

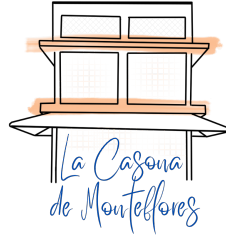


# AN INTENTIONAL RECOVERY

A DAILY REFLECTION GUIDE WHILE  
VOLUNTEERING IN PUERTO RICO THROUGH  
PRESBYTERIAN DISASTER ASSISTANCE



**PRESBYTERIAN  
DISASTER  
ASSISTANCE**



*Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) remains committed to our siblings in Puerto Rico through hurricanes Irma and Maria's recovery in addition to the January 2020 series of earthquakes in the southwestern region. Recently, a new recovery process started after the hit of hurricane Fiona in 2022.*

*More than \$3.8 million in grants have gone to Puerto Rico to support the work of congregations and local organizations responding to the disasters, and over 2,000 PDA volunteers have worked in rebuilding projects since 2017.*

*More info: [linktr.ee/PuertoRicoPDA](https://linktr.ee/PuertoRicoPDA)*

## AN INTENTIONAL RECOVERY

Every time I go to a new place I try to apply what's shared in "The Danger of a Single Story", TED talk by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, about the importance of acknowledging our lives are *composed by overlapping stories* or perspectives.

In the same way I have single stories about other places, many have single stories about Puerto Rico. We can also have single perspectives or expectations about our role as volunteers, our worksites, the purpose of our visit or the reality of the people we will meet.

Volunteering through PDA in Puerto Rico provides an opportunity to intentionally learn about deeper issues that affect the recovery process. My hope is this week brings opportunities to deconstruct *singles stories* about our Island and find other ways to support with empathy, awareness and justice.



Michelle Muñiz  
Disaster Recovery Coordinator (Puerto Rico)

# LOOK AT THE STARS

## DAY ONE

*Rev. Arelis Cardona*

*“Then he took him outside and said, “Look at the sky. Count the stars. Can you do it? Count your descendants! You’re going to have a big family, Abram!”*

*Genesis 15:5 (MSG)*

My favorite place in La Casona is the terrace. Everything you can see and feel from there is wonderful. During the day you can see the beach, the buildings, the immediate and distant surroundings and the vegetation. You feel the sea breeze; you perceive the social differences and the need. At night you see the stars.

Like Abraham, you have stepped out in faith (12:1), on an adventure sponsored by PDA. He was afraid and even doubted the divine promises. Can you identify with him?

The Lord, who knew very well how much Abraham needed a word, spoke to him through a vision, to give him assurance and a symbol that would nourish his faith.

He said to him: "I am your protector. You will get what you ask for, trust. Look at the stars."

The Lord has come with you to Puerto Rico, and just as he did with Abraham, he is ready to listen to your concerns, doubts and worries along the way. He also promises you to be a shield and help, protection in this stay that is not merely a trip to perform a task under the hot Caribbean sun. It is a precious opportunity to pause, and while you serve, to listen to other voices, to observe other faces, to explore a different community, to hear another language, to test yourself in other ways. As you seek to hear God's voice and discern His presence, it is an opportunity to grow, to transcend.

Ask, think, observe, pray, and tonight, before going to bed, look at the sky. Focus on the stars, and like Abraham, pay attention. Behold them, wait with confidence, recount the promises the Lord has made to you and ask Him to grant you visions and experiences that will bring you closer to Him and fill your life with a strengthened faith and greater meaning.



The Rev. Arelis Cardona is the pastor of Rev. Ramon Olivo Robles Memorial Presbyterian Church in Monteflores since 2003. For her, La Casona de Monteflores is a dream come true.

# PARTNERSHIP VS CHARITY

## DAY TWO

*Rev. Edwin González-Castillo*

In a conversation with Rev. Lydia Neshangwe, Moderator-elect of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) 2023 – 2025, she shared this important insight: “The new paradigm that we’ve been encouraging...is that we are not really there, for example, to teach the margins how to fish. You know, there’s a maxim that says, ‘Give a man a fish, and you give him a meal. Teach him how to fish and you give him many meals.’

