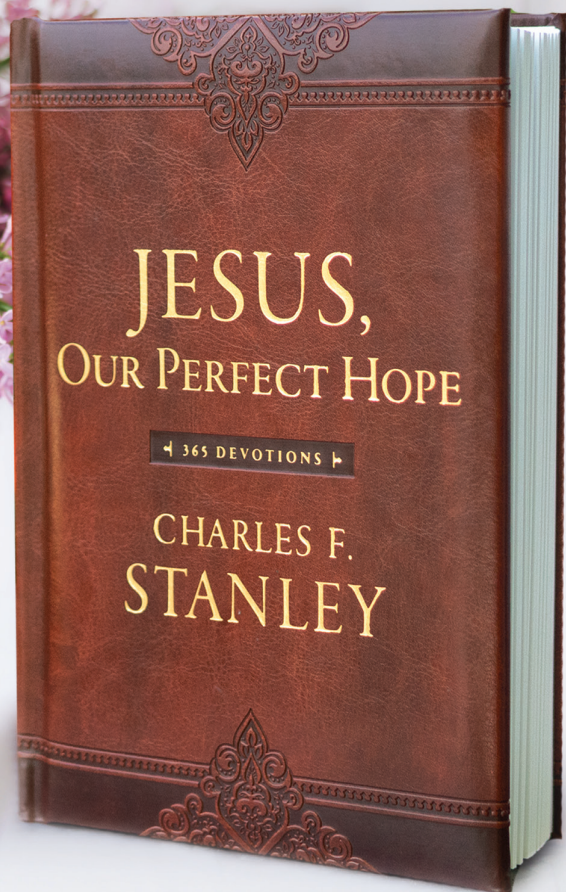


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04/19

Spotlight



Who Is Our Neighbor?

BY STEFANI MCDADE

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARLOS RUBIN

PASTOR JOSEPH RAMOS STOOD OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR of Palmas Community Church in Humacao, Puerto Rico, surveying the damage around him. Hurricane Maria had left its grisly imprint—roofs stripped off houses, household items strewn about muddy lawns. But the most noticeable *Continued on pg 46*



difference was the lack of greenery. Every tree that once lined the well-manicured neighborhood had been ripped out, exposing the impoverished community surrounding it.

These lower-income areas, called *barrios*, had long been hidden from the view of the exclusive gated community, which was often referred to as “the Bubble.” And while the hurricane had impacted everyone, only the upper class would have the resources to rebuild. In that moment, the future of Ramos’s ministry became clear: “We saw that the need was greater out there than it was in here.” So he and his church began a task force to serve not only their immediate neighbors but those in the outlying barrios as well. They distributed food, water, and clothing—along with hundreds of In Touch Messengers and Torches.

Today, over a year since the hurricane, marks of the devastation still remain—families in need of resources, houses yet to be rebuilt, and many suffering from PTSD. That’s why church members follow up with every family they serve, sharing the hope of Christ through the Messenger. Now, whenever traumatic memories or present worries arise, their neighbors can find comfort in God’s Word. “You have it available to you all the time, just like the light of the Lord,” says Ramos. “It’s something that never goes out.”

HIS CHURCH, WHICH HAD ONCE SERVED ONLY THOSE WITHIN ITS UPSCALE SUBDIVISION, WAS NOW LIVING OUT A KINGDOM VISION OF “NEIGHBORHOOD.”

In five years Ramos has watched the church grow from a handful of people to a thriving congregation. And in the wake of Hurricane Maria, instead of seeing a decline in attendance or a lack of engagement, Ramos witnessed a whole new kind of growth. His church, which had once served only those within its upscale subdivision, was now living out a kingdom vision of “neighborhood.”

“We used to pass by [the barrios] and go on our merry way,” Ramos says. “It was like they didn’t exist.” Now, Ramos corrects anyone he overhears talking about the “Bubble”—he explains, “The Bubble was busted.” And long after the trees grow back, again framing their homes with lush greenery, he and his church plan to carry on God’s beautiful restoration within this community.

 See how Messengers helped after Hurricane Maria. intouch.org/maria



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