

With advanced preparation and smart thinking, a Memphis church became a shelter of hope to hundreds of Katrina survivors, meeting their basic needs-and more.

It wasn't business as usual at many local churches on the weekend after Hurricane Katrina mercilessly struck the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Regular activities took a back seat, scheduled events were cancelled, and normal operations were sacrificed. If there was any good thing about Katrina, it's the realization that a real church is one that puts more value on people than any of its programs and rituals.

Germantown Baptist Church in Germantown, TN, as an example, turned its conference center into a shelter and relief distribution facility.

"Several years ago, our church signed on with the Red Cross to be a Red Cross relief area and shelter, and so having done that we knew we were going to step up and be what we said we would be," says Ron Chandler, pastor for administration.

"Little did we know that Red Cross was not prepared for this kind of disaster," he continues. "And so we kind of took things on our own. Although we had put a Red Cross sign outside, we had no Red Cross people helping us. We did it all on our own."

Modeling real community

The days following the influx of nearly 10,000 evacuees to Memphis saw the 5,500-strong Germantown Baptist Church mobilizing members to donate food, clothing, cash and other basic items, serve those who were referred to the church, and help them rebuild their lives.

The church was indeed modeling real community. When an evacuee came for help, they were directed to a security station, and once cleared they proceeded to the paperwork section for proper identification. The next stop was the recreation facility where they could take a shower, after which they were given a new set of clothes. If the clothes they had worn were washable, the church volunteers washed them. Then they were given a healthy meal; afterward, volunteers started working with them one on one to meet needs that were beyond the basics.

Says Chandler: "We set up a job placement service and took in advertising for employers looking to hire people. We set up a phone bank to allow them to call family members and let them know they were OK. They could go on the Internet and see what conditions their house was in."

Chandler says the conference center was set up to receive 400 people, but actually housed only 40 to 50 evacuees a night. "What we have found," he says, "is that a lot of people had found shelter in numerous locations throughout the city, but

they've not been able to get some of the things that we're offering here."

All in all, Chandler says volunteers at Germantown Baptist Church served more than 1,000 people, including those who received cash gifts from Red Cross. More than half a million dollars in Red Cross aid were distributed to qualified people, says Chandler. "If you went to Red Cross, it would take a couple of days to go through their process. Everyone who came here got things done quickly."

Equipped to be effective

It is important to note that things did not just happen because Germantown Baptist Church decided to do the right thing. Rather, things were accomplished with a good measure of success because the leadership made sure the church was equipped to do things the right way.

"We have a disaster relief awareness in our church," says Chandler. "We even have a trailer that's filled with chain saws and tools, and we go into areas damaged by a tornado or storm to help clean up debris."

However, while the church has had several opportunities to respond to natural disasters within 70 or 80 miles of Memphis, Chandler admits that Katrina stretched their ability to respond to calamities to a new level. And the fact that the church is a Red Cross center has made it just a little bit different in what it was able to do, Chandler says.

"We were just a part of a huge effort," says Chandler, noting that other churches were much quicker to respond. "But I would say that our ability to respond has been unprecedented in our church, and our ability to mobilize volunteers and get our shelter up and going has been an incredible thing."

Inspired by a new sense of responsibility, Chandler says, "From now on I think we're going to be a little bolder in how we respond. It's really easy for us to get to the Gulf Coast; it's a lot more difficult to get to Florida, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't respond."

A sacrifice of service

If churches are to successfully respond to all kinds of natural disasters, sacrifices have to be made.

"We've cancelled almost all of our Wednesday activities and numerous other programs to accommodate the huge requirements to be a distribution center," says Chandler, adding that members of the church made numerous sacrifices in their church and personal lives to help take care of the evacuees' needs and make things happen. "We've had people sleeping in our offices. Very few people got Labor Day off."

And as the church expands its relief efforts in the Gulf Coast, more volunteers are expected to make more sacrifices. Already, 300 people have signed up, and Chandler expects 200 or 300 more to make the same commitment.