What we are saying to our partners is that you need to come and fish with us. So that’s not a matter of you teaching us how to fish. Come and fish with me in the Zambise River. As we are fishing, you understand why I don’t catch as many fish as you think I should, because I have to watch out, one eye is in the water looking for fish, the other eye is looking for crocodiles and hippopotamus...There are some seasons when I cannot fish at all, because it’s too risky. I may die of malaria. So the new paradigm is, “don’t go out as missionaries to teach the people in the margins how to fish. Go and fish with them. And once you become one with them and fish with them, you will become aware of their difficulties. And then, of course, it will make us less judgmental of other people who are at the margins, and it will make us view them less as separate to us.”

Is difficult to add anything else to this wonderful quote. So much wisdom on these words. As someone who has been on both sides of the equation, the person welcoming volunteers, and the person leading a group of volunteers, I can say that one of the most fulfilling parts for both the volunteer and those being serve, is the relationship established during and after the trip. Of course, the relief provided is essential, but the connection provide a space of growth that is on many occasions a spiritual experience.

So, during this week, put aside your sandals, because every home you step in, every street you walk on, every community you visit, will be a sacred place where you will encounter Christ, through God's children and creation. Let the Spirit talk, open your ears and eyes to what God wants you to learn. Connect with those whose wisdom comes from not only their suffering, but from their resistance, their willing to continue walking each day. Get your fish rod ready and sit and learn, and you will discover the wonderful, we are not there only to serve, but also to grow.



The Rev. Edwin A. Gonzalez Castillo is the Director of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance of the PCUSA. After hurricane Maria, Edwin participated and coordinated several relief projects in Puerto Rico in coordination with the presbytery, local government, PDA and various NGOs. He has led many volunteer groups to Puerto Rico.

# CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

## DAY THREE

*Rev. Marielis Barreto Hernández*

The community can be considered as the common union, in other words, the unity of people in ideas, dreams, goals, and projects. Not too far from reality, Dr. Juan Bek, professor at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, defined community, from the Latin term “*communitas*”. In his statement, the “*communitas*” not only shares common projects, but it is also about communion. Such as in Pentecost (Acts 2), communion ensures the divine capacity so the church can work unanimously together with God, with its neighbors, and in the midst of diversity.

Through its projects of assistance and community work, the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance proclaims, affirms, and facilitates the common union, communion, and community. The practice of these concepts allows for the development of service towards our fellow men and women, particularly those people and communities who need assistance from the church. The coexistence of the working groups which, for example, are lodgers at the host sites in Puerto Rico, provide for “*communitas*”. Appreciation to what community life means, the openness, the learning process, and the ability to face the challenges, make life in community possible.

A good example is portrayed by Jesus himself, who on the road to Emmaus, becomes present (Luke 24:13-35) to sad and frustrated walkers. The transforming encounter with the



resurrected Christ and communion opened their eyes and understanding on the need to return to the community and share Christ's life and Christ in their lives. Communion with God and with our neighbors is what makes us be and live like the "communitas" of the resurrected Christ. May we be and live like the community of the resurrected that we shall never cease to be. So be it.



Rvda. Dra. Marielis Barreto is the pastor of Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana en Aguada, Puerto Rico, host church of PDA Volunteer Host Site "Casita Ebenezer"

# BEYOND LONG-TERM RECOVERY

## DAY FOUR

*Amarilis González*

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
Isaiah 61:1*

It's been five years of a long journey, recovery seems eternal. Most of the time it is overwhelming and frustrating to deal with suffering and extreme poverty. Above all, not having the adequate resources to meet the needs of all who agonize around you is devastating.

After hurricane María hit the island on September 20, 2017, the Puerto Rican people have dealt with many factors: the delay of the help, the bureaucracy (documents were considered more important than necessities), the high cost of construction materials, politics and politicians who have ignored the circumstances in which the most vulnerable still live.

It is challenging to live in a tropical island and not having a proper shelter. More than 20,000 cases have not been addressed effectively up to date. In some houses when it

rains outside, it pours inside. Spending years exposed to humidity and mold has provoked a crisis. People living in such settings have developed respiratory conditions, skin diseases, and their mental health has deteriorated.

We have been called to proclaim the good news to the poor and to bind up the brokenhearted, and although we lack resources to help at a faster pace; we are determined to restore a basic need of many: shelter. When volunteers fix a roof, they not only fix a structure, but they fix hope, faith, and smiles. Recovery is not only about specific buildings, but also about people, empathy and love that goes beyond cultural or language barriers. Recovery will be visible when we acknowledge the ones who are invisible.



