

MINUTE FOR MISSION

Presbyterian generosity helps save a community in Puerto Rico from the threat of displacement

Even before Hurricane Maria ravaged communities along the Martín Peña Channel in Puerto Rico last year, residents were facing another threat that could have completely disrupted their way of life.

Plans to dredge the polluted channel and improve the waterway promised to dramatically increase property values in this section of San Juan near the financial district, airport, and universities. However, people living along the channel were looking at displacement rather than economic gain. Residents of these settlements did not have deeds to their dwellings, and land speculation and gentrification threatened to displace them — including families that had lived there for five generations.

Thanks in part to the generosity of Presbyterians — gifts from congregations just like ours received for One Great Hour of Sharing — the community formed the Martín Peña Channel Land Trust, which acquired title to a 200-acre area that is home to 1,500 families. While the trust owns the land, individuals can obtain deeds that give them surface rights to their homes.

Lyvia Rodríguez, executive director of the land trust, explains, “Gifts from One Great Hour of Sharing ensure that a new generation of residents have the opportunity to live along a restored Martín Peña Channel.” A community facilitator is helping families through the tedious process of acquiring deeds for their homes.

“The hurricane destroyed 75 houses, and over 1,000 houses lost their roofs,” says Mariolga Juliá Paceco, special projects coordinator for the land trusts. “We were able to supply tarps, first aid supplies, food, and water.”

One of the lesser known effects of a disaster is the confiscation of land from poor people in the name of “progress,” mainly under the guise of “recovery” and “redevelopment.” In New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina ... in Haiti after the

earthquakes ... in too many places where people have already suffered tremendous loss. Our church is present not only in efforts to recover from wind and rain damage, but also in solidarity to resist those who claim they are there to “help” but are really there to help themselves.

One Great Hour of Sharing ministries — Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and Self-Development of People—are working alongside the land trust. Presbyterians have helped assuage the fears of families who are protected by the Martin Peña Channel Land Trust by looking beyond our own doors, our own walls. Paceco says, “We are grateful for the generous giving and for this help.”

Let us pray,

*God of mercy, help us look past the walls
and doors of this church.*

*Help us to open our doors
to walk alongside the vulnerable
to whom we have been called.*

*As we share through this Offering,
may all your children feel
the love of Christ and share in
the justice, compassion, and joy
you offer.*

*Keep us unsatisfied with being
THIS church on THIS corner,
so we shall be known as
CHRIST’s church to the whole world.*

Amen.