

Storm Troopers

In the wake of Katrina, Christian relief groups were some of the first to offer food, shelter and kindness.

Hurricane Katrina swamped the Gulf Coast states this summer, but churches, ministries and parachurch organizations flooded the region with compassion in the form of relief aid, emergency shelters and donations. Their work continued even after another deadly storm, Hurricane Rita, left more devastation a few weeks later.

Christian volunteers showed the love of Jesus to thousands of people from Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Alabama who were displaced by the powerful storms.

“Through this tragedy, we have seen the body of Christ across the nation respond immediately, generously and selflessly,” said Doug Stringer, founder and president of Somebody Cares America (SCA). The Houston-based ministry mobilized local efforts and a nationwide network of humanitarian assistance as soon as the evacuation from New Orleans was ordered days before Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast on August 29.

In contrast to the federal government, which was widely criticized for its slow response, SCA and other ministries responded quickly to the catastrophic disaster.

LeSEA Global Feed the Hungry said its team arrived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 48 hours after Katrina struck. Since then it has distributed 400 tons of relief supplies to various sites across the region.

Katrina’s death toll was much lower than officials had press

time, Mississippi had recorded 219 deaths and Louisiana 799, while other affected states had much lower numbers. Hurricane Rita had caused at least 10 weather-related deaths, but 23 elderly evacuees from Houston died August 23 when their bus caught fire near Dallas.

Both storms produced massive flooding. After Katrina, floodwaters covered 80 percent of New Orleans, in some areas 20 feet deep. Rescuers plucked thousands from streets, levees, roads and rooftops.

At least 32,000 were rescued and another 70,000 evacuated from New Orleans after the storm, according to official figures. Social services officials in Louisiana estimated that more than 114,000 people had taken refuge in shelters stretching from West Virginia to California.

President Bush declared a national day of prayer on Sept. 16 to help the country cope with the deadly aftermath of Katrina, which caused in excess of \$100 billion in damage.

A few days after one of the worst natural disasters in the nation's history occurred, Bush toured a Baton Rouge shelter with Bishop T.D. Jakes, who leads The Potter's House, a 30,000-strong congregation in Dallas.

The president hugged and chatted with displaced New Orleans residents as he strolled through the makeshift but orderly facility at Bethany World Prayer Center (BWPC), led by prominent charismatic pastor Larry Stockstill.

Jakes and leaders of some of the nation's largest African-American churches, including Eddie Long and Kenneth Ulmer,

joined forces to provide more than \$1 million of immediate financing and materials to support the aid effort for Katrina survivors.

"I was surprised at how well and comprehensive the [Christian] response was across the board," Jakes told Charisma. "Churches called [The Potter's House] asking, 'What can we do to help?'"

The Potter's House also partnered with the World Children's Fund, donating 200 tons of disaster relief, including ready-to-eat meals, nutrition bars, water, ice and first aid. Jakes' church also worked with World Vision, which distributed truckloads of various nonperishable supplies, including clothing, toiletries and water.

Stockstill's church opened its campus as the City of Hope, a shelter that housed, fed and cared for the needs of 850 evacuees.

Tonja Myles, who helped coordinate relief efforts at Bethany, told Charisma the evacuees were hurting but were spiritually open.

"We prayed with many of them," said Myles, a member of the church who with her husband launched a recovery program for addicts called Set Free Indeed (SFI) ministry in Baton Rouge, located 60 miles north of New Orleans.

"They were open to the gospel. The Wednesday after the hurricane, Pastor Larry did a town meeting. Seven hundred evacuees came, and 600 gave their lives, or rededicated them, to the Lord."

Myles also set up Camp Champion, a shelter that housed 500 disaster relief workers, medical personnel and law enforcement authorities, who came from outside Louisiana.

Myles, who was brought twice to Washington, D.C., by President Bush because of her work with SFI, said she had "daily contact" with Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, in Katrina's wake.

"He asked us to be the eyes and ears for the faith-based office in Baton Rouge," Myles said.

She added that SFI and BWPC were committed to relief efforts "for the long haul."

"However long it takes to rebuild people's lives, that's what we'll do," Myles said. "We want to rebuild New Orleans, but first of all we want to rebuild people's lives. It is people that matter to God. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about."

Meanwhile, nearly 2,000 miles away in California, a compassionate ministry drew national media attention for its part in helping to rebuild the lives of New Orleans evacuees.

Clint Carlton of the Dream Center in Los Angeles, a ministry of the Assemblies of God (AG) and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, said pastors Matthew and Tommy Barnett agreed to house up to 300 displaced families in a 14-story former hospital. The center will feed, house and clothe evacuees for as long as they need and then transport them back to their homes when ready.

