

# Florida Baptist medical team minister physically, spiritually

By Russ Rankin, Florida Baptist Convention  
Feb. 9, 2010

Port-au-Prince, HAITI—Medical volunteers from Florida arrived in Haiti on Feb. 3 and haven't stopped working since. There is just too much to do.

It has been nearly one month since the massive earthquake shook this impoverished nation. Some estimates have placed the death-toll as high as 200,000. Following an initial assessment by Florida and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief representatives, Florida joined South Carolina, Kentucky and Mississippi in mobilizing emergency medical teams to be the first wave of Baptist response.

Each day, Haitians line up to be seen by the medical personnel from Florida, who are working out of a field hospital situated in the police barracks located directly across from Haiti's presidential palace—a once-proud looking structure whose grand domes now sit slumped in crumbled surrender.

The makeshift hospital was birthed by Omayra Alvarez, a native Dominican who rushed to the scene after the earthquake and persuaded the authorities to allow her to begin treating wounded survivors of the quake.

When the Southern Baptist assessment team met her, Alvarez was extremely low on medical supplies and critical elements such as infant formula. The assessment team responded immediately with in-kind donations and an agreement that Southern Baptist medical teams would soon be on the way to help.

Brenda Outlaw, an emergency room trauma nurse at Baptist Hospital (South) in Jacksonville, Fla., has been working in the hospital's makeshift triage center—the first point of entry for the several hundred Haitians each day waiting to see a doctor.

The triage unit consists of eight lawn chairs lined side-by-side under a blue plastic tarp. The doctors and nurses conduct a quick interview and assessment and determine whether the patient's needs call for them to see a doctor in another area of the facility—general medicine, dentistry, obstetrics, surgery, or pediatrics.

According to Outlaw, most of the quake-related treatments involve changing bandages and treating infected sores and wounds. Some have needed fingers or toes amputated. The majority of treatment, she said, has involved quality of life issues.

"Just about every child we see complains of flu and stomach ache, but what they all have is worms," Outlaw said. "So many are living in horrible conditions; you know they aren't getting clean water and sanitation. And so many kids and adults are suffering from respiratory problems—obviously from inhalation of so much after the quake."

Florida team members have also seen evidence of a society growing restless—gunshot wounds and stabbings have come through the clinic—but there has also been moments of joy. On Feb. 6, team members assisted with three births, one by emergency Caesarean section.

Rick Picerno, an orthopedic surgeon and member of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, helped organize and recruit the Florida medical team.

"This entire process, although we all feel very thrown together at the last minute, has obviously had God's hand all over it," Picerno said. "The needs here on the ground specifically for this week so accurately met the make-up of our team. There was a big need for a dentist, an ob/gyn and a pediatrics nurse. That's exactly what we brought, without knowing the need."

Picerno said the entire Florida team has been moved by the spirit of the Haitian people they have treated. "The people we have seen, even those in such desperate situations, have come across so thankful and grateful," he said, adding that the doctors and nurses are praying for each person with whom they come in contact, even if it's for the briefest moment.

"Even now, it's so hard to explain what we've seen and done in these first few days," Picerno said. "It's an incredible privilege to be able to help the Haitians as we have."