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Haitians in Springfield: Holding on to a fragile hope

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From the Director

The US election is fast approaching and clearly it will have consequences in so many ways and across the geo-political landscape. KLC is making no attempt to cover the range of issues at play in this election and our prayers and thoughts are with Americans as they go to the ballot.

We published [an EiC on the history of the phrase “Make America Great Again”](#) and in this article we publish a response to Trump’s extraordinary comments about Haitian immigrants in Springfield. It is a sign of just how bizarre aspects of US politics has become that such a topic is even being addressed. The topic has been widely discussed in mainstream media, but I have yet to see discussion of the state of Haiti and just how hard life is there for most Haitians, especially the poor. Nor have I seen much discussion of America’s role in the history of Haiti.



Why even discuss this issue? Because a characteristic of good political leadership is concern for and sensitivity to the poor. Proverbs 31 begins with an oracle taught by his mother to King Lemuel. It includes the following two verses:

- 8 Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
- 9 Speak out; judge righteously;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Targeting legal immigrants from one of the poorest nations on earth seems to be the very reverse of this. Thus, we welcome this piece from Karen Harding who knows Haiti well and has a huge heart for the people of Haiti and the immense challenges they face on a daily basis as well as their (largely) Christian faith.

Craig Bartholomew

“In Springfield, they’re eating the dogs, the people that came in, they’re eating the cats,” said Trump. “They’re eating the pets of the people that live there.”

Former president Donald J. Trump delivered this statement during the Presidential debate in Philadelphia on September 10, 2024. He made this false statement referencing the Haitian immigrants currently living and working in Springfield, Ohio. Trump’s comment was met with both shock and disbelief, but for White Supremacists and other hate groups, jubilation. The moderator of the debate challenged Trump on air and Kamala Harris laughed in disbelief.

This statement was completely erroneous and disrespectful to every citizen of Haiti and every black person living in the US. Memes created to mock Trump’s words emerged everywhere.... Some were musical while others were depicting shocked faces of cats and dogs.

Most of the Haitians of Springfield are there legally, having arrived in the US under Temporary Protected Status, due to the insane violence escalating in their home country of Haiti.

Trump wants to deport all illegal Haitians,¹ and his horrific statement echoed the words spread online in August from social platforms used by Blood Tribe, a neo-Nazi hate group and far right extremists.²

In the aftermath of Trump’s statement, there have been bomb threats, and some schools and hospitals were closed. Flyers were circulating in Springfield, claiming to be from the Trinity White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan – a Kentucky offshoot of the White supremacist group.³ Since Trump

1 Rashard Rose and Kate Sullivan, “Trump says he would revoke Temporary Protected Status for Haitian migrants in Springfield if elected,” *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/03/politics/trump-revoke-status-ohio-haitian-migrants/index.html>.

2 Stephen Starr, “Haitian immigrants helped revive a struggling Ohio town. Then neo-Nazis turned up,” *Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/14/neo-nazis-springfield-ohio-haitian-immigrants>.

3 Kathryn Post, “Haitians are not eating pets: Springfield faith leaders stand with migrants,” *The Christian Century*. <https://www.christiancentury.org/news/haitians-are-not-eating-pets-springfield-faith-leaders-stand-migrants>.



had echoed the remarks from Blood Tribe, he had to have known that there would be ensuing trouble from White Supremacist groups. All of this was done to strengthen his anti-immigration and future mass deportation efforts.

As a result, Haitians have been targeted and persecuted, but haven't Haitians suffered enough already? In 2017 and 2018, I lived for several months with Haitians in Leogane and Les Cayes. I was exposed to the reality of extreme poverty, food insecurity, lack of medical care and the corruption of NGOs. Many Haitians were still living in tents after the devastating earthquake of 2010.⁴

For a nation which has been controlled by foreign powers for centuries, it would seem incredibly gracious for Haitians to be afforded an opportunity to live and work in a country, such as the US. However, this foreign welcome has also been marred with disrespect by Donald J. Trump. I am certain that the Haitians, living with Temporary Protected Status in the US, would have never imagined that they would have been disrespected to the point of a former president claiming that they were eating their neighbours' pets.