Matthew Barnett, who leads the Dream Center, noted that shortly after Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, he received

an emergency call from a church in Louisiana asking for help in housing and helping families who had lost everything.

"Of course we said yes," he said. His father, Tommy, pastors Phoenix First Assembly in Arizona.

Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), which has supported the Dream Center since its beginnings in the late 1990s, donated \$100,000 to aid in the relocation and outreach efforts of evacuees.

"[The Dream Center] is a real place of refuge for them right now, where the love of Christ is tangible," said Paul Crouch Jr., TBN's vice president of administration.

Jeff Nene, director of media and communications for Convoy of Hope (COH), an AG disaster-relief ministry, said "it has been exciting to see the response of the church" concerning Katrina.

"The people of God have risen to the occasion and are being Christ's hands extended," Nene told Charisma. "People have sacrificially given and are enabling organizations like Convoy of Hope to deliver help and hope."

At press time, COH had distributed more than 150 truckloads of ice, water, food and other relief supplies.

Nene estimated that thousands of churches were destroyed or damaged.

Katrina affected 35 percent of all AG churches in Mississippi, while only two AG churches in Alabama sustained major damage due to the hurricane.

One ministry in the New Orleans area escaped Katrina's wrath.

Charismatic Bible teacher Jesse Duplantis said his ministry's headquarters in Destrehan, located 12 miles from downtown New Orleans, did not sustain flood or structural damage.

"God gave us a miracle," Duplantis told Charisma. "We didn't lose any trees, just some branches."

He added that his home also escaped damage, and of his 220 employees, only two had damage to their homes.

"We give God glory for this," said Duplantis, whose ministry set up a supply and distribution center called Covenant Compassion Center to help with relief efforts.

"I've talked to some pastors who lost their churches and lost everything. I've encouraged them to continue to preach the gospel. ... How is God using this catastrophe? God saved my ministry for a reason, and it's not to look pretty. It's to preach the gospel."

Eric Tiansay was a reporter for newspapers in Nevada and Florida. He now works as a marketing writer for Charisma House publishers.

Losing Everything in New Orleans

Pastors Steve and Theresa McKnight say they will return to their city and rebuild.

When Hurricane Katrina unleashed its fury along the Gulf Coast, Steve and Theresa McKnight lost their home, their church and hundreds of dollars worth of diapers, toys and

clothes that were given to them at a recent baby shower.

It was painful to lose their new crib and the 100 new chairs they recently bought for their church, River of Life Worship Center, located a few miles east of New Orleans. But what hurt the most, they say, was the lack of communication with families in their church after the McKnights loaded their car and drove to Alabama to escape the killer storm.

"A lot of people said they were going to stay and ride it out," Steve told Charisma. "That's the biggest stress we dealt with-not knowing where our people were."

One man in his church had to be rescued from a roof, and his house was in 14 feet of water. Another man whose house was destroyed now lives in a borrowed trailer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Theresa, 46, who gave birth to a healthy baby boy seven days after the hurricane, was concerned for people in her church who still might be in danger-or dead. "I just kept saying, 'God, You are bigger than this [storm].' I know they are OK."

Steve, 50, a native of Louisiana, moved last year to St. Bernard Parish to pastor the small nondenominational church in the community of Braithwaite. The McKnights learned in early September that their rented, three-bedroom house and their metal-framed church sanctuary were destroyed by the floods.

To make matters worse, the church was uninsured. An insurance company refused to renew the policy when Steve changed the church's name last year.

"We have lost everything," he said. "The photographs, the

videos, the memories, the images of our life. It's all gone. We've cried a lot."

The couple moved temporarily into an office at a church in Birmingham, Alabama. A few days later, a wealthy Christian family from the Atlanta area offered to house them in a fully furnished, four-bedroom home.

Today, all the McKnights' needs have been met. They plan to live in the borrowed house until they can return to their church and start over.

Although there is grief over the loss of their possessions, the McKnights aren't complaining. Most of all, Theresa is thankful she didn't have the baby early, as doctors had predicted.

"God did not allow me to give birth early," she said. "Who knows what would have happened if we had stayed behind? I don't know if I would be alive."

J. Lee Grady

Charisma is raising funds to help churches that have been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. We also have provided food for evacuees at a shelter in Panama City, Florida. Send your tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn.: Katrina Fund, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795 or make a donation online at .

Rebuilding New Orleans

Charles Brown is reclaiming the storm-ravaged city.

When Bishop Charles Brown of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) went to bed on August 28, he had no plans to leave New Orleans, even though forecasters had predicted Hurricane Katrina would hit his city. But a prompting by the Holy Spirit changed everything.

“When I turned on the television Sunday morning and listened to reports, I heard in my spirit, ‘This is going to be bad.’”

