

Baptists arrive to help in Irma-shattered Caribbean

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SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic (BP)—Days after Hurricane Irma killed at least 38 people and destroyed entire communities in the Caribbean and West Indies, Southern Baptist partners are on site assessing the most urgent needs for assistance.

A Baptist Global Response disaster assessment and response team arrived Sept. 10 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Baptist Global Response is working in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board to meet the immediate life-preserving needs of survivors across the region.

"We have already approved \$50,000 of food relief in a joint effort with NAMB Send Relief for the Virgin Islands," said Jeff Palmer, chief executive officer of Baptist Global Response. "Send Relief is committing \$50,000 as well for an initial effort of \$100,000 from Southern Baptists."

Food, clean water and shelter top the list of immediate concerns, as communities prepare for long-term recovery and rebuilding, Palmer said.

"Clean, potable water sources are critical right now to prevent dehydration and intestinal issues that could cause outbreaks of diseases such as cholera," he said. "Personnel will also find temporary lodging alternatives to provide survivors with comfort and shelter from the elements until more permanent housing is in place."

Initial BGR assessments will focus on Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, the Turks, Caicos, and the Bahamas, Palmer said in an update on the Baptist Global Response [website](#).

Communication difficult in Virgin Islands

Pastor Lennox Zamore of Ebenezer Baptist Church in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, was working to contact fellow Baptist pastors in the region.

“I still have no contact (with) the churches of St. John (Virgin Islands) where Irma was most severe,” Zamore reported by text message. “Only emergency transport and military (are) allowed. Besides, there is no gas.”

A curfew that restricts travel from noon to 6 p.m. impedes travel, Zamore said, adding, “I am trying to overcome all of these” impediments.

Ebenezer Baptist lost all of its windows, Zamore said. Among churches Zamore has managed to contact, Grace Baptist Church in St. Thomas lost its roof, and Bovoni Baptist Church in Bovoni lost windows and doors and suffered internal damage.

The Virgin Islands are expected to be without electricity, running water, hospitals and schools for months, Zamore said, and several hotels are damaged.

The destruction has created “great opportunities for mission trips in the area,” Zamore said, listing needs including debris removal, structural repairs, feeding and mental healthcare for post-traumatic stress disorder and other concerns.

About 60 congregations comprise the Convention of Southern Baptist Churches in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, according to Southern Baptist Convention data.

Assessing needs in Cuba

L.M. Dyson, a layman at First Woodway Baptist Church in Waco and retired professor at Baylor University, has been in contact with the SBC International Mission Board and other partners, including Plano-based East-West Ministries International, to begin assessing damage and discovering needs in Cuba.

Dyson has traveled to Cuba more than 40 times in the last 18 years, working in partnership with Cuban Baptists and often with Texas Baptist Men to provide shipping containers filled with ministry supplies.

Early reports indicate Hurricane Irma “virtually destroyed” a Baptist camp outside Santa Clara in Central Cuba and the damage was “more far-reaching than Matthew,” the hurricane that hit Cuba last year, Dyson noted.

After Hurricane Matthew, Dyson worked with TBM, the IMB, Baptist Global Response, East-West Ministries, Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall and Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler to provide water purification units, a generator, building materials, food and other supplies to Cuba.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.