

**Central American Disaster:
Churches respond with help and prayer**

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San José, Costa Rica (LAMNS) – The flooding, landslides and damage were beyond belief.

“I have never seen anything like what just occurred in my life,” said Kathryn Winn, an El Salvador based missionary with the Latin America Mission.

Winn was referring to the aftermath of Hurricane Stan which slammed El Salvador, Guatemala and southern Mexico in early October, leaving more than 2,000 people dead and millions of dollars of damage in its wake.

“I was not able to travel to my ministry site for three days because the highway was cut off by mudslides, fallen trees and boulders,” she recalled. “I passed by a restaurant whose entire back half had fallen off of a cliff with the two security guards inside.”

Hardest hit was Guatemala where up to 1,400 were possibly buried in a massive landslide that swept away the Mayan town of Panabaj near the country’s popular Lake Atitlan tourist attraction. Officials found the recovery of bodies difficult if not impossible and declared the site a mass grave.

Rains from the hurricane also caused flooding in Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica.

“The impact of these natural disasters, between the floods and the volcano that erupted, has been far greater than the tragedy of Hurricane Mitch,” Winn said. “Almost the entire agricultural economy was destroyed in a matter of eight days. It literally rained NONSTOP here for eight days.”

El Salvador’s Iamatepec Volcano erupted as the region was being drenched by the hurricane’s downpours. An earthquake measuring 5.8 on the Richter Scale also struck the country, causing landslides on hills already unstable because of the heavy rain.

Winn reported that more than 70,000 people were living in temporary shelters, mostly in Evangelical churches and schools. “Many of the shelters are inaccessible and the aid must be sent via sliding the food across rivers by rope,” she said.

The impact in neighboring Guatemala was much higher. “The western and southern coasts were especially badly damaged with flooding, mudslides and damage to homes and crops,” reported Phillip Sandahl, Country Director for the Christian aid agency Food For the Hungry International.

“Many roads and bridges have been washed out and people are isolated from relief workers. Many have gone without food or water for five or six days. Helicopters are being used to find and bring aid to affected communities. Mudslides have buried entire towns.

“Immediate needs are focused on finding those who are trapped and getting them water, food, clothing and shelter,” Sandahl said. “Later we will also have to deal with the devastation to the crops which will affect food supply through the next harvest cycle.”

The storms caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage to Guatemalan agriculture, especially in coffee and sugar.

The story was much the same in southern Mexico where LAM missionary Liz Isais reported that over two and a half million people were affected by floods and landslides.

Isais said that over 250 people were reported dead throughout Mexico and Central America in addition to the estimate of 2,000 or more deaths in Guatemala.

Churches and Christian agencies are responding to the disaster with aid and prayers.

“Food for the Hungry in Guatemala is sending supplies from our warehouse and using \$5,000 committed already by Food for the Hungry in the United States to purchase and send supplies we do not have on hand,” Sandahl said. “More is needed. We are coordinating through the government’s national relief network CONRED and with some of the local churches in the capital who have sister churches in the affected areas.

In El Salvador, Winn reported that “The Evangelical Church has been a bigger source of aid than any other agency or religion. Every church I know of in El Salvador has been either collecting goods to distribute to the different shelters, or converting into shelters themselves.”

Southern Baptist missionary Philip Johnson in El Salvador reported that “Disaster response in El Salvador, unlike Guatemala, was quick and efficient. Churches and non-governmental agencies cooperated with government officials in providing food and basic necessities to several hundred shelters. People were housed in churches, schools, even stadiums.”

“Many churches opened their doors to the homeless, or became collection agencies for food and emergency supplies,” Johnson added. “An incredible spirit of unity and solidarity was felt in many churches.”

“Churches that did not have the resources to serve as shelters have responded by using their small, ill-equipped kitchens to cook for the hungry,” Johnson said. “As one cook remarked to me, ‘It’s the least I can do; this could have happened to me. I must respond.’”

In Mexico too, churches were at the forefront of disaster response. “Local churches here are gathering money and provisions to help,” Isais reported. “We do not yet have information about how many local churches have been destroyed or damaged in the flood areas.”

While the immediate response has involved providing shelter, food, water and health care, Christian leaders say that the long term needs will be much different.

“The future of many farmers and rural workers is in question,” Johnson said. “The loss of homes and crops will leave many people with no income or long-term housing.”

Organizations such as Food for the Hungry International and World Vision have established funds through their U.S. and Canadian offices to provide relief in the region.

In addition, Johnson recommends that those interested in helping out “may want to contact their denominational headquarters and see how they can actively participate in community water projects, rebuilding homes, assisting with seeds for planting, or being a part of a medical team.”

The disaster has provided an opportunity for prayer for Central Americans. “Please pray that the Lord will use this situation to wake up the church in Guatemala for the need to reach out to their families and neighbors in a way that will glorify our Lord and savior,” requested Nathan Sandahl, Phil Sandahl’s son who also works in Guatemala through Food for the Hungry.

“Also please pray for the Guatemalan people, that they may carry over this spirit of solidarity to the development of a stronger and more just nation in the near future.” He said.

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