

Spirit-Filled Puerto Rican Pastor: I'm Not the Same Man I Was 2 Weeks Ago

Pastor Marvin Suarez and his wife Carmen saw the creature comforts of life as they knew it wiped away when Hurricane Maria ravaged their island home.

"We are not the same people we were two weeks ago," the couple say when reached by phone. "Everything is lower. There's no contact with people, we go to their houses because sometimes phones don't work. Everything is completely different."

The two pastor Iglesia La Viña de Mayagüez along the western coast of Puerto Rico. They're desperate to serve their community but have limited resources due to the storm. Their biggest need? Cash—cold, hard cash.

"This is an experience we've never had before because we are so used to plastic—debit cards, credit cards," Carmen says. "[It's been] tough for a lot of people because they didn't have enough cash. The banks were closed, and they just opened. This is a different environment. But some aspects [are a] blessing, too. We are more aware of our fragility and our dependency on the internet, the technical stuff and the technology. We have been able to get to know our neighbors, work together at church. We spent whole day at church just cleaning and fixing things there. It has been not all bad."

As the island attempts to move back into routine—which is extremely limited, due to continued power outages and lack of basic resources—the Suarezes say their community members are tired and grumpy, stuck in lines for hours on end just to attend to basic needs.

So today, the couple will hand out juice and cookies at banks,

gas stations—basically wherever they see a line.

“[A bank manager] was telling me that he goes to have some conversations with people in line just to be there for them, just the fact that they’re talking to you brings them comfort. That’s what we want to do, just be there, comfort them and give them sugar to keep going,” Marvin says.

The church campus also has a well on site, which has the couple scrambling to find a water pump so they can distribute the necessity to those around them. They will also soon offer at least one hot meal a day and prayer to anyone who stops by.

“What we’ve learned from this experience that the church was not hurricane ready. That is something we are going to work on,” Marvin says. “For these kind of tropical incidents, we need to have a good generator, install water pumps at the well and be a safe place for people to come right after the hurricane blows over us. Then, even though I have been working with constructors to get the electrical poles put in place, [it’s] impossible, because these guys are subcontracted by the government to deal with bigger stuff. They put all their energy and resources into that.

Without internet and with only spartan phone service, the church is dependent on signs to tell its neighbors about the outreaches. They may have next to nothing, but they know God is still good.

“I have seen the Lord’s hand in every move,” Marvin says. “The church is different, but the church is alive.”