What is even more heartbreaking is that many Haitians have felt the need to defend themselves regarding Trump's

4 Timothy T. Schwartz expounds on this in his book, *Travesty in Haiti: A true account of Christian Missions, orphanages, food aid, fraud and drug trafficking* (BookSurge Publishing, 2008). Schwartz exposes the reality of greed, fraud, apathy, political agendas and the depths of corruption regarding foreign aid.



Gustave Doré, *Lazarus the Beggar at the Rich Man's Gate* (1891)



Tomas Castelazo, *Old Woman* (2007)

statement that they were eating domestic animals. I received pictures of their food on WhatsApp with captions confirming that they do not eat pets. Many showed plates of their food on TikTok and Facebook. The injustice is beyond words, and it will be no surprise that Trump will not be receiving any Haitian votes in November's election.

One Haitian messaged me, saying that Trump's statement really did not concern the Haitian diet, but that it was a political strategy, meant to promote an alignment with those who are also against immigration in the US, or as it has often been called, the "Browning of America."⁵ The Haitian related that the same thing had occurred in the Dominican Republic. A gentleman running for a political office called the Haitians, who were living there, "ugly" to appeal to those who had issues with the number of illegal Haitians in the DR. This strategy was used as a method of obtaining votes to receive a position of power. As of late, the Dominican Republic has declared that it will begin deportations of ten thousand Haitians per week.⁶

Trump participated in a written interview on October 23, 2020 mediated by spiritual advisor Paula White-Cain. He wrote: "Though I was confirmed at a Presbyterian church as a child, I now consider myself to be a non-denominational Christian."⁷ Considering all of the indictments, felonies,

5 See Roland S. Martin and Leah Lakins, *White Fear: How the Browning of America is Making White Folks Lose Their Minds* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2022).

6 "Dominican Republic to deport up to 10,000 Haitians a week, citing an 'excess' of immigrants," *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/02/americas/dominican-republic-deport-haitians-intl-hnk/index.html>.

7 Jack Jenkins, "Trump, confirmed a Presbyterian, now identifies as 'non-denominational Christian'," *RNS*. <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/23/exclusive-trump-confirmed-a-presbyterian-now-identifies-as-non-denominational-christian/>.



lies and abuse of women, it is difficult to understand the depth of his Christian faith. If he can go to the extreme of lying concerning the Haitians eating their neighbours' pets, could he not also be aligning himself with the Christian evangelicals by simply calling himself a non-denominational Christian? Foreigners from third world countries are not welcome in the US under a possible Trump presidency.

Can Trump possibly understand the degrees of suffering he has brought to the Haitian people? I was in Les Cayes, Haiti, in 2018 when Trump used profanity to describe Haiti. Haitians were out in their yards shaking fists in the air and yelling, "How can Trump say that? Trump has never been to Haiti! We love our country!" (translated from Haitian Creole). The Haitians were traumatised by Trump's words on that day and called him racist and ignorant. Trump has only added to their trauma by accusing them in a presidential debate of eating the pets of their neighbours.

I was privileged to spend the Christmas of 2017 in Haiti. There were no decorated trees, lights or presents but beautiful songs and hymns could be heard all over the country. The Haitians spend Christmas Eve in churches all over Haiti and celebrate Christmas morning with a traditional Christmas soup. A great majority of Haitians are Christian and, even though many are very poor, they are rich in faith. Prayer meetings in Haiti can last ten to twelve hours and the Haitians depend on God for everything.

Given the invitation to come to the US with Temporary Protected Status, made possible through the sponsorship of US residents, must have seemed like a miracle. Haitians believed God had rescued them, and they would now have an opportunity to send money home to their loved ones. Trump's lies about the Haitians eating pets only enforced a longing for Haitians to return to their home country. Somehow, amid gang violence and extreme poverty they would not experience such blatant disrespect in Haiti.

According to a late news release on CNN, it is Trump's intention to revoke the Temporary Protected Status of the Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, and to conduct mass deportations to Haiti if he becomes president in November.⁸

Jesus alludes to Deuteronomy 15:11 in Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7 and John 12:8:

For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in the land. (Deut 15:11 RSV)

When a country such as the United States of America chooses to forget the poor; when it chooses to ridicule and humiliate those who have sought refuge and protection, it has forsaken the heart of God.

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⁸ Rashard Rose and Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would revoke Temporary Protected Status for Haitian migrants in Springfield if elected."



Clunie Damus, C/lon (Painting depicting Haitian Independence)