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Relief groups mourn their losses in Haiti

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Jan. 20, 2010

Workers with Catholic Relief Services unload ready-to-eat meals at a site for displaced people in Port-au-Prince, Jan. 17. (CNS photo/Lane Hartill, Catholic Relief Services)

As religious relief organizations and missionaries work to help the living and cope with the dying in Haiti, some faith groups are mourning the deaths of their own members in last week's earthquake.

Two United Methodist Church executives, a Lutheran seminarian, and three missionaries of the Free Methodist Church, all died as a result of the massive earthquake. Other religious organizations are still awaiting word about whether staffers and their family members are alive and safe.

On Saturday, Bishop David Roller of the Free Methodist Church conducted a funeral at the site of the collapsed building where the Rev. Jeanne Acheson-Munos, Merle West and Gene Dufour are presumed to have died. Acheson-Munos' husband, Jack Munos, and church volunteer Katie Zook, are recovering in a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., hospital, said Judy Litsey, a spokeswoman for Free Methodist World Missions. Munos and Acheson-Munos had been in the region for five years; West and Dufour were on a short-term mission trip using their craftsmanship skills.

"It's been very difficult," said Litsey. "There were 17 people there total at the time of the earthquake. Some of them worked diligently digging by hand to free Katie and Jack."

The Rev. Sam Dixon, the leader of the United Methodist Committee on Relief, died as a result of the earthquake, along with the Rev. Clinton Rabb, head of the mission volunteers office of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. They had been attending meetings on health care in Port-au-Prince.

"We had a prayer service for staff just a little bit ago in the building and we also are sending folks from the United Methodist Committee on Relief to Haiti as we speak," said Chris Heckert, spokesman for the United Methodist global ministries board on Tuesday (Jan. 19). "We are doing both ends of the work, some pastoral care and healing internally as well as assessment and beginning work on the ground in Haiti."

Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, is planning a memorial service on Friday for Ben Larson, a 2006 alumnus who is presumed to have died in the quake. He was in Haiti teaching theology with his wife and cousin, fellow

seminary students who survived, when the building they were in collapsed.

"They were there because they love the church and they loved what they're doing," said John Brooks, a spokesman for the Evangelical Church in America on Tuesday. "It's unfortunate what happened. And one of them I spoke to last night said as far as the other two are concerned, they're going right back to the seminary to finish their work."

Larson, who was known for his musical abilities, was last heard singing "God's peace to us we pray," his wife, Renee Splichal Larson, told ELCA News Service.

In a statement, Larson's parents, Pastors April and Judd Larson wrote: "In his young death his life joins the bodies of the poor. In the Haitian rubble Ben's life joins these dear beloved people of God: all those parents crying for their children; young widows calling out for their husbands; new orphans searching for their parents. God have mercy on us."

While some ministries are relieved that their staffers have survived and are now able to turn to help others, some are mourning the deaths of native-born workers in Haiti.

Salesian Missions, a New Rochelle, N.Y.-based Catholic nonprofit, has reported that Brother Hubert Sanon, a Haitian, died in the rubble. In addition, more than 250 schoolchildren and some 200 young women who were studying in their educational buildings at the time of the quake have died.

"The future teachers have been lost," said Hannah Gregory, U.S. spokeswoman for Salesian Missions.

Catholic Relief Services, which is based in Baltimore, is still seeking to account for one of its 312 staffers. Most of the staffers are from Haiti and many have lost relatives or immediate family members, said spokeswoman Debbie DeVoe.

"We're saying more prayers," she said.

Recognizing that aid workers will need assistance along with the hundreds of thousands of Haitians reeling from the quake, some religious organizations, including Church World Service and World Vision, are working to send teams that will include trauma specialists to help both children in the region and relief workers.

World Vision knows that 35 of its 90 Port-au-Prince staffers are back at work, said spokeswoman Geraldine Ryerson-Cruz. But they have contracted with a search and rescue team to help look for people who are still missing, including their own staffers.

"Tomorrow, a psycho-social team is arriving for families," reported Church World Service's Don Tatlock after his own arrival in Port-au-Prince, in a message Tuesday to staffers. "The situation is horrifying."

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