Amarilis González Domínguez is the Executive Director of Techos Pa' Mi Gente (TPMG Corp), a not-for-profit organization that rebuilds roofs to the homes of families affected by natural disasters. Amarilis is a teacher, wife, and mother of two boys. As one of the leaders of the organization she has turned into an advocate of the ones without a proper roof.

# AND NOW, WHAT?

## DAY FIVE

*Rev. Amaury Tañón-Santos*

Your service in Puerto Rico has strengthened the livelihoods and wellbeing of some in the communities you served. I hope you found opportunities to pray, worship, and consider who you are and what you do as a person of faith. As your time of service in Puerto Rico comes to an end, I want to encourage you to consider what you have learned, individually and as a group. What are the two main assumptions about Puerto Rico and its people that may have shifted? What is the main concern you take with you – whether for an individual, a family, or a community you were involved with? What is something you learned and/or experienced you were not expecting or ready for?

I want to encourage you to consider those questions before thinking of what could be next for you and your group. I am certain you will have seen and heard that Puerto Rico's recovery process will take longer than anyone can fathom. You have surely heard that the recovery from hurricane María is not the only thing Puerto Ricans are seeking to come out from. I wonder what you have discovered about yourself (singular and plural) in your time in Puerto Rico. And perhaps this is the most important question. Puerto Ricans have much work ahead of us as we encourage the recovery of our homeland from the natural disasters and political crises.

As you consider, “and now, what?” I encourage you to do so not simply from what you can afford. I want to encourage you to also bring your mind and heart. Recovery is not only about building stronger and safer buildings. Recovery is about seeing the pain of communities, and participating with the community in turning that pain into resilience, solidarity, and joy.



Amaury Tañón-Santos was born, raised, and trained in Puerto Rico before he migrated to the United States to pursue theological formation. A pastor by vocation, a historian by training, and a networker by calling, Amaury has served in parish ministry, higher theological education, regional church ministry, and not for profit leadership.

## *PRAYER FOR A JUST RECOVERY IN PUERTO RICO*

*God of love and mercy, we lift a prayer in worship and gratitude.*

*We are grateful for the unity and strength of the Puerto Rican people, willing to fight in the midst of pain and need. Thank you for the Puerto Rican diaspora that responded and for the aid received in the past years.*

*We cry out for the families still living under blue tarps, and for those who haven't been able to rebuild their homes due to the bureaucracy in the system.*

*We pray for our elderly dealing with loneliness caused by the emigration of their relatives. We pray for the education of the Puerto Rican children and youth, and for the mental health of those affected after all these disasters.*

*We pray for the Church dealing with its own recovery process, dealing with challenges involving a lot of work, effort, willingness and determination.*

*We pray for the direction of the Holy Spirit so local leaders can continue serving their communities, sharing -in many ways- the good news of the Gospel.*

***“But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”  
(Psalms 39:7)***

*Amen*

*Written by Miriam E. Santana, Commissioned Ruling Elder at  
Iglesia Presbiteriana en Guánica*

## *ORACIÓN POR UNA RECUPERACIÓN JUSTA EN PUERTO RICO*

*Dios de amor y misericordia, a tí elevamos nuestra oración en adoración, alabanza y gratitud.*

*Gracias por la unidad y fuerza de los puertorriqueños dispuestos a luchar en medio del dolor y la necesidad. Gracias por nuestros hermanos boricuas en la diáspora que dijeron presente y por todas las ayudas recibidas.*

*Hoy clamamos a ti por las familias que todavía tienen en sus casas toldos azules y por los que no han podido reconstruir sus casas por la burocracia del sistema.*

*Por nuestros envejecientes que han quedado solos por la emigración de sus hijos y demás familiares.*

*Por la educación de nuestros niños y jóvenes y por la salud mental de nuestros hermanos afectados por todos estos eventos.*

*Por la Iglesia que en este tiempo enfrenta grandes retos. La Iglesia que también está en un proceso de recuperación que envuelve mucho trabajo, esfuerzo, voluntad y determinación.*

*Por dirección del Espíritu Santo para continuar presente en nuestras comunidades sirviendo y llevando las buenas nuevas del evangelio.*

***“Ahora, oh Señor, ¿qué esperaré? Mi esperanza está en ti.”***

*Amén*

*Escrita por Miriam E. Santana, Anciana Gobernante  
Comisionada en la Iglesia Presbiteriana en Guánica*