To ensure that the teams understood the scope of their responsibilities and knew for sure they were the right fit for the job, a disaster relief session was held in the church. "We're offering the training; you can't just show up and go to the Gulf Coast," says Chandler.

There are three ways volunteers can help with the relief work: (1) as members of the chain saw team, (2) mud out team, or (3) food team.

All volunteers have to meet the physical requirements of the job; they have to have the necessary shots; they have to fill out an application form and sign a waiver of liability; and they have to know the authority structure.

Chandler explains, "The guy in charge wears a blue hat; all the workers wear a yellow hat. A yellow hat takes instructions from a blue hat so there's no chaos. Everybody knows their roles; it's a lot more productive that way."

Each team is composed of 10 to 12 people who would go on a Saturday and come back the next Saturday.

"You sleep on the ground; you work all day, you'll probably work harder than you've ever worked in your life; you share the love of Jesus," Chandler says.

Seeing miracles happen

While Katrina left in its wake a country in crisis, it also "produced" miracles that surely were no small feats.

Remember the conference center at Germantown Baptist Church that was turned into a sleeping and feeding area? On Sept. 9, 2005, it became a wedding chapel for a couple of evacuees, complete with all the trimmings and "instant" guests who did not need to RSVP. Volunteers helped them get a marriage license, health certification, and "a little honeymoon thing," Chandler says.

"They were not married although they have two children and she's pregnant with their third child," Chandler says.

One can only surmise that somehow while receiving help from the church and watching the volunteers serve with gladness, the couple saw God in action and decided they wanted to get right with him.

Then there's the lady who came up to Chandler and said she has decided to stay in

Memphis and join the church. A woman who got separated from her husband during evacuation found where he was through the online service at the church. "We paid for her ticket to go to Houston to join her husband," says Chandler.

There are stories of people finding jobs, reuniting with their loved ones, and coming to know the Lord.

But for each answered prayer, nobody felt more blessed being part of the church's finest hour than the volunteers themselves. "They see things happen before their eyes, and it just touches their hearts because it could be any of them in the same circumstance," Chandler says.

Chandler's list: Smart ways to respond to a disaster

In helping victims of calamities, a compassionate heart is a good start. But strategic planning, good leadership and management, and adequate training are critical for achieving a high degree of success. Here are some tips from Ron Chandler, pastor of administration at Germantown Baptist Church.

1. Now is the time to organize for your disaster response. Don't assume that you will have a need to respond. Assume that you will respond - it's just a matter of when.
2. Form a committee, and start identifying opportunities in your community where your church may be able to effectively respond.
3. You may consider buying a trailer and loading it with some tools. Find some people who can set up a food and clothing ministry very quickly in the event of a disaster.
4. You may want to contact the Red Cross and evaluate whether or not your church can be a Red Cross facility.
5. You may need somebody to take on the mantle of leadership as the disaster relief director. This person will be responsible for building a team and developing some guidelines.
6. Call your insurance company and know your legal liability limits. Ask yourself: What can and what can't we do in our facilities?
7. Know your security issues. We actually searched the possessions of people who came in for help, and nobody minded that. Who knows whether or not someone is trying to bring a weapon in? When you help people, you want to do it in a secure environment. You want to make sure your volunteers are safe when they come to help.

8. If you take up a special offering for disaster relief, make sure you have a system of accountability in place and you have policies and procedures that spell out how that money could be used.
9. You must be prepared for when a natural disaster directly hits your facility. If our facility is involved and gets damaged, I will take on a much bigger role helping ensure the safety of the facility, finding a place for the church to meet, and trying to keep the operations of the church going. I'm going to be more involved in keeping the church functioning, and some of our people will be more involved in helping others who are also affected - and hope we don't miss a beat.
10. Don't forget the tremendous opportunity for churches all over the nation to help. If we do what we're supposed to do, we'll get through this and the people will be better to some degree than they were before.