

Making a Good Transition by Rev. David Williamson

We all go through transitions in life—some good, some bad. But have you ever stopped to ask what makes a particular transition a good one or a bad one? Yes, where you ultimately end up does have something to do with it, but I would argue it's equally important how you get there. So what are some of the factors that make for a good transition?

A couple of things come to mind. For one, it makes a difference how prepared you are for the transition—did you have time to get ready, or did it hit you from the blind side? The pace of the transition is important as well—slow, gradual transitions are almost always better than fast ones (unless you're yanking off a band-aid). And it always helps to have resources to fall back on during a transition—enough money in the bank to carry you through the rough part, or a community of friends to support you in the journey.

Preparedness, Pace, Resources. On all three of these counts, the transition the Haitians experienced on January 12 was a brutal one. They were caught completely by surprise; it happened in the blink of an eye; and they had little to no financial resources to help them absorb the loss. (Compare, for instance, to the earthquake that occurred in Chile shortly afterwards—despite the fact that the earthquake in Chile was much larger on the Richter scale, the country was in a much better position to respond to those who were affected and to offer them help through the transition.)

What the people of Fondwa accomplished in the weeks and months following the earthquake was truly admirable. What they lacked in financial resources, they made up for with faith and resilience. And they employed the skills they've acquired through decades of survival living—they did the best they could with the materials that were available in order to meet the needs of their community. They built shelter out of scraps of tin and plywood; they constructed a school using donated tarps and locally harvested lumber; they dug through the rubble of the former school and guesthouse and recovered every chair, every book, every pencil that was salvageable. To their credit, they established shelter and they opened the school within two months after the earthquake devastated their village.

As noted, this is a remarkable feat. But now we arrive at a moment when we must ask a very important question: The Haitians did what they could to meet their short-term needs. But will what they've built continue to meet those needs until their long-term plans become a reality? Will these structures carry the children of Fondwa through the transition to a better school and orphanage?

On a recent trip to Fondwa, I asked the children of the orphanage what they thought of their “new” house and their “new” school. The response I received was an interesting mix of gratitude and regret. On the one hand, they were thankful for the

shelter they had—thankful to be dry at night, thankful not to have to sleep on the ground anymore. And they were thankful just to have a school, thankful a space to learn and faithful teachers to work with them. But they also remembered how things once were, and they still wish for a house where there's windows to let the light and the air in, and for a school that keeps the water out. (The current orphanage shelter has very little ventilation or natural light, although there is a single light bulb that gives light in the evening. The current school is in even worse condition—the students are all pressed in on each other, with only a thin tarp separating classrooms. When the winds pick up, the tarps flap horribly so you have to strain to hear the teacher. And in heavy rains, the water leaks through from above, and the whole floor becomes a muddy mess.)

From the moment the earthquake struck Haiti, we've been working towards rebuilding. It takes time to get those plans together, and the details are still in development, but we know that there *will* be a new school, a new orphanage, and a new community center. But it is quickly becoming clear that the transition of how we get from *here* to *there* needs our immediate attention.

In May 2010, Family Health Ministries placed two teams in Fondwa for week-long development trips. Two teams from St. Luke's have been there as well. As a result of these efforts, we've built one 12'x24' shelter and two 10'x28' classrooms, working side-by-side with local carpenters in order to provide much needed training and employment. But what we've done so far is just the beginning . . .

In the coming months, we hope to improve on what we've started by building more classrooms and by supporting the effort to build five new shelters for the children of the Fondwa orphanage. We know what we're transitioning towards—to a brand new school, to a brand new orphanage, to an infrastructure that will serve the children of the community for decades to come. But we also know that making our dreams a reality will take a lot of time and hard work, and we must care for the needs of our friends in the meantime. Because *how* we get there is just as important as where we arrive at in the end.