demonstrations. The situation kept devolving, and eventually the president was ousted. We went by bodies newly dead in the street. Stories of beatings or people being killed were part of daily conversation for a while. If you stayed out of demonstrations, most likely things were fine. But two coworkers were carjacked by gunpoint. A Haitian friend's brother was shot in the street. A home not far from ours was invaded by armed kidnappers. Kidnappings, at times, were rampant. We were cautious and our Haitian neighbors and coworkers were always generous in advising us how to try to stay safe. But living in a climate of fear and to some extent chaos is corrosive, and it wasn't easy for anyone. Certainly a lot of Haitians were facing much harsher situations than us—like in some of the more violent slums. But everyone in the city, including us, felt that threat was constantly hovering nearby. And the presence of physical threat also seems to become an emotional and spiritual threat over time.

What is the spiritual climate and religious landscape of Haiti like?

Kent: The majority of Haitians are Christian. It's a very spiritual place—both in the sense that people believe and experience the spiritual realm as being alive, and also that people are talking about faith and religion a lot. Voodoo also has a significant influence.

Faith is very important to many. People who don't have them are often eager to get Bibles. There are prayer vigils. I've gone on visits with church members to pray with someone sick at their home. On Sunday morning, many people are dressed in their best outfits walking to church.

I also love that subjects that are taboo for polite conversation in the U.S.—religion, sex and politics—are often early conversation topics in Haiti. I've been crammed in the back of a pickup, on public transportation, and pretty quickly a crowd of a dozen strangers are having conversation that bounces off a bawdy joke, into a debate on predestination, then onto politics or fear of kidnapping, then a bawdy joke, and round it goes. I like that these issues are on the surface.

And I should say that I'm a little reluctant to speak in these broad strokes. When I think about the spiritual climate—whether out of humility or egotism—I like to think personally

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first, rather than evaluating others. In Haiti, I felt like I was learning intensely about the gospel from others. The needs are heartbreaking and endless, and so I was trying to answer Love’s demanding and gracious call, sometimes answering and sometimes failing to.

How did living in Haiti affect your marriage? What did you learn?

Kent: It was a pretty wild decision for my wife to move to Haiti sight unseen. I’d already worked in Europe with a refugee ministry, including in Albania and Kosovo during and after the war there. She’d never done anything like this. Our first seven months we lived in one semiprivate room in a small tin-roofed house with a Haitian family—learning the language and culture along the way. It was incredibly intense.

We had nothing left to give each other on a lot of days. I was sick a lot, and Shelly would hold me up sometimes, when I was too weak, as I threw up or had to be in the outhouse. Life was shared in a new series of intimate—if sometimes a little gross—ways.

We—well, mostly I—decided we’d build a house in Haiti too. So when we finally moved out of the home with the family, then we had neighbors and workers with us every nonworking moment as we took on this unruly project. We hiked up rocky hills, in the dark, in the pouring rain, to arrive at our little house with no electricity or running water. During the violence of the political meltdown, I feared for her safety at times and felt like a completely delinquent husband for putting her in these situations.

My wife did good work in Haiti, but over time something that became really hard was that I felt right in the middle of what I was supposed to do with my life . . . whereas Shelly could do it, and liked parts of it, but was also, fair enough, worn down by the physical, emotional and spiritual demands.

And yet . . . and yet! In the middle of the strains from this kind of living and service, it was incredible for us in many ways. We extended our family so it now includes a goddaughter in Haiti and many friends we stay in close touch with. We shared an experience that every day informs our lives and faith—and will keep doing so for the rest of our lives. We cherish the shared memories, which can also see us through challenging times now: *well, we made it through that . . . so this isn’t too bad*. Now Shelly is an associate minister in Florida, and I’m able to work full-time with Haiti Partners and travel to Haiti regularly. It has its challenges, but we’ve been able to find a way to answer our individual as well as our joint calls.

So in Haiti we were able to learn together, grow in love for each other, grow in love for God and make a difference for our neighbors facing a lot of need—and these are the things we wanted and still want our marriage partnership to be about.

How can ordinary people—people with spouses, kids and jobs—follow Jesus “through the eye of the needle”?

Kent: There are two parts to Jesus’ invitation to the rich man: the giving up—selling

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everything and giving it to the poor—and the following.

Well, the rich man probably could have physically followed Jesus around, right? I mean, at times huge crowds followed Jesus around, and it's not clear that they'd all given up everything. It's a deeper kind of following in question. And Jesus' answer to the rich man goes to this: What is holding you back from discipleship and love? So it seems a question that Jesus asks all of us—and we can ask ourselves regularly—is, what is keeping us from loving and serving as we should?

Too much money was the answer for the rich man, and probably holds many of us back. But there's also ambition, busyness, fear, status, pride, comfort . . . a whole range of idols seduce our worship, don't they?

So what can people do practically? It seems like we can confess and do something about what's holding us back—and then get out there following Jesus, so we can love and be loved more profoundly.

For example, if you've been helping out at a soup kitchen once a week, you follow Jesus out from behind the counter where you're ladling the soup and also spend some time sitting next to folks, eating some of the food, listening, maybe laughing, maybe crying, as you open up your heart to people and open your own life to change.

If you or I find ourselves obsessing over money—and we have enough; it's not a situation of unemployment or not providing the basics for our family—then that's probably indication we should give more away. Same thing if our giving only skims from our excess.

Is there a part of town that's too dangerous to go to, that everyone who doesn't live there should avoid? Then maybe that's precisely where we should find a church to attend on Sunday morning. Or find some other good and safe way to be there.

Have your vacations only been getaways? How about taking a chance to learn about the reality facing two billion people who live on less than two dollars a day? Find a good organization or mission who does these things in a culturally sensitive way, and spend time learning how they're helping. Don't spend all your time building something or painting walls. Spend time with people. You might not help as much immediately, but I've found it opens me and others to hearing how Jesus is inviting us to take that next step through the needle's eye—whether it's around the world or around the corner from your house.

I struggle with some of these questions as I now live back in the U.S., with my wife and two young children. Most of us—unless we take vows and move into a monastery—probably get repeated invitations to follow through the eye of the needle in new ways.

Though Jesus makes quite a demand, ultimately he's inviting the rich young man to a more joyful and meaningful life—for us and for those we're able to help.



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