

Cuban Baptists Rally to Aid Hurricane Sandy's Victims

Hurricane Sandy's torrential rains and 105-mph winds slammed eastern Cuba Oct. 25, damaging about 130,000 homes—demolishing more than 15,000 of them and leaving 11 people dead. Among those killed was a couple from First Baptist Church in the hard-hit coastal city of Santiago.

The Baptist couple—whose names were not released—died when a wall collapsed in their home during the storm.

Hurricane Sandy devastated their city of Santiago, affecting nearly 70 percent of the area, news reports said. In Santiago and surrounding provinces hit by the storm, many of the 150 churches and 200 house churches affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba were damaged; some were completely destroyed. The convention's seminary and home for the elderly also sustained damage.

The storm's intensity caught many people unprepared, reports said. Debris, fallen trees and downed electrical poles now block most of the area's roads, making it difficult to bring aid supplies by vehicle. The storm also caused a citywide power outage predicted to last several more weeks.

In the wake of the disaster, Baptist Global Response released \$5,000 in emergency funds last weekend and anticipates providing more funds for relief efforts soon, said a BGR official. In addition, the Florida Baptist Convention has contributed \$5,000 in aid and other state Baptist conventions are planning assistance as well.

But even before outside aid arrived, Cuban Baptists in Santiago were reaching out to the community, despite their own losses.

“The great thing is even in the midst of all the challenges and difficulties that are being faced right now, a lot of the pastors we’ve been able to speak to and the members of their churches just immediately began to step up to the plate,” said an IMB representative who travels frequently to Cuba. “Even though they themselves had had a lot of loss and a lot of damage, they’ve been coming together to try to help people in the community.”

To meet the pressing needs for food and water, local Baptist churches have begun setting up the first of 35 planned soup kitchens throughout Santiago and other locations ravaged by the storm.

“As a church, we have proposed to invest all our efforts and resources to help the needy,” one local pastor wrote in a letter to the president of the Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba. “Today we began to prepare food. Early in the morning we only had a little bit of rice, but thanks to God, with the contributions of various members, we were able to feed 60 people. Tomorrow we will cook for 100. We know this is insufficient, but we have already begun. God will continue to provide.”

Local Cuban Baptists also are gathering clothing and other supplies for people in need. Fourth Baptist Church of Santiago has made their generator available daily so locals can charge cell phones and batteries, and even hooked it up to a TV in the street so people can watch the news.

As local Baptists met immediate needs, Cuban Baptists from the western side of the island quickly stepped in to contribute to the relief effort, too.

“As soon as the hurricane had passed,” said the IMB representative, “[leaders from the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba] discovered what some needs were, and they immediately loaded a truck with a lot of rice that they had

stored for a hurricane and sent it with other foodstuffs and purified water and other things they felt would be needed.”

In addition to meeting physical needs, Cuban Baptists are using the opportunity to reach out to their neighbors spiritually, the IMB worker said.

“Our brothers and sisters [in Cuba] are recognizing that this terrible situation is an amazing opportunity to share the love of Christ in very real and tangible ways,” he said. “They take the call to share the Gospel very seriously at all times, but in the midst of their own suffering, that actually draws the church together, and it helps them to focus on finding the real needs of their neighbors and demonstrating the love of Christ.”

The disaster also has motivated Cuban Baptists to step up their efforts in meeting their national goal of seeing 1 million new believers in Cuba by the year 2020, the IMB representative said. Cuban Baptists set this goal several years ago, calling it the “20/20 Vision.”

“Cuban Baptists from both the eastern and western Baptist conventions are very strong, mission-minded, Great Commission Christians,” he said. “And I think, as tragic as this is, this is an opportunity to be a part of seeing a million new believers by 2020. That’s an amazing perspective on things, just recognizing in the midst of this tragedy, God is going to do something amazing for those who love Him.”

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