

## MINUTE FOR MISSION

### **CHRISTMAS JOY GIFTS HELP PUERTO RICAN PASTORS AND CHURCH WORKERS RECOVER FROM HURRICANE MARIA**

After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico last year, Presbyterian pastor Manuel D. Silva bore the dual burden of caring for his family and his congregation. The property damage wrought by the storm was in the billions, and many on the island were without electricity for months.

When the storm hit, Manuel's wife, Sylvette, was pregnant with their second child, and like thousands of others in Puerto Rico, the Silva family's home was unsafe for habitation. The couple and their firstborn son Caleb moved into a tiny apartment Manuel's father owns in a neighboring town.

The Assistance Program of the Board of Pensions, which receives significant funding from the Christmas Joy Offering, helped active and retired pastors as well as other church workers in Puerto Rico get back on their feet. Your gifts helped Manuel's young family — and many other pastors and their families — recover and serve their congregation's surrounding community.

Concerned about the well-being of overburdened pastors, Board of Pensions representative members met with Puerto Rican pastors four months after the hurricane with a delegation of different church agencies. There were conversations about resiliency, and the Board of Pensions representatives spoke about board benefits, including counseling services.

“We told them that they were not by themselves, that we are going to be there for them, and that we are going to help them as much as we can,” says Jose Irizarry, the Board of Pension's vice president for education. “They were rushing out caring for people, but they also needed to be cared for, and that wasn't being done.”

Manuel's church building was without electricity for two months. Nevertheless, the congregation continued to gather in the building each Sunday to worship, pray, and encourage one another. In February, the Silva family welcomed a healthy baby boy, Yanluis. Several weeks after his birth, the family was able to move back into their home. Yet life has still not returned to normal for many Puerto Ricans. Some in Manuel's community are camped in tents alongside the rubble that remains of their homes.

Manuel is grateful for the assistance he and other church workers received thanks in part to the Christmas Joy Offering. Special Offerings have taken on new significance among his congregation's members, Manuel says. "They give from experience and from love. It's part of who we are. We take care of people who really need it."

Why disasters like Hurricane Maria happen is beyond our understanding. There has been so much destruction and loss of life and livelihood. Yet, as we share in the grief of our sisters and brothers, we can comprehend God's call to help people in distress, and we can bear witness to God's love by our giving to the Christmas Joy Offering. In addition to helping pastors and congregations who know they can count on our love in their hour of deepest need, the Christmas Joy Offering also aids future church and society leaders who study in Presbyterian-related schools and colleges equipping communities of color. God's Love. It is the perfect gift.

### *Let us pray,*

*God of hope and restoration, draw near  
to those who offer compassion  
in times of immense struggle.*

*Bless all church leaders with your strength  
and by your grace as we seek to support  
them through our gifts.*

Amen.