

Southern Baptists serve up Gospel along with much needed food

Editor's note: This year's Week of Prayer for North American Missions in the Southern Baptist Convention is March 6-13.

GUAYNABO, Puerto Rico (BP and local reports) – When Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board (NAMB) first opened an emergency food bank during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, Itamar Elizalde agreed to list her personal mobile phone number as the contact.

"I got 250 calls, not repeated calls, in about six hours – people looking for food," said Itamar, who serves as ministry coordinator in Puerto Rico for SEND Relief, the compassion ministry administered jointly by Southern Baptist's International Mission Board and NAMB

She was getting texts at all hours of the day, and she knew her team needed a new plan. Before they could make one, she got a text from Rosa that simply said, "I'm all alone. Please help me." A few minutes later, Itamar got a second call: "I don't have food. Please, help. Please, please."

"It was a series of texts, and I'm just reading this with tears in my eyes," Itamar said. She replied and got no response. She called, and Rosa answered.

Rosa told Itamar she didn't have a car and suffered from depression. She didn't leave her house even before the pandemic hit, and the pandemic had only made things worse. The Catholic church across the street from her home had been supplying her with food, but the priest had recently died of COVID-19 and the church shut its doors.

“She said, ‘I don’t know what to do. I have nothing,’” so Itamar got to work. She asked Rosa where she lived and found out her home was close to one of NAMB’s church plants. Itamar talked with the planter, and he along with his family dropped off groceries from the food bank.

The church planter prayed for Rosa, and his wife invited her to church.

“That Sunday, they picked her up and brought her to the church,” Itamar said. “At the time, they were only allowing 10 people in the building [at one time], and he said, ‘We made sure she was one of those 10,’ and then she was weeping and the wife shared the Gospel with her again.”

Not only that, she told Rosa that they were willing to walk alongside her and take her through biblical counseling. Rosa said yes to Jesus and discipleship.

She’s one of many who have heard the Gospel and also had their physical needs met through the work of the ministry center, which began operation after back-to-back hurricanes Maria and Irma ravaged the island in September 2017.



SHARING PRAYER – Derrick Rudolph (left), a Journeyman

-serving in Puerto Rico with Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board, (NAMB) prays over a man he and Cesar Guzman (right) met on the sidewalk. Guzman is a NAMB church planter serving at Iglesia Bautista Sobre La Roca (Upon the Rock Baptist Church) in Rio Piedras. (Photo credit: NAMB)

The center, located in Guaynabo, serves as the offices for SEND Relief Puerto Rico and provides housing for volunteer teams, along with hosting the emergency food bank.

Itamar said the needs are great. Puerto Rico has been in a dire economic crisis since 2015. The hurricanes in 2017 killed thousands and knocked out the fragile electrical grid, leaving most residents without power for months.

Two years later, a political scandal brought more hardship and at the beginning of 2020, six weeks of non-stop earthquakes destroyed hundreds of homes in the southwest.

Itamar moved there in late 2019, right in the heart of the growing need. It was a full-circle move for her. She was born in Puerto Rico. Her parents moved to Worcester, Mass., to plant a church when she was young.

She hadn't intended to move back but after spending some years in the criminal justice field and then student ministry, she led a GenSend student team to Puerto Rico in March 2019. While there, she encouraged her students to pray about coming back for the summer. What she found was that God was leading her to come back and stay.

Now Itamar serves as the on-the-ground coordinator for volunteer teams that come in from churches in the U.S. to help with construction projects, work that opens doors to share about the hope found in Jesus. Sometimes that impact is immediate. At other times, it's laying the groundwork for what's to come, she said.

"You might not see it but a few years from now, this person might come to Christ or this family or a church might be

planted here," she said, "and you get to be a part of that rather than just building a roof. Another hurricane can come and blow that roof away. It goes deeper than that."

God is at work in Puerto Rico, Itamar said, in the same way He stirred her heart to join His work there, He's been stirring others, too.

"In spite of all this [tragedy] and because of all this, God has begun to move in the hearts of church planters to move their lives and plant churches in a place where Southern Baptists churches were not being planted and were, in fact, dwindling in numbers and influence," Itamar said.

"The Lord has used tragedy to awaken the hearts of many on the island who previously placed their hope on money, family, health, and stability and can now see how fleeting it all is in light of the solid-rock hope found in the Gospel," she said.

The Annie Armstrong Easter Offering[®] provides half of NAMB's annual budget, and 100% of the proceeds go to resource missionaries. The offering is used on the field for training, support, and care for missionaries like Itamar and for evangelism resources.

Gifts to the Annie Armstrong Offering for North American Missions are received through local Southern Baptist churches or online at anniearmstrong.com, where there are also resources to help promote the offering. This year's goal is \$70 million.