

In the South, a new helping hand: Muslim disaster relief teams

Islamic Relief USA is turning ecumenical rebuilding efforts into interfaith partnerships.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue

Delores J. Porter and her husband had to abandon their one-story house in Princeville, North Carolina, after floodwaters rose nearly ten feet in mid-October.

Passing by one day this summer, she was overjoyed to see people working at her house. When she gingerly stepped onto the exposed floor joists, she found a troop of young Muslim volunteers in blue “Islamic Relief USA” T-shirts installing support beams in the 90-degree heat.

“I will take a hug from everybody,” said Porter, 61, a former schoolteacher and administrator and lifelong resident of Princeville. “If you don’t mind my perspiration, I definitely don’t mind yours.”

At a time when the far right often cites the inability—or refusal—of Muslims to assimilate, these young volunteers are doing what other religious groups in this country have been doing for decades: providing emergency aid after tornadoes, floods, and hurricanes, then helping people gut uninhabitable homes and rebuild them from stud to kitchen cabinet.

The nonprofit relief and development group Islamic Relief USA, based in Alexandria, Virginia, was founded in 1993 and is the largest Muslim charity in America, with a budget this year of \$113.5 million.

After Harvey, one of the strongest storms to make landfall in United States, devastated the Gulf in late August, Islamic Relief USA’s Disaster Response Team mobilized quickly, “moving from helping survivors of Hurricane Matthew in North Carolina to working to bring aid to those now affected in Texas,” the group wrote on its website. Volunteers worked with the American Red Cross at shelters in Dallas for thousands of evacuees before it was safe to get into Houston.

“For a lot of people, this may have been the most traumatic experience they have been through,” said Hani Hamwi, Islamic Relief’s team manager, in a release. “Our volunteers are trained to help them.”

A week before, in North Carolina, Mimi Hassanain of Livingston, New Jersey, an Islamic Relief employee, sanded drywall in one of the homes flooded when Hurricane Matthew bore down, submerging Princeville after the Tar River levee failed.

“It’s a great way to show other people that Muslims are friends and that we can work together,” Hassanain said.

Princeville is the nation’s oldest town incorporated by freed slaves, and many of its 2,080 residents—nearly all of whom are African-American—have taken shelter for the past ten months in FEMA trailers, hotels, rentals, or relatives’ bedrooms. Many can’t afford flood insurance because they are in a flood plain and are living on Social Security. The town’s only restaurant reopened recently, as have a few other businesses. But many homes are still empty.

In the neighboring community of Tarboro, the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church has set up an operational base in an old health department building. From there, an average of 50 volunteers—Baptists, Lutherans, Mennonites, Methodists, and Presbyterians—spend one week at a time gutting homes or installing new drywall. Among the most recent recruits are 18 Muslim volunteers with Islamic Relief USA.

The organization first sent a team to Princeville shortly after Hurricane Matthew. Now it’s extending its collaboration with the Methodists. In August, 23 volunteers attended a daylong training session led by the United Methodist Committee on Relief that covered everything from how to handle moldy interiors to how to use a chainsaw.

“We’re building up our capacity as a team,” Hamwi said. “We’re bringing in more skill sets.”

Princeville does not have a mosque, but its residents didn’t have conflict with the Muslim volunteers.

“People are hugging the community,” said Greg Bethea, interim town manager. “It’s like a love fest here.”

That hasn't always been the case. Last year, a Louisiana sheriff ordered the Islamic Relief workers to leave immediately after they arrived alongside the American Red Cross to assess property damage from a recent flooding, Hamwi said. When volunteers with the American Red Cross objected, the sheriff asked them to leave, too.

Among Princeville Muslim volunteers, the majority were women—many wearing a headscarf—and they made it a point to reassure homeowners that they were honored to work in their home. They included Amaney Kazlak, 32, a civil engineer from Jersey City, New Jersey, and Lamyaa Mowery, 24, who works for the Alliance for an Indivisible America 2020, a Sterling, Virginia, nonprofit organization that works to counter radicalization and xenophobic violence.

Porter told the volunteers that she lost her parents' home to Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and never imagined she would live to see another flood. That time, it was mostly Christians helping rebuild, said Porter, who is a member of Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, which is kitty-corner from her house. She was surprised to see Muslims joining the rebuilding this time.

"It just tells me you have people who have a generous heart and it doesn't matter what religion they are," she said. "It's just a blessing." —Religion News Service, with updates

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