

Religion Today  
September 11-17, 2005  
*Churches and Hurricane Relief*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

Since the devastation of the Gulf Coast caused by Hurricane Katrina, I have spent hours each day watching television coverage of rescue efforts, and lack thereof, reading newspaper accounts of victims and devastation and scanning the Internet for coverage of relief activities. In all this information two points have become clear.

First, everyone wants to help. Wyoming school children are raising money by hosting bake sales and ice cream socials. Montana smoke jumpers are assisting in front line rescue efforts. Native Americans are funneling aid to coastal tribes whose homes have been devastated. The list goes on and on.

Second, apart from governmental agencies, whose response, or lack thereof is becoming a major news story, the most extensive relief assistance has come from churches and other religious organizations (Jewish, Muslim and others). Some churches have received significant publicity for their efforts. Bishop T.D. Jakes found himself accompanying President Bush on his second visit to the region after his Potter's House mega-church sent a convoy of semi-trucks with aid. The president visited the refugee shelter at the Bethany World Prayer Center church in Baton Rouge as well.

Most assistance activities by churches have taken place below the radar.

Many denominations, such as the Church of Christ, the Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church, have used their national networks to gather food, water and other needed items and then funnel them into church-based assistance centers within the regions of the hurricane's destruction. Others, such as the North Carolina Baptist Men's Group, organized volunteers who traveled to Mississippi to clear debris and slept in church basements during their stay.

Of course, the first church providing relief on the ground in the storm-damaged areas was the Salvation Army, which specializes in disaster assistance. For many hurricane victims in Alabama and Mississippi, the first meal after the storm was provided by the Salvation Army.

Many individual churches in the region carried out relief activities of their own. They loaded trucks with water and food, drove into damaged areas and passed the supplies out to whoever needed it. They sent church vans and busses into devastated areas and brought victims out to organized shelters and assistance. They gathered and distributed clothing, blankets and other basic necessities.

Now that people displaced by the hurricane have been temporarily relocated in communities across the United States, churches are continuing to help provide direct assistance. A survey of newspapers across the country indicates that in many areas that are hosting people from Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, local churches are banding together across denominational boundaries -- often across religious boundaries as well -- to coordinate assistance.

In Houston, which now houses more than 200,000 Louisianans, churches have organized to provide two different types of assistance. For the 50,000 poor people who had been stranded in New Orleans and evacuated to the Astrodome complex, the churches have set up a daily schedule for providing meals over the coming months. For the more affluent middle and upper class families who are paying to stay in Houston hotels (primarily along the I-45 corridor), organizers have linked individual churches to specific hotels and their residents. The churches are linking children with the right schools, providing after school activities and recreation, setting up computer rooms, organizing counseling and medical help, and so on. They are even looking forward to providing accommodation should families' money run out and have to leave their hotel refuges.

All this involvement by religious organizations in helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina shows that Christians and members of other religions are still moved by compassion for those in need and will act on that compassion. It also reminds us that, aside from the government, churches remain the dominant civic institution in our country. No other type of organization can mobilize so many people across the nation to help others.