



# SEND RELIEF

MEETING NEEDS IN PUERTO RICO IS A DAILY, LONG-TERM MINISTRY.

Puerto Rico is a mountainous island full of colorful houses, sunny beaches, waterfalls, lush valleys, and structures right out of the pages of history.

A commonwealth of the US, Puerto Rico is a tropical destination for tourists and surfers.

According to the UN World Tourism Organization, 3.2 million international tourists visited the island in 2019. Puerto Rico's prime location in the Caribbean Sea is one of its advantages. But with it comes the risk of violent storms and other disasters.

"Though vulnerable to earthquakes, tsunamis, and wildfires, the major threat of disaster in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands comes from hurricanes, tropical storms, and drought," states the Climate Hubs website of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). "Hurricanes bring storm surge, heavy rainfall, flooding, landslides, extreme winds and tornadoes, and often cause extensive and catastrophic damage. Long-term drought impacts crops and livestock, water supply, and increases the risk of wildfires."

In recent years, Puerto Rico has experienced a few of the events on this list. From 2014–2016, Puerto Ricans were impacted by an extended period of drought. The USDA reports, "2015 was the third driest period in Puerto Rico. Strict water restrictions were enforced, businesses temporarily closed, and crops and livestock were lost."

After the drought came Hurricane Irma (category 5) and Hurricane Maria (high category 4). The hurricanes hit 14 days apart in September 2017. The USDA says Irma "devastated" eastern portions of Puerto Rico, while Maria struck the southeastern part. Maria earned the designation "the strongest storm to hit Puerto Rico since 1928."

In Puerto Rico, the need for relief services is daily and long term.

"Our Send Relief daily focus is to meet needs and change lives," said Jonathan Santiago, Puerto Rico's Send Relief regional director. "We serve our community by identifying practical needs we can meet in the areas of home reconstruction, meeting needs caused by poverty or [providing] crisis response [and] relief."

Send Relief is a ministry of the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board (NAMB). According to [sendrelief.org](http://sendrelief.org), "Sharing the love of Jesus is central to everything we do at Send Relief. Whether it's responding to natural disasters, caring for refugees and displaced families, fighting human trafficking at home and abroad, supporting adoption and foster care efforts and strengthening communities facing economic and physical crises, our goal is the same."

Jonathan said allocations from the Cooperative Program (CP) and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering (AAEO) are vital to Send Relief efforts in Puerto Rico.

"Almost half of our field funding [comes] from the AAEO," he said. "We would not be able to do what we do without AAEO and CP. . . . [CP money] funds our

missionaries and allows us the opportunity to meet needs and change lives."

Send Relief operates three ministry centers in Puerto Rico in addition to a ministry site. Jonathan and his family live in Humacao, Puerto Rico, and he is based in Send Relief's office in Guaynabo.

He said partnerships with churches, organizations, government entities, and others are essential for the work of Send Relief. "We are not able to do what [we do] without our partners."

In addition, missions teams provide much-needed workers and assistance.

"We host dozens of mission teams every year," said Jonathan, who has worked with Send Relief in Puerto Rico for three and a half years. "[Teams] assist with home repairs, prayerwalk, provide prepackaged meals, distribute backpacks, and assist local churches with community projects."

The people of Puerto Rico are receptive to the missions teams, he said. "Locals are very welcoming and usually invite mission teams and volunteers and share of whatever food they have with the team or volunteers."

## LIFE OF PREPARATION

Jonathan grew up going to church in Puerto Rico. "My favorite time in church as a child was the time I spent as a Royal Ambassador [RA]," he said, noting that in RAs he learned the Bible, Christian traits, life skills, leadership, responsibility, teamwork, and the importance of serving others.

"I am what I am today, and I do what I do because of three reasons: God's grace, my family's Christian upbringing, and the lessons learned at the Royal Ambassadors," Jonathan said. "Our Royal Ambassador experiences were also tied to the gospel, the mission field, and God's call to serve others. That was part of the foundation that shaped me."

