

After Hurricane Helene, faith groups ramp up disaster relief

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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Wreckage from Hurricane Helene near Send Relief's disaster recovery center in Valdosta, Georgia. (Photo by Jay Watkins/Send Relief)

Even before Hurricane Helene made landfall in the United States, near Tallahassee, Florida, on September 26, faith-based disaster groups were on the move.

Disaster relief staff from the Southern Baptist Convention shipped food and other essentials to Valdosta, Georgia, where [Send Relief](#), a Southern Baptist humanitarian group, runs a ministry center. From there, supplies could be sent to the Gulf Coast

and other areas affected by the devastating storm.

Coming ashore as a Category 4 hurricane, Helene killed 227 people at last count and left millions without power in at least eight states across the Southeast US, according to the Associated Press. As the storm headed north, SBC officials and leaders from other faith-based groups were holding conference calls and planning their relief efforts.

“The Baptists set up their field kitchens, begin cooking, and then Salvation Army field units gather the meals and distribute them into the communities that were impacted,” Jeff Jellefs, disaster relief coordinator in the Southeast for the Salvation Army, said in a telephone interview.

Jellefs said disaster relief teams may end up working in communities farther north along Helene’s route as well, in Virginia and Tennessee, because of the extensive damage from the hurricane, which he called one of the worst storms he had seen in years.

The widespread effects of Helene will prove challenging for disaster relief groups. Normally volunteers and other staff come from nearby states. Helene was such a large system, however, that people are being mobilized as far away as the Midwest.

Josh Benton, a vice president at Send Relief, said Southern Baptists have trained volunteers and leaders in each state and can draw from that pool of volunteers in states affected by the storm as well as other states. The organization also works with other faith groups as well as with federal officials, FEMA, and local officials.

Within a day, Send Relief’s ministry center in Valdosta was already serving meals to those affected by the storm, said Jay Watkins, a pastor who coordinates the center.

More than half of the groups in the National Voluntary Organization Active in Disasters, a network of nonprofit disaster response agencies, are faith-based groups that remain an essential partner in the nation’s response to natural disasters.

“This is one of the darkest days in many people’s lives,” said Jellefs. “When the disaster hits them, there is an incredible amount of trust and responsibility involved. God opens the door for us to bring a little bit of light into those situations.”

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