

By Sheila Allen
and Cameron Crabtree

VANCOUVER — Two Northwest Baptist disaster relief ministry teams have completed the first phase of aiding victims of Hurricane Katrina in rural Mississippi, operating “Henry’s Kitchen,” a large mobile unit capable of serving up to 10,000 meals per day.

The Northwest effort is part of the multi-pronged Southern Baptist Disaster Relief effort coordinated by the North American Mission Board that has served more than 3.6 million meals, cared for more than 4,500 children, counseled hundreds of grieving families and shined a light of hope for those displaced and injured by the late-August storm fury.

Stationed at a local high school in Wiggins, the first Northwest team established the mass feeding unit immediately after the hurricane’s destruction in the Gulf Coast Region. A second team arrived Sept. 11 to assist with the feeding ministry.

“I want to help somebody,” said Rollo Moses, leader of the first team. “Whenever I hear about a disaster, wherever it is, I’m ready to go and want to go and serve.” After leading the hurricane relief unit, the Mississippi native left for Thailand to assist with post-tsunami rebuilding efforts.

The mobile kitchen operates in partnership with Southern Baptists and the American Red Cross.

The feeding unit began their work by serving 4,000 meals a day, which trickled down to 700 meals as the week progressed. The Northwest group worked hand in hand with local residents who pitched in to help as they could with chores such as hauling garbage and opening cans.

“This experience has motivated me to stay diligent in my walk with the Lord,” said L.B. Davis, leader of the second team. “This is a good reminder of the fact that we don’t ever know long we have on this earth.” Davis said the need for volunteer aid workers will continue for months, especially for clean-up crews to follow the initial relief effort.

Terry Stack of Beavercreek (Ore.) Baptist Church watched the evening news on Aug. 29 to learn about the depth of the hurricane’s destruction. Hours later, her phone rang to check her availability to help. Stack participated in disaster relief training last year following the hurricanes that hit Florida.

After making hurried plans with her husband and two children, she flew out the next morning to help serve meals at Henry’s Kitchen and in Waveland, Miss., a town completely destroyed by the hurricane’s wind and water.

“Many people cried and were so thankful for a hot meal,” Stack said. “We tried to give treats to the kids, and it was rewarding just to watch their faces light up.”

Stack said God’s hand was evident in the relief efforts:

-- For five days the supply trucks carrying food were unable to get in, but team was able to work with community leaders to secure food items from nearby schools and stores.

“We were able to serve 17,000 meals before the supply trucks showed up,” said team member Dale Price, a businessman and member of CrossPointe Baptist Church in Vancouver, Wash.

-- One evening, the group stood together to pray, because they lacked the water necessary to operate. Soon, three trucks loaded with bottled water arrived.

-- One man brought his adult son through the food distribution line and asked about the "Disaster Relief" shirts and hats the team wore. After Stack explained Southern Baptists' commitment to ministering to hurricane victims, the man returned the next day to help the team.

"He said he and his son would like to be Southern Baptist if this is how they respond, and I was able to lead him to Christ that day," Stack said, noting she cried when it was time to leave. "The local people were so great, and jumping in to help everywhere."

Price also noted the importance of sharing the message of Jesus while providing for basic needs, not only with disaster victims but also with other relief workers: "I will be able to share the Gospel 10 to 15 times, mainly with Red Cross personnel who I began to form a relationship with."

He noted the importance of cooperation and creativity.

"Flexibility is the key to disaster relief," he said. "I became involved with disaster relief with my teenage sons four years ago to have a ministry we could participate in together. I love how Southern Baptists work together."

After hearing about the need for relief workers, Harry and Sherry Hodgson of Vancouver's Northside Baptist Church canceled their vacation plans to travel with the second Northwest team to aid Mississippi's hurricane victims.

"It is a heartfelt trip," said Harry Hodgson. "Every time we drive around the area, we came back in tears. The victims are so appreciative of how far we have come to help them."

The outpouring of compassion among Northwest Baptists has been evident, church leaders said.

The weekend after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, a disaster relief orientation meeting scheduled by Interstate Baptist Association drew more than 250 people from churches in the Portland area. The Red Cross had originally asked IBA's relief ministry to feed as many as 1,000 Portland-bound evacuees, but officials later canceled the planned operation.

"Even though that did not happen, we were amazed at how quickly our people mobilized for training and support," said director of missions Bruce Sloan. Noting IBA churches had collected more than \$13,000 designated for relief efforts thus far, Sloan encouraged IBA churches to continue collecting offerings for the ongoing efforts on the first Sunday of each month for the next year. "Such action will allow the flow of relief to continue without interruption during this difficult time of recovery," he added.

