

Learning: We Can Do This Together

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On our first day we began to learn about the impact of the hurricane on the personal lives of the people we were there to help. The stories were similar with most of the people we worked for. Carmen was not able to get back to her home until eight months after the hurricane while her children worked to remove the mud and debris. Carmen did alterations before the hurricane and had five sewing machines, all lost in the flooding. Now she is doing what she can with one machine that a friend loaned to her. In Puerto Rico – family takes care of family and neighbors help neighbors. As a congregation, what can we learn from this, how can we help our neighbors?



Puerto Rico in general is not a financially wealthy US territory. The median income is a third of the median income in Missouri. Yet the home owners served us lunch, cool drinks, and/or snacks. Their gratitude was indescribable. Puerto Ricans have very little, but are extremely generous with what they do have.

We were all asking during our week there, “Why, after two years, is there still this much work to be done?” There are a couple of reasons we believe contribute to this. One is people are physically unable to do the repairs or cannot afford to have a contractor do the work required. Eighty percent of the homes in Puerto Rico are concrete, yet FEMA does not cover repairs to concrete homes with a concrete roof, so the people are dependent on organizations like PDA, Salvation Army, and St. Vincent de Paul to arrange for the repairs.

Another reason is family. For generations, it has been a practice for parents to give a portion of their land to their children to build a house. They are family, and you don’t sell property to family. Or in some cases, children move into their parent’s home to take care of them. In these situations, there is no sale, so no title or deed in their name.

After Maria hit, without title to the land or house it took a long time to prove which individuals owned which property.

By the end of the week we had sealed a total of six roofs, removed crumbling ceiling stucco from another home, painted walls, and worked on repairs to the First Presbyterian Church in Anasco. Yet all 11 of us wondered if we did enough. We worked hard every day, contributing in ways we could not have imagined.

On our last day in Anasco students from a private school down the street from our accommodations provided a full dinner for us. We had done nothing at or for the school during our week there, but they knew about us and our purpose there and wanted to show their appreciation for the work we had been doing. How can we learn from this school?

So, what did we learn? We had taken a guided tour of the only natural rain forest in the US, El Yunque National Forest, in the mountain range that crosses the entire island. Our guide explained that Hurricane Maria was so powerful it brought in salt water along with the winds and rain, and almost destroyed the rain forest. In just two years the forest has returned to its former lush, beautiful self. Puerto Rico is a beautiful island with friendly, outgoing, generous, caring, and resilient people. Mother Nature overcame the ravages of Hurricane Maria in the rain forest and the people of Puerto Rico are working hard, with help, to overcome as well.

