

## **Church of the Brethren hurricane response in Puerto Rico**

When Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017 (just two weeks after Hurricane Irma brought some flooding and storm damage to the island), it caused extensive damage to infrastructure, services, agriculture and structures. While no longer in the main news, challenges in Puerto Rico abound, including consistent access to power, safe water, and resources.

All seven of Church of the Brethren congregations in Puerto Rico were among those affected by the hurricanes. Thirty-four members' homes sustained major damage, churches had minor damage, and many in surrounding communities need assistance. The disruption to life and sustenance has gone beyond the initial impact, affecting access to and availability of employment, food, building materials, etc., and making cooking, bathing and laundry much more difficult.

The compassion, prayers and donations of Brethren individuals and congregations on the U.S. mainland have been a source of strength for the Puerto Rican Brethren. The initial hurricane response included:

- trips by BDM staff to support and encourage the district leadership, assist with connections with FEMA and VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) representatives and develop plans for relief and long-term response programs
- emergency funding of \$48,300 to support district and congregational relief programs
- supplies, tools and generators valued at more than \$62,000 provided for use or distribution by the district and congregations

The Puerto Rico district, in partnership with Brethren Disaster Ministries, is planning for a \$480,000 long-term recovery response for church families and their communities. While a typical BDM project provides construction and volunteer management in partnership with other organizations, the district and BDM felt called to respond boldly and not to wait for other groups to step forward with other services.

A District Recovery Committee has been formed and a Puerto Rico-based response coordinator and related response staff will be hired or appointed. This group will carry out case management, project approvals, volunteer management, and volunteer-based home repair and construction. BDM will provide training, help in the development of response guidelines and send volunteers to help rebuild homes. Volunteers interested in serving in Puerto Rico are urged to contact their district disaster coordinator.

This long-term program will help the Puerto Rican Brethren and the communities around their congregations to recover and find hope again. They are encouraged that their brothers and sisters on the mainland are committed to partnering with them for the long haul.