

Christians Offer Relief After Hurricanes

Churches and missions organizations have been reaching out to victims of the recent storms

Since a recent wave of hurricanes swept through the southeast United States and much of the Caribbean, Christians have been reaching out to their communities, sharing hot meals, water, ice and other relief. Leaders say church attendance has gone up as a result.

Covenant Centre International church in Palm Beach Springs, Fla., lost the roof and much of the interior of the building, forcing the church to rebuild from the ground up, pastor Norman Benz said.

“Florida has been hit hard, but I believe God is in control and this will result in a real move of God in our state and even nationwide,” he said. “Buildings are clothing for the ministry, but it’s really what God is doing in the lives of people that matters.”

Steve Lyons, a hurricane expert with The Weather Channel, told Charisma the 2004 season—which saw hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne rip through Florida from mid-August to September—is just slightly above normal. In a typical season, hurricanes form and then dissipate at sea, but this year storms are making landfall in the United States, primarily Florida, at an alarming rate.

In Pensacola, where Hurricane Ivan made landfall, churches

have been rallying. Pastor Jody Herrington, assistant to the president at the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry, is leading relief efforts for Brownsville Assembly of God.

“God has used this [hurricane] to open the eyes and hearts of the community toward this church,” she said. “This is a moment for us to reach out to the community. The loudest gospel we can preach to them is to serve them.”

Herrington said scout teams are assessing damages in neighborhoods and then reporting back to the church so needed supplies and services can be provided. “We want them to see Jesus with skin on,” Herrington said.

Perdido Bay United Methodist Church, also in Pensacola, helped about 1,000 people per day after the storm hit Sept. 15, leaving many without food or a roof over their heads. “We’ve been able to offer security for people who have lost their security,” associate minister Rusty Glasgow said.

The church cared for two brothers who lost their homes, cars and jobs to Ivan. The young men packed their wives and children into their mother’s small house.

Central Chapel Worship Center joined with the American Red Cross to feed people and distribute supplies, even though the back of the church’s sanctuary was torn off by the storm. Senior pastor Tim Nail said at one point they were nearly out of food when a woman on the serving line prayed for God to provide. The next morning, five big trucks arrived loaded with food.

Pace Assembly of God became a key distribution point for aid,

partnering with U.S. Army troops and federal relief agencies. As church members worked to help others, tragedy struck. Four key members—Bill Walther, Traves Neff, Cristy King and Daniel Wesley—died in a plane crash a week after Ivan hit.

Neff, who at the age of 26 was Continental Airlines' youngest commercial pilot, wanted to perform an aerial assessment to help remote areas hurt by Ivan. The small, single-engine, four-seat Cessna crashed shortly after takeoff. Walther was a Pace Assembly staff member described as pastor Glyn Lowery Jr.'s "right-hand man." King and Wesley, both 20, were raised in the church and due to be married in January.

Lowery was supposed to be on the flight but opted out at the last minute. He has been shaken by the tragedy but is comforted knowing his friends are in heaven. "I know they were doing what they wanted to do, and I know they wouldn't come back for anything in this world," he told Charisma.

Pensacola Mayor John Fogg, a committed Christian, told Charisma he's encouraged by the outreach of area churches—many of them greatly affected themselves—and the strong sense of community that has developed in post-Ivan Pensacola. "I'm extremely optimistic that at the end of the day—and the end of the day may be a year or two down the road—we are going to be a better community because of this," he said.

The four storms have taken a heavy toll. In addition to battering Pensacola, Hurricane Ivan ravaged Jamaica, killing 50 people and destroying more than 8,000 homes. In Haiti, the death toll was staggering—more than 3,000 dead and 200,000 homeless after Jeanne, then a tropical storm, ripped through the nation Sept. 17.

According to ASSIST News Service, an American Youth With A Mission (YWAM) staff member in Haiti said groups of needy people turned into angry mobs as relief aid was distributed. YWAM staff encountered one man who said the storm killed six people in his house. The man said he slept in a tree for two days, waiting for help.

Ann Briere, spokeswoman for Food for the Poor () based in Deerfield Beach, Fla., said the aid organization has been involved in hurricane relief in Jamaica, Granada, Grand Bahamas and Haiti.

In Granada, Briere said, 90 percent of the population of only 100,000 had their homes either destroyed or badly damaged. She said both Granada's spice tree and tourism industries were critically damaged, crippling the economy.

Though the United States has suffered billions of dollars in damage, there are means to gain help from relief agencies, she said, unlike in Caribbean and Latin nations. "Those who haven't traveled in the Third World don't fully appreciate the lack of resources there," she said.

Food for the Poor partners with local churches and organizations to distribute aid, helping pastors help their people, she said. "We believe we see Christ in all of the faces of the poor," Briere said.

Springfield, Convoy of Hope () sent out quick-strike response teams to bring food, water and supplies immediately, sometimes the day after the hurricane. Randy Rich, vice president of administration and disaster response, said the organization delivered 169 semitrailer-loads of food and supplies weighing

more than 6 million pounds to some 300,000 hurricane victims. "Our heart is to be a resource for churches reaching out to their neighborhoods," Rich said.

Florida children, many still recovering from their own losses, are joining others from across the United States to provide shoe boxes filled with school supplies, candy and letters of encouragement to 7 million children worldwide, including many in Haiti and Granada.

"I know what it feels like to see just about everything you have swept away by a storm," said 11-year-old Connor of Melbourne, Fla., which felt the impact of Charley, Frances and Jeanne. "I hope my shoe box gift makes another kid who's lost a lot in the hurricanes feel better."

Richard Daigle in Pensacola, Fla