As an NAMB summer missionary in 1996, Jonathan was a counselor at Trinity Pines youth camp near Houston, Texas. During a Wednesday night service, "God used Isaiah chapter 42 to call me to ministry. From that moment forward, it was clear to me what He was calling me to. I understood that my life would be a life of service to Him and those most vulnerable," he said.

Subsequent missions work prepared him for his current Send Relief responsibilities. He gained experience in inner-city missions as an senior pastor and youth pastor and in state leadership roles in student ministry and evangelism for the Puerto Rico and New York Baptist conventions.

He and his wife, Yesenia, are bringing up their three daughters "the same way we were raised: knowing God and loving people. We teach them to pray for others, give, and serve others."

## GOOD TIMES, DIFFICULT TIMES

In 1493, Christopher Columbus landed on the island of Puerto Rico and claimed it for the Spanish crown. The Spanish governed the island until 1898, when it was ceded to the US as a result of treaty negotiations after the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans were granted US citizenship in 1917.

When Columbus first arrived in Puerto Rico, he gave the island the name of San Juan Bautista, which translates to Saint John the Baptist. Its capital city was originally called Ciudad de Puerto Rico, or “Rich Port City.” Eventually the island’s name morphed into Puerto Rico, and the capital city became San Juan. Now, the island’s official name is the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico sits along the Mona Passage, a key shipping lane on the way to the Panama Canal. And San Juan contains one of the biggest and best natural harbors in the Caribbean.

Until 2006, Puerto Rico enjoyed one of the Caribbean’s most robust economies. However, around that time, some government incentives that had encouraged investment from US companies ended. In addition, the cost of oil for producing a significant portion of the island’s electricity escalated. Job opportunities markedly decreased and out-migration ensued.

“Economic recession on the island has led to a net population loss since about 2005, as large numbers of residents moved to the US mainland,” *The World Factbook* states. “The trend has accelerated since 2010 in 2014, Puerto Rico experienced a net population loss to the mainland of 64,000, more than double the net loss of 26,000 in 2010.”

Per capita income on the island is roughly two-thirds of what it is for mainland US.

Jonathan said half of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty level. Even so, every year more and more migrants from the Dominican Republic cross the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico to look for work.

## VERY RELIGIOUS, BUT VERY LOST

Jonathan describes Puerto Ricans as “very religious.”

In fact, 56 percent of the people are Roman Catholic, and 33 percent are Protestant (mostly Pentecostal). Seven percent report no religion, and one percent say they are atheists.

“Although very religious, [the people are] very lost and broken,” Jonathan said, adding they desperately need the hope found only in Jesus Christ. “We rejoice every time we have an opportunity to serve, meet needs, and share the gospel.”

He received that hope himself as an 11-year-old attending Glenview Baptist Church in Ponce, Puerto Rico. “I remember [Senior Pastor Rene Pereira] shared about the invisible God. The One who sees all, hears all, knows all, the only true God. That morning, God placed conviction in me and showed me how much I needed Him. That morning, I understood no one was good. So that morning, I . . . gave my heart to Jesus Christ.”

Three years later, Jonathan experienced the heartbreak of his parents’ divorce. “New in my personal walk with God, this created a lot of questions about God’s love and faithfulness,” he said.

Through this difficult time, Jonathan saw how Jesus binds up the wounds of the broken (Psalm 147:3). “I remember clearly that the search for the answers to the many questions I had only led me to get closer to God. My dependence on Him for reassurance, identity, and purpose only grew stronger.”

The work of Send Relief allows Jonathan to fulfill that purpose, while also offering other believers a way to show their genuine love for Jesus Christ.

