The Episcopal Church has responded to the devastation caused by the magnitude-7 earthquake in Haiti with unexpected and astonishing generosity.

Building upon a partnership that began before the Jan. 12 earthquake, Episcopal Relief & Development has experienced a generosity of giving from Episcopalians that has enabled its relief effort to secure food, water, vehicles for supply deliveries, fuel and shelter.

Many congregations in the Episcopal Church have forged important and mutually supportive relationships with congregations and individuals in Haiti over the years. It is natural for these congregations in the Episcopal Church to want to do everything possible to assist their brothers and sisters in Haiti. However, Haiti Bishop Jean Zacé Duracin asked in a Jan. 21 letter that, unless the people who want to come and help are “certified professionals in relief and recovery, they must wait.”

In his letter to Robert Radtke, Episcopal Relief & Development president, Duracin added: “We will need them [people who want to come to Haiti] in months and years to come, but at this point, it is too dangerous and too much of a burden for our people to have mission teams here.”

Duracin has appointed a 15-member commission that is assisting him in coordination and organization of the diocese’s rebuilding effort as well as its response to current needs.

In addition to continued generous giving to Episcopal Relief & Development, we need to be advocates for Haiti. It is important to understand that, just as the relief and rebuilding effort will unfold in stages over the coming months and years, so will the advocacy effort, and that is where Episcopalians can assist best, right from home.

Even as Haiti stories recede from the front pages of our newspapers, we must be aware that the political and policy debates about how best to assist Haiti’s rebuilding will require our voices in the arena for the foreseeable future. We will need to rely on Duracin and the people of the Diocese of Haiti to tell us how they want to rebuild and how our advocacy can help them.

For the rebuilding of Haiti, it is evident that the involvement of the international community will be necessary, ensuring that rebuilding efforts are not piecemeal and left to the whims of individual donors, but rather are cohesive and coordinated with the wishes of the Haitian people. Last summer, Haiti’s government produced a well-commended development strategy brief for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In the wake of the earthquake such a strategy is more important than ever. The long-term effort will require a concerted international effort to rebuild the Haitian government’s own capacity both to lead and to provide adequately for basic redevelopment needs such as social services, education and infrastructure.

The U.S. government should make this a diplomatic priority in the coming months and years. This is an area where every Episcopalian can be an advocate with our own government on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Haiti. The Episcopal Church’s Office of Government Relations in Washington, D.C., is equipped to assist us in our advocacy efforts.

Our continued support for Haiti is most important. By expanding our idea of what it means to be family, even those congregations that have long-term relationships with congregations and individuals in Haiti can see new ways to be involved and in partnership that embraces and encourages a new and sustainable Haiti.

For now, let us all set aside our own personal needs to be of assistance and instead concentrate on hearing what is asked for and on praying for new and expanded visions of partnerships. Let Episcopal Relief & Development do the work it is so good at doing on our behalf. First relief, then development.

Sit tight. We don’t know yet what God will ask us to do, but let’s prepare ourselves for the long haul with Haiti.

—Canon Bonnie Anderson is president of the House of Deputies of The Episcopal Church.