Brown, 53, who pastors Full Gospel COGIC and Metropolitan COGIC, was right. Hurricane Katrina left hundreds of people dead and billions of dollars in property damage throughout the Gulf Coast region.

Brown had weathered four hurricanes in the past and had never evacuated. Today, he is grateful to be alive. Twenty-one of the 32 COGIC churches in the jurisdiction he oversees with his uncle, Bishop Lindell B. Brown, were impacted by the hurricane. Four of the churches and Brown’s home were destroyed.

But it’s people, not property that inspire Brown and others to provide temporary housing, food and assistance for church members who evacuated to Atlanta, Houston and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Modern technology helped Brown contact many of his congregants after the hurricane. “I started text messaging links. Everyone who knew someone with a cell phone sent text messages. I can account for 98 percent of both congregations, and we have heard from every pastor except one. We think he’s OK,” Brown told Charisma.

James Tucker, who pastors Violet COGIC, a 100-plus-member church 14 miles from the Superdome, was left in New Orleans to battle the storm. He says he and his wife are alive because of God's mercy.

"After the eye of the hurricane passed, water began gushing into our church, rising to about 13 to 15 feet high," Tucker recalled.

During the ordeal, the pastor and others with boats ferried about 350 people to safety. The Tuckers and 12 other church members were eventually taken to a makeshift military post after spending three days on a levee waiting to be rescued. Brown says he finally got a word from the Lord about what happened.

"The pastors of the community met months ago and started praying," Brown said. "We all knew this was spiritual warfare. We asked the Lord to clean up the city. ... Satan did it, but God allowed it."

Brown added: "Tests, trials and tribulations always work for the good. New Orleans has been cleaned out and now it is time for it to be cleaned up."

Valerie G. Lowe

One Church, Three States

Members of Paul Morton's congregation are scattered.

Bishop Paul S. Morton is conducting worship services in three cities in an attempt to minister to his scattered flock.

The pastor of 20,000-member Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church in New Orleans said his members are scattered across 32 states, and he is holding services in Houston, Atlanta and Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed Morton's home and two of St. Stephen's three locations in New Orleans. He urged city officials to discourage residents from returning because of unsafe conditions. Morton says he is not a major supporter of President Bush, but he endorses his plan to help rebuild the city.

"We need to let the president do what he promised he would do for us," said Morton, 55. "New Orleanians have lived at a sub-standard level long enough, and there's no need to return to a city with no jobs, unsafe water, no electricity and no schools for our children."

Like Morton, many New Orleans pastors are conducting worship services in nearby cities in an effort to hold their congregations together.

"I want to go back," said Bishop J.D. Wiley, a New Orleans pastor. "I want to give the people a sense of community. I have no intentions of abandoning New Orleans."

Morton said patience is needed right now. "Our churches have been destroyed. To try to rebuild New Orleans without the church would be devastating. We need temporary places to provide worship services for our people. ... After all, the church is the backbone of every city."

Valerie G. Lowe

Faith Church now uses a Web site to congregate.

While emergency workers were still slogging into New Orleans in mid-September to get people out, evacuated members of the city's Faith Church were logging onto the Internet to see if they could get back in.

"[They] are blogging to stay in touch, e-mailing" in hope of reuniting, Faith Church senior pastor Michael Green told Charisma by cell phone from San Antonio, where he relocated in advance of the storm with his wife, Linda, and two children.

The World Wide Web, a resource that seemed incongruous with the widespread ruin of utilities and infrastructure wrought by Katrina, emerged like a hero from the post-apocalyptic-looking rubble. During and after the evacuations it was a resource for reuniting people.

For many at Faith Church the Web meant survival of community. It became a gathering place, a way to circumvent their flooded sanctuary, homes, schools, parks and playgrounds. Only days after the storm, the church's Web site, , became a vital way station for members who were far-flung and hundreds of miles from New Orleans.

Said Green: "I have elders living in Houston; Port Arthur, Texas; Atlanta; Orlando [Florida] and other places. People are settling where they are." Some parishioners were scattered as far away as Utah.

To help unite them, Green started posting communiqués on the Faith Church site shortly after the storm. Members could get news about the church, learn how to obtain school transcripts from the 300-student academy that will not reopen this school year, and more. Using e-mail, the Web or cell phones, he encouraged his flock to “continue steadfastly in their faith and bloom where they are planted.” One of his earliest messages offered members this encouragement: “We will come back.”

Green took over the pastorate of the Pentecostal church four years ago from his father, Charles Green, who founded it in 1953. The church’s 38-acre campus in northeast New Orleans is a half mile from Lake Pontchartrain, in an area where flooding was severe.

But despite the 8-plus feet of water around the facility, Green was upbeat: “We have a chance [for the gospel] like never before. Times like these show you the foolish things we spend our lives on.”

Jimmy Stewart