

Deep into the Eye of the Hurricane in the Caribbean

by Rev. Angel L. Rivera-Agosto
Area Executive, Latin America and the Caribbean

In the Caribbean people look up and see God in the winds. They sense God's overwhelming presence in the nature that shelters them, and in its contours and limitations, becomes a dominant force that creates, destroys, and transforms. As human beings, we confess our limitations by understanding God's mysterious work and recognizing that God's wonders are incomprehensible to our humanly limited gaze. It is within this powerful dialectic of destruction/creation/transformation that the notion of mission in the Caribbean can be understood and our process for accompanying our partners and their countries into a path of justice and fullness of life can be undertaken.

On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma, became one of the most powerful hurricanes ever recorded in the Atlantic. Irma damaged crops and houses in the Dominican Republic. Haiti, where they are still recovering from the devastation caused by the 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew last year, was flooded once again. Two weeks later, Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico — the first Category 4 storm to directly strike the island since 1932. Within hours Maria had fully engulfed the 100-mile-long island as winds, shattered palm trees, peeled off rooftops, and cut electric power to nearly the entire island. More than three million Puerto Ricans remain almost entirely without electricity, not because their power plants are down, but because roughly 80 percent of transmission lines are. The hurricane has left the island wholly crippled as residents struggle to pick up the pieces.

Besides the natural effects of the hurricanes in the Caribbean region, it is crucial to understand the other forces that have hammered the islands. They are suffering the effects of globalization, privatization of public services, free trade, the dissolution of the social state, and the full dominion of multinationals and private investments over the common interest, which has diminished the abilities these countries to withstand natural disasters. For example, in Puerto Rico, the Electric Power Authority has been under fire for "inefficiencies" in recent years. As a result hundreds of employees were dismissed, mostly electric line workers. Now that the system is down because of the hurricane, the restoration of the service will take twice as much time as preventative maintenance would have. On top of that, the islands bear the additional burden of laws and restrictions imposed by the U.S. Congress, which create an unjust burden on the economy

of the Caribbean. That is why we, as people of faith, need to advocate for the elimination of the economic blockade against Cuba and the Jones Act in Puerto Rico, among other measures, to allow the recuperation of both islands and the rest of the Great Caribbean.

We must let the winds bring down our prejudices, our false ideologies, and illusory assurances. The lesson from the hurricane is to understand that only God has Words of eternal life before our sins, myopia, and vulnerabilities. The witness of the people from the Great Caribbean, battered by forces both earthly and human, must bring us to a space of solidarity in which demolished walls are brought down and we are able to recognize those neighbors who have been invisible to our sense of solidarity and care.

*Starting January 1, 2018 Witness for Justice will be available online only.
Sign up to receive this column via email: <http://bit.ly/witness4justice>
Donate to support Witness for Justice: ucc.org/donate*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Angel L. Rivera-Agosto is Area Executive for Latin America and the Caribbean for Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

LEARN

ucc.org/justice

DONATE

ucc.org/nin_donate

ARCHIVE

WJ
f

bit.ly/witness4justice

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.