

Haitian bishops agree on program to oversee church reconstruction

WASHINGTON – Haitian bishops agreed Sept. 24 to the creation of a broad-based reconstruction program involving church partners from around the world that will guide how parishes and Catholic schools destroyed in the January earthquake are rebuilt.

They met in Miami Sept. 22-26 with Catholic officials from the United States, Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guadeloupe and Mexico and the Inter-American Development Bank. The bishops were considering the proposal developed over several months primarily by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services.

The four-day gathering came on the heels of meetings Sept. 20-21 the Haitian bishops had in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, to discuss reconstruction needs and other church programs.

Called the Program for the Reconstruction of the Church in Haiti, the plan would establish a commission with both Haitian and international members that will review and approve parish projects and ensure that building plans meet construction standards based on appropriate building codes.

“As Haitians continue to struggle to recover from this unprecedented natural disaster, the church walks with them, bearing the cross of Christ, in hope that suffering will give way to new life and to a new Haiti,” the Haiti bishops’ conference said in a statement released Sept. 24 in Miami.

The church aims to “build up every Haitian man and woman in his or her totality: physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually,” it said.

“The task ahead remains formidable,” it continued. However, with the reconstruction plan is “an important stem to rebuild the church’s infrastructure,” it added.

According to Richard Balmadier, a CRS adviser to the U.S. bishops who crafted much of the reconstruction plan, it is “going to create for both the church in Haiti as well as the episcopal conferences around the world that want to support the church in Haiti with a forum where they can really work together in solidarity.”

“It will provide support to the church in Haiti by basically creating a capacity there to help it realize its mission,” he told Catholic News Service in an interview in Washington in advance of the Miami meeting.

The Haitian church has struggled to recover since the magnitude 7 earthquake Jan. 12 destroyed 70 parishes, including the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Port-au-Prince, dozens of schools, several convents and the national seminary.

Three Port-au-Prince archdiocesan leaders – Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot, Monsignor Charles Benoit, vicar general, and Father Arnoux Chery, chancellor – were killed in the quake along with seven priests, 31 seminarians, and 31 men and women religious. The death of Archbishop Miot was particularly devastating because his concern for the poor made him a beloved figure among Haitian Catholics.

Archbishop Louis Kebreau of Cap-Haitien, president of the Haitian bishops’ conference, has worked to rally church leadership to meet pastoral needs in the aftermath of the earthquake, which affected 20 percent of the country and a third of the population of 10 million. But Haiti’s overwhelming poverty, coupled with the needs of 1.3 million people who remain in makeshift shelters in hundreds of camps in the earthquake zone, has strangled the local church’s ability to respond adequately.

“Here you have a church that has suffered tremendous losses and is being called upon to do something that frankly a church in the prime of health would be very, very hard pressed to do,” Balmadier told CNS. “To say they’re in a very difficult situation is an incredible understatement.”

Oblate Father Andrew Small, director of the Collection for the Church in Latin America for the U.S. bishops, said the plan was developed in collaboration with church representatives around the world including officials in Haiti.

International partners in the effort include Development and Peace, the Canadian bishops' development and relief agency; Adveniat, the German bishops' agency for solidarity in Latin America; Caritas Haiti; Society of St. Vincent de Paul; Conference of Religious of Haiti; and the U.S.-based Leadership Conference of Women Religious and Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

A working document outlining the program for the meeting's participants stressed the importance of building "solidarity partnerships" so that the effort does not appear to be one imposed on the Haitian church. It calls for building responsible local leadership that can respond to local needs and gradually become less dependent on outside help.

Father Small said the program also will require accountability and transparency and allow people who contributed to church special collections in the United States and elsewhere to know how money is being spent.

Through Sept. 23, American Catholics contributed \$148.5 million to Haitian relief efforts. Worldwide, Catholics have donated more than \$303 million for earthquake relief.

Of the total, \$82.3 million was donated during special collections in dioceses in the weeks after the quake. CRS has collected an additional \$66.2 million.

The U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee decided in March to allocate 60 percent of the special collection to CRS for humanitarian needs and use the remaining 40 percent for ecclesial needs, such as the rebuilding of churches and parish schools and restarting ministries. Based on the funds collected, \$32.9 million is available for rebuilding the Haitian church.

"If we're doing this together," Father Small said, "there's the chance we'll have development that's truly sustainable, that's owned and run by the Haitians themselves."

Archbishop Bernardito Auza, papal nuncio to Haiti, told CNS Sept. 22 after arriving in Miami that the effort is "setting up what's always been absent in the church in Haiti."

“The idea (behind the commission) is to make sure the buildings will be built well and the money will be well spent,” he said.

In addition to rebuilding local parishes, the archbishop is particularly focused on rejuvenating the country’s formation program for priests.

He and Haitian church officials have identified a 650-acre tract 10 miles northeast of Port-au-Prince and are negotiating to buy the property. The site would include two seminaries for 350 students, housing for religious men and women and students, an elementary school and parish and a large-scale housing development.

The property is large enough to relocate the destroyed University of Notre Dame of Haiti as well, he said.

Estimated to cost \$5 million initially, the project would be funded separately from the money collected by church agencies worldwide for earthquake relief, Archbishop Auza added.