"God sometimes has to hit you with a 2 x 4 to change the way you minister locally," said Kelly Boggs, pastor of Valley Baptist Church in McMinville, Ore. "When members left our church to come to the training, we didn't have enough room in the cars to get everyone in. Southern Baptists do care and this gives us a way to show it."

Mike Irish, a member of Community Baptist Church in Battleground, Wash., voiced the sympathy of many attendees.

“I would want someone to come and help if I needed a hand,” Irish said. “The Bible tells us to help the widows and the orphans, and that we are known by our love. It makes us distinctive as Christians to serve.”

Mike Thibodeaux, a Northwest-based evangelist and member of Greater Gresham (Ore.) Baptist Church, led a team of volunteers from several Northwest Baptist churches to Covington, La. They partnered with Global Impact, another evangelism ministry, to participate in relief efforts ranging from assessment and clean-up to evangelism and distribution of basic supplies.

Three NWBC churches paid an estimated \$3,600 for three generators, the associated shipping costs and gasoline to operate them.

Thibodeaux initially was motivated to help family members living in Louisiana, but he also wants to help churches seize the opportunities for ministry.

“I want to be at the center of the effort to help churches become all they can be” in the weeks and months ahead, Thibodeaux said.

Gary Floyd, missions ministries strategist for the NWBC, served two weeks on site in Jackson, Mississippi, as SBC liaison to the Salvation Army headquarters. Working with a coalition of relief agencies, he expects additional mobilizations from Northwest Baptist Disaster Relief in the weeks and months ahead, but he noted money is the “most efficient and most effective response right now”

With regard to physical donations, Floyd noted only water, food and new clothing are currently requested. Another immediate need, Floyd noted, is for trained chaplains.

“Public safety personnel are asking for chaplains to accompany them, so it is a ministry to those personnel and to the local public,” Floyd said.

It’s important, however, for them to be trained for counseling people who experienced trauma, he added.

“Without the training, people walk in with some assumptions that just don’t reflect the real nature of the disaster and they end up becoming victims themselves,” Floyd said. “When that happens, it doesn’t bode well for the Gospel and it doesn’t reflect well on Southern Baptists who are doing such good work.”

At least five experienced Northwest Baptist church leaders were serving as chaplains in the region in late September. Among them: Dale Jenkins of Airways Heights, Jim Williams of Maple Falls, Wash., Terry Jemes of Bend, Ore., Mike Ruptak of Tigard, Ore., and Bill Lotz of Richland, Wash.

The hurricane damage is the largest disaster in terms of economic and long term demographic issues, Floyd observed.

“Good has been gracious in allowing us to be bearers of his mercy in the midst of this and it’s not something we should take lightly,” Floyd said. “People will come to Christ through this catastrophe, and churches will be started.”

Floyd encouraged churches interested in developing long-term partnerships with churches in the region to think about commitments up to three years.

“A continuing relationship allows the Northwest church to respond to their needs initially and then work into a partnership where the affected congregation can give back to needs in the NW in the future,” said Floyd. “That will ultimately affirm the congregation by allowing them to participate in a mission outside of their specific area.

It could also allow Northwest churches to help prevent some of the leadership drain that could eventually take place.

“Our history with disasters has proven that a high percentage of pastors in those affected areas will leave within 18 months after the incident because of the trauma they’ve experienced,” Floyd added. “Support from our local churches may help break that cycle.”

He said there will be opportunities for enterprising businesses to make long-term impacts.

“We have entrepreneurs in our churches who could their gifts as ministry,” noted Floyd. “It could have a significant impact on what the communities look like in 10 years if they’re willing to get involved.”

Although organizers of the Southern Baptist relief efforts have discouraged volunteers who have not been trained for disaster relief operations from self-deploying to the regions damaged by the Aug. 29 hurricane, numerous individuals and organizations are nevertheless responding to the needs on the Gulf Coast.

“When a disaster like this strikes it reveals the depths of compassion that can be mobilized, but it’s hard to connect these people with training when there isn’t a motivating crisis,” Floyd observed.

Church leaders are encouraged to use a resource available on the NWBC website or the NAMB web site — titled “Involving Southern Baptists in Disaster Relief” — to train volunteers interested in providing aid.

Northwest Baptists interested can fill out pages 33-40 of the training manual and send them to NWBC Disaster Relief, 3200 NE 109th Avenue, Vancouver WA 98682 or fax them to 360/882-2295. Volunteers will be contacted as needed with specific details, according to Floyd.

To send funds to Southern Baptist relief efforts in the areas most affected by Hurricane Katrina, send checks, designated “Hurricane Katrina Relief,” to the NWBC or to NAMB, Box 116543, , P.O. Box 116543
Atlanta, GA 30368-6543

Churches wishing to help with food distribution can participate in projects sponsored by other state conventions. That information is available on the NAMB website at www.namb.net/dr