“My role is to provide those opportunities for people to be on mission, to understand they were saved for a purpose. And that purpose is to make His love known,” Jonathan said. “I believe that God not only saves us from something, He saves us for something. He saves us on purpose and for a purpose. It’s not just about missing hell and making it to heaven. . . . Our understanding of God’s grace and mercy, as well as our understanding of His love for us, should spark a passion in us to serve Him and, through that service, see ourselves as part of [the] redemptive plan for the world. . . . There’s no way we experience that and not love Him more and more every day.”

The need for people in Puerto Rico to hear about Jesus is great, as is the need for people committed to sharing the love of Jesus on the island, Jonathan said. “The call to love and serve our neighbor is not reserved for a few, but it’s a call to all [who] have believed that Jesus is the way, truth, and life.”

## PRAY FOR . . .

- The broken and lost people of Puerto Rico
- The essential needs of those living below the poverty level
- Local churches ministering within their communities
- Missionaries and staff as they meet needs and tell people about Jesus
- Mission teams who will be serving on the island

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# Puerto Rico: Meeting needs through Send Relief



## FOR GROUP OR CHURCHWIDE STUDY:

**BEFORE THE SESSION:** write Jonathan Santiago's prayer requests on index cards to be passed out.

1. Ask, *What comes to mind when you think of Puerto Rico?* List responses on a board or large sheet of paper taped to the wall. Summarize Puerto Rico's history and current needs as shared in the mission study article.
2. Read the quote, "In Puerto Rico, the need for relief services is daily and long term." Summarize the introductory section of the mission study article. Include:
  - a. Send Relief services in Puerto Rico
  - b. The importance of the Cooperative Program and Annie Armstrong Easter in providing relief services
  - c. Partnerships with churches, organizations, government entities, and mission teams
3. Ask a volunteer to read what Jonathan Santiago said in the section, "Life of Preparation." Discuss what it means to live a life of service.
4. Ask another volunteer to read the statistics and quotes Jonathan Santiago shared in the section, "Very Religious, but Very Lost." Brainstorm ways to support Send Relief efforts in Puerto Rico.
5. Pass out the prayer request cards and pray together for each need. Encourage participants to take the cards home as reminders to pray for Puerto Rico and Send Relief efforts there.



## FOR FAMILY STUDY:

**BEFORE THE SESSION:** write Jonathan Santiago's prayer requests on index cards to be passed out.

1. Using information from the mission study introduction and the section, "Good Times, Difficult Times" and from your online search, present information about Puerto Rico to your family, including history, culture, statistics, tourist attractions, and needs. Ask, *Who would want to vacation in Puerto Rico? Why or why not?*
2. Describe the Send Relief efforts in Puerto Rico and how the Cooperative Program and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering support those efforts.
3. Summarize Jonathan Santiago's background and testimony as shared in the section, "Life of Preparation." Ask a volunteer to read Jonathan's quotes out loud.
4. Discuss the difference between being "very religious" and having the "hope found only in Jesus Christ." Use information from the section, "Very Religious, but Very Lost," to aid in your discussion.
5. Using a world map, help children draw, color and write Jonathan's prayer requests on outlines of Puerto Rico. Pray together for each need.



## FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY:

1. Search online for information about Puerto Rico, including statistics, culture, and things like tourism and natural disasters the island experiences.
2. Read the introduction of the mission study. Evaluate your own personal giving, including regular giving and special offerings such as the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. Pray for God's direction how to give to future offerings.
3. Read about Jonathan Santiago's testimony in the section, "Life of Preparation." Compare and contrast with your own story, outlining the progression of God's call in his life and yours.
4. Read the section, "Good Times, Bad Times" to better understand current conditions in Puerto Rico.
5. Consider the difference between being "very religious" and having the "hope found only in Jesus Christ," as explained in the section, "Very Religious, but Very Lost."
6. Pray over Jonathan's prayer requests and ask God for wisdom in how to support Send Relief's efforts in Puerto Rico.

**DIANA DERRINGER** serves with her husband as a friendship family to international university students. She offers Life Lessons from English Expressions at [dianaderringer.com](http://dianaderringer.com).