

Thousands in Haiti Embark on the Greatest Journey

✖ Climbing up the steep hill leading to Eglise Croisade Evangelique Internationale, 10-year-old Stephany smoothed her satin peach-colored dress nervously. Her mother warned her not to splash mud on it or brush against dusty earthquake remnants, no easy task in this area of Port-au-Prince.

The Delmas district, where the church is located, was hard hit by the earthquake that rocked Haiti on January 12, 2010. Stephany's dad and older sister were both killed that horrible day.

As she continued her climb, Stephany rehearsed in her mind how to walk up the aisle during graduation—a very special occasion in the girl's life. The ceremony marked the completion of a 12-lesson Bible study called The Greatest Journey, a discipleship program developed by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse for children who receive shoe box gifts through Operation Christmas Child.

After children complete the program, they are presented with a personalized certificate and a special New Testament in their own language.

On this day, known as Happy Children's Day in Haiti, more than 10,000 children graduated from the discipleship course in churches throughout the nation.

Stephany's friend, 12-year-old Emmanuel, met her at the church door. The two exchanged excited chatter before one of the volunteer teachers hushed them with a stern but amused glance.

Emmanuel's family was spared during the earthquake, but his life has not been easy. His father—a Voodoo priest—abused him regularly in his younger years. His Christian mother left and

tried to take Emmanuel with her, but his father would not permit such mutiny—at first.

Finally he relented, and Emmanuel joined his mother in a safe place. He started coming to church with her a year ago and eagerly joined The Greatest Journey class.

“I like the story of Job,” Emmanuel said. “He suffered like me and my brother.”

Emmanuel’s brother, 7-year-old Christoph, is recovering from cholera, which has spiked in Haiti after seasonal rains. “I tell him stories from my lessons,” Emmanuel said. “And now I can read from my new Bible.”

Close to 140 children graduated with Stephany and Emmanuel on June 12 at Eglise Croisade Evangelique Internationale.

Katie Simon Deshlouches, one of The Greatest Journey teachers, said the program has touched the entire community around the church. “It has brought a lot of new people here. They are now enthused to come to church and everyone brings their Bibles.

“And the children are better behaved. They are more respectful and not as unruly,” she said.

Teacher Marceline Marcilus Tergen said her pupils loved the colorful books: “They especially liked the creation story and, yes, reading about the faith of Job.”

The lessons encouraged the children, said one of pastors, Lamar Charles. “The kids came very eagerly to learn about Jesus. As we teach them and they grow, they will go in the right way.

“In the streets, there is disorder and chaos, but the Word of God will guide them. Jesus will continue working in the lives of these children,” the pastor added.