

Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church: This Is Going to Devastate Us for Years to Come

"If you don't laugh, you'll cry," Lakewood Church's Senior Communications Director Don Iloff tells Charisma News while standing outside in the pouring rain in Houston.

Though the megachurch has received some flak for not opening its doors as an emergency shelter, there's virtually no access to Joel Osteen's campus, which is considered one of the largest in the country. Instead, staff and volunteers are meeting through conference calls to coordinate efforts. The church, located in Houston's inner loop, is just a few miles away from the city's largest shelter, the George R. Brown Convention Center.

Although Harvey's damage was initially labeled as a once-in-500 years flood, Iloff says it's now closer to 1-in-800.

"We are this city," he says. "When you talk about 75,000-80,000 members of the church with 45,000-50,000 showing up on any given weekend, not to mention visitors, when you talk about Lakewood, you're talking about city. It's blacks, whites, Hispanics, rich and poor, everything. It's been interesting the last several days. We've had members and staff who have been rescuers, and members and staff who have been rescued. Nothing like this has ever occurred."

More than 3,000 National Guard troops have been deployed to the state, and ministries from around the country have loaded trucks with supplies to serve the refugees.

Iloff says Lakewood's efforts will be more focused on the

aftermath.

“Right now, it’s hard to know how devastating it’s going to be. Even FEMA doesn’t know the scope until the waters recede,” Iloff says. “That’s really where we’re going to end up make the biggest impact, and we’re going to make efforts for years to come. Lakewood is currently involved in our community, and we have lot of efforts happening in an ongoing basis, like in the 5th Ward, around the city, and we’re working with everyone we can imagine. Our membership is so diverse, and we work with homeless, with unwed mothers. ... We truly believe that because this is such a big deal, that this storm is a such devastating thing, our efforts are dealing with this storm in almost everything we do from this point forward at least a year, years to come.”

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It’s the diversity that hits home for Iloff.

Leading up to the hurricane-turned-tropical storm, Iloff says the media focused on division. Stories dove into the racism in Charlottesville and the aftermath as the country considered how to handle statues commemorating the Civil War Confederacy. Headlines read of free speech—or lack thereof—of intense protests over the president’s actions. But in Houston, diversity breeds heroics.

In flood pictures, black men carry small white children, white women help elderly Hispanic people, Hispanic people hand out water to whoever is in need—regardless of skin color or religion.

“Maybe it’s because I go to Lakewood, which is very diverse, and we love each other and focus on the greater good, which is Jesus Christ,” Iloff says. “We all focus on something greater than ourselves. They don’t pay attention to the differences between us because commonality is so important. Our race doesn’t matter. I’m a believer, you’re a believer.

"I don't know that mainstream media is missing it, and right now, I hope they focus on the heroic love and sacrifice that people are making for one another regardless of any kind of difference they may have with that other person. I hope they continue to cover this, not necessarily dividing us up. At least it's good for us, and it's really bringing about making us aware of how much more alike we are than different. You can drown no matter what your religion, your ethnicity. Water can kill us all. We all need to be saved. We are all one, and it takes these things to make people realize that. That is something good to come from this."

For those who want to pray for Houston, Iloff has two requests that boil down to one word: Strength.

"Strength is the single most important thing, the ability to endure through this and after. I think, in the aftermath, that people strengthen their faith. A lot of faith is tested right now, because the single greatest question that comes to us is, 'How did God let this happen?'" We also hear, 'Why did this happen?' 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' and other big faith questions. ... During this storm, pray for endurance, and in the aftermath, pray that our faith is strengthened, because it's up to Christians to answer these hard questions."