

San Juan pastor serves meals, shares gospel after Maria

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SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (BP)—Hungry and thirsty two weeks after Hurricane Maria decimated Puerto Rico, a teenaged girl approached as Southern Baptist church planter Johnny Baez was serving beans, rice and filtered water.

“I’m hungry, and I don’t have nothing at home,” she told Baez. “And I just start walking to see if I find something to eat.”

Baez persuaded her to accept a meal at his church plant, Iglesia Bautista de la Familia Santurce—the Baptist Church of the Family in Santurce. The girl thought she was poorly dressed and had been too “embarrassed ... to go inside a church,” Baez said.

Her story is only one in the community of Santurce, one of San Juan’s poorest. The island remains devastated after Hurricane Maria struck Sept. 20 with a wind force just shy of the 157-mph Category 5 storm ranking. While the official death toll from Maria is 36, funeral directors there say the death count might include dozens more.

‘Desperate to have food’

Pastor Felix Cabrera, a member of the Hispanic Baptist Pastors Alliance leadership council, has been in San Juan since Sept. 30 to help. Send Relief leaders and volunteers from the Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board began arriving Oct. 8.

“We are desperate to have food in our churches to start serving hot food in

the communities," Cabrera said.

In cooperation with the Hollywood, Fla.-based Come Over Ministry, an international church planting outreach led by Colombian native Martin Vargas, the Hispanic Baptist Pastors Alliance helped supply 12 power generators for churches. Vargas recruited Banyan Air Service and other private jet companies to transport the generators, Cabrera said.

"Unfortunately, right now we have other generators for churches, elderly homes, and food and water stuck in Fort Lauderdale," Cabrera said. "But we haven't found jets to transport these to Puerto Rico."

Cabrera estimates as of Oct. 9, electricity has been restored for only 12 percent of the population.

Disparity between metro and rural areas

"We have two types of Puerto Rico—area metro and the rest of the island," he said. "Area metro is returning to ... normal, but the rest of the island is without electricity, water, food, medicines, etc. People are trying, they are working hard to move forward," said Cabrera, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Central (Central Baptist Church) in Oklahoma City, Okla. The church's church planting network has birthed two churches in Puerto Rico among 30 internationally.

"After Hurricane Maria, my people are like the people of Israel," Cabrera said. "The remnant there in the province who had survived," he quoted Nehemiah 1:3, "is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

Cabrera, working with Vargas and Southern Baptist churches there, hopes to open temporary Help and Hope Centers in 12 churches to serve hot

dinners.

"Many of our churches suffered damage. Many of our pastors lost or have damages at their homes," Cabrera said. "Their church members are in great need, and many in our communities are waiting to see the church to rise up and serve those in need."

On Oct. 9, Baez's church plant in Santruce was the only Southern Baptist church offering hot meals. Open since Oct. 1, the church hoped to serve 500 meals in its first week, Baez said.

Adapting to adversity

Residents are skilled in adapting to adversity, Baez said, and feel blessed to eat one meal a day.

"They feel blessings because you know at least they are alive, and remember this was a hurricane that hit the whole island. It's not a corner of this island that is not destroyed or affected," he said, his sentence stopped by his own sudden tears.

"But we are alive—we are alive. God protected lives. They (survivors) say we don't have food, but at least we are alive."

Working without government assistance, Baez receives small donations of beans and rice from survivors. A donated two-gallon water filter makes hydrant water potable.

"Everybody's waiting on the donations that come from the United States, but we don't receive it yet," said Baez, who grew up in Puerto Rico. "But people in Santurce are not eating, eating bread one time a day and no water."

To buy food at the few supermarkets that have reopened, residents must

stand in line as long as four hours to make purchases limited to small portions, Baez said. Waiting in the supermarket lines takes Baez away from the feeding ministry, where he also is able to offer the hope of the gospel.

"I think the best way to provide food was asking everybody to give a little bit, a little bit, and that's the way we do it," said Baez, working with a multidenominational group of area pastors.

"And we get people from everywhere. Pastors ... come from far away to bring me rice, three pounds, five pounds, and that's how we are doing now. They go to the supermarket, they buy a little bit, then they bring it and we cook it."

"Little by little," Baez noted, communities will get the help they need.