

Haiti relief, 2010 CP budget revision dominate SBM meeting

By Barbara Denman
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LEESBURG (FBC)—Florida Baptists' unprecedented response to Haiti's devastating Jan. 12 earthquake and the reduction of the 2010 Cooperative Program budget by \$1.65 million consumed much of the business conducted at the Feb. 5 State Board of Missions meeting at Lake Yale Baptist Conference Center.

In a report that outlined Florida's leadership in the Southern Baptist earthquake response, John Sullivan, executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, explained that the Convention's 15-year partnership with the Confraternité Missionnaire Baptiste d'Haiti, which has spawned nearly 900 Baptist churches, has provided the structure and resources to minister in the aftermath of the disaster.

"We were the only Southern Baptist entity in Haiti at the time of the quake," Sullivan told the 99-member Board. "The International Mission Board did not have any missionaries in Haiti. We have seven indigenous missionaries and a staff of 15 at our mission house." Subsequently in a Jan. 26 joint task force meeting of Southern Baptist Disaster relief agencies, Florida was given the lead for coordinating the denomination's response.

Immediately after the 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit, Haitian missionaries, employed by the Florida Baptist Convention, began assessing damage and needs of the people in their communities. Within days, a Florida Baptist assessment team arrived to determine the extent of the damage and begin supervising relief efforts, which included medical care and rice dispensed from Baptist churches in five communities surrounding Port-au-Prince.

Meanwhile, rice—the basic staple of the Haitian's diet—is continually being distributed in churches near the capital city as well as surrounding areas where Port-au-Prince refugees have fled. These distributions, offered in local churches, are being coordinated by local CMBH missionaries and pastors, who have been involved in six food distribution efforts in the aftermath of hurricanes, flooding and civil unrest.

Much of the rice has been purchased in Haiti. However, at Sullivan's initiative and the assistance of First Baptist Church in Stuttgart, Ark., more than 82 tons of rice is on its way to the Haitian port in Saint-Marc, about two hours from Port-au-Prince.

Strategically placed medical mission teams from Mississippi, Kentucky, South Carolina and Florida's First Baptist Church of Jacksonville are now on the ground treating patients in make-shift clinics located in Port-au-Prince's tent cities and near the Presidential Palace. The teams are staying in the Convention-owned mission house located in Port-au-Prince.

Craig Culbreth, director of the Convention's Partnership Missions department reported to the Board that to date, 2,150 patients have been treated, suffering from malnutrition, wound and infections. Professions of faiths are being made each day, he said.

Noting Florida's "quick response and leadership given to the Southern Baptist disaster relief response," Pensacola Board member LaDon Boyd, said "I can't think of a time I was more proud to be a Florida Baptist."

Thousands of Florida Baptists have become involved in supporting the relief effort, Sullivan reported, giving \$20 to purchase a 100-bag of rice and preparing "Buckets of Hope" to feed a Haitian family for a week.

To date, the Convention has received \$1.26 million in disaster relief donations earmarked for the Haiti response, including \$113,000 from the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Also, Sullivan called upon Florida Baptists to observe a "Day of Prayer for Haiti" on Sunday Feb. 14.

During the Feb. 5 meeting, the Board prayed for fellow Board member Odany Augustin, pastor of Bethesda Christian Church in Pompano Beach, and the tragedy facing his homeland.

"Thank you for your quick response on the ground in Haiti and your attention to Haiti relief. God has prepared the way," said Augustin, whose brother serves as a pastor in Saint-Marc.

The new Board member asked for prayer for Haiti where the "fields are white for the harvest," Augustin said. "When things like this happen, people's hearts are suffering. That is the condition for spiritual awakening in Haiti."