

# Churches play vital role after storms: A no-red-tape response

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While some traditional disaster responders have been faulted for their slow pace in reacting to Hurricane Katrina, many religious organizations quickly welcomed, clothed and fed thousands of storm victims. Their no-red-tape response—continued after Hurricane Rita's follow-up punch—reflects a trend in which faith-based organizations play an increasing role in functions traditionally performed by the government and secular charities.

The activity has some Gulf Coast area church leaders and government officials—emboldened by the large role that houses of worship assumed after the storms—saying they want congregations to do even more.

“We have seen a paradigm shift,” said Chip Hale, senior pastor at Spanish Fort (Alabama) United Methodist Church. “In America, since the 1930s or '40s, we've thought the government was going to do it. Now we realize the church is going to have to do it.”

Alabama state senator Bradley Byrne said the post-Katrina relief efforts have shown the government it should give churches a larger role in responding to future disasters. “This would be a lost opportunity to build for the future if we don't,” said Byrne, a Republican.

In the days following the storms, churches in Gulf Coast states welcomed people who lost their homes. Churches not only provided a temporary haven, enabling storm victims to sleep and shower, but also chauffeured the stranded to safe cities and connected hundreds to medical care, job opportunities and long-term housing.

Relief programs born from Katrina's destruction included:

- *Shelters set up by numerous churches.* Some are operated by the American Red Cross, while others are run by church members. “We saw the crisis of literally thousands of people being displaced in Mississippi and New Orleans,” said Bob

Terrell, family life minister at Church of Christ of Spanish Fort, which opened its shelter September 1. The church runs the shelter without Red Cross support.

- *Collections of goods and money.* Many churches and religious organizations have gathered food, clothes and household items for evacuees. The United Methodist Church's Disaster Recovery Ministry set up five distribution centers in southern Mobile County. Spanish Fort United Methodist Church converted its food pantry into a distribution center, then sent 28 17-foot-long trailer-trucks filled with food into Mississippi.
- *Help stations set up near affected areas.* Three Alabama churches set up a makeshift camp in a parking lot in Waveland, Mississippi, to offer food, water and other supplies to hurricane victims. The center, nicknamed Camp Katrina, has aided thousands.
- *Transportation for evacuees.* St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Fairhope, Alabama, hired several charter buses to transfer hundreds of victims from Mississippi to Alabama and Georgia.

Many churches jumped into action as fast as, if not faster than, government agencies or traditional response charities like the Red Cross.

Leigh Anne Ryals, director of the Baldwin County (Alabama) Emergency Management Agency, said the huge post-Katrina need stretched many organizations thin, including governments and nonprofit agencies. After the storm passed, "the whole sheltering initiative is placed on the shoulders of the Red Cross, and certainly we have seen several shortcomings with personnel constraints, especially with a disaster of this magnitude," Ryals said.

As those agencies failed to meet needs, churches across many counties opened their doors, gathered supplies and called on members to cook hot meals and to organize and staff shelters. "To me it was the most awesome thing to see churches give and to continue to give and support" the evacuees, Ryals said.

The fast response of churches saved lives, said state senator Byrne. "Churches can't do what the government will do in the weeks and months to come," he said. "But as far as getting basic life necessities to people in the weeks after the storm, I think the church played a decisive role."

Church officials offer several reasons for their quick response. Hale at Spanish Fort Methodist credited a lack of bureaucracy. In his Internet blog, Hale alluded to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, comparing FEMA to Gulliver tied down on the isle of Lilliput, and said the churches were able to move freely like the tiny Lilliputians.

"What happened was the government wasn't ready to respond, yet individual churches were ready to respond," he later said in an interview.

Churches also often have the necessary resources for disaster relief, such as large buildings for shelters and a closely knit membership from which to find volunteers.

Most important, according to relief workers with religious groups, is that the spirit of giving permeates the teachings of all churches. "The church is not there for itself, but for others," said Clyde Pressley, executive director for the Disaster Recovery Ministry in Mobile. "We get a sense of joy helping others. We high-five one another after we've done something." -*Religion News Service*