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By Hannah Elliott

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NEW ORLEANS (ABP)—Despite expectations to the contrary, donations to many charities not related to Hurricane Katrina held steady or increased last year, according to reports from Charity Navigator, a nonprofit watchdog group that monitors the financial health of charities.

The most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history, Katrina caused roughly \$75 billion in damage since it hit land Aug. 29, 2005. One year later, nonprofit leaders and watchdog groups are evaluating how much money was given to Katrina relief, what it was used for, and how that giving affected other charities.

Giving for Katrina relief on the national and international levels exceeded \$4.25 billion in 2005, Charity Navigator reports.

Sandra Miniutti, director of external relations for the New Jersey-based group, said the combination of the Asian tsunami and Gulf hurricanes in 2005 could have spelled a funding slump for local charities not involved in disaster relief.

“It was something we were quite worried about last year,” she said. “But giving did not decline to other charities. That’s not what happened.”

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Instead, gifts to local non-disaster-relief charities actually increased in some cases.

“I think that was probably in part because there was so much attention paid to the fact that the local charities still needed support,” Miniutti said. “A lot of the thinking behind that was that all of the media coverage of Katrina ... got people to think about their local charities.”

Along with giving to local charities, people continued to give more than usual to national nonprofits assisting Katrina victims, including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist Builders, an interdenominational recovery coalition.

Charity Navigator listed 35 groups as the top-rated nonprofits assisting Katrina victims. The charities included World Vision, Desire Street Ministries, Islamic Relief and the Christian Relief Fund but no specifically Baptist groups.

Marty King, a spokesman for the North American Mission Board, said the Southern Baptist agency received almost \$24 million specifically for Katrina relief. NAMB’s 30,000-plus individual donations for Katrina came from churches, children, senior citizens and local groups—including some gifts from people who are not related to the Southern Baptist Convention or even to Christianity.

“There was so much publicity that we received lots of gifts ... from outside of the convention. Some of the donors were Christians and some were not,” he said, later adding that national media coverage helped prompt those gifts. “I think (non-Christians) gave to NAMB because they saw us doing the work. They saw who was actually doing the work, not just talking about it.”

In fact, King said, the sheer volume of gifts, which peaked for roughly three months after the storm, required NAMB to hire temporary employees to

process the donations. And the 132,598 eight-hour volunteer days donated to NAMB projects, he added, represent more than \$18 million of in-kind volunteer hours. The dollar amount is based on a \$17-per-hour estimate often used to calculate the financial value of volunteer work.

Meanwhile, the Southern Baptist International Mission Board was not hurt by Katrina-directed giving. It set a record in gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering in 2005, King said.

NAMB supported workers in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida and Texas, King said. Of the \$23.8 million NAMB received, \$7.5 million will go to Project NOAH in New Orleans; \$9 million went to the Baptist conventions in Louisiana and Mississippi; \$2 million went to Alabama, Florida and Texas state conventions; and \$1.3 million went directly to local churches, associations, individuals and volunteers. NAMB also still holds \$3 million for contingency efforts.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, based in Atlanta, collected almost \$1.5 million for Katrina relief and continues to work in the Gulf area “for the long-haul,” Jack Snell said. Snell is the CBF global missions associate coordinator for field ministries.

“CBF tries to stay and work with the local community...as long as there is a need,” he told ABP. “We are committed to partner with churches and individuals as they discover and fulfill their God-given missions.”

Many of those partnerships were in New Orleans, La., through Baptists Builders International, a disaster-response coalition launched in October 2005. The association includes CBF, American Baptist Churches USA, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Alliance of Baptists, and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

CBF also sent significant funds to Baton Rouge, La., and Lacombe, La. In Bayou La Batre, Ala., it worked with Volunteers of America Southeast to

coordinate more than 9,500 volunteers—134,000 hours of service—for hurricane reconstruction.

Cooperation with organizations like Volunteers of America and the American Red Cross was indicative of CBF's main philosophy in disaster relief, Snell said.

"CBF does its better work in partnerships," Snell said. "We do that all over the world, and our response to Katrina was a reflection of that philosophy. We have used our volunteer office to help recruit and process volunteers, but much of the work has been done under the work of these state organizations."

Like NAMB and CBF, many charities continue to work in the still-devastated region. American Red Cross expects to continue working "today, tomorrow, and for a generation of families from the Gulf region," said Neal Denton, Red Cross vice president for government relations and public policy.

Of the \$4.25 billion in Katrina donations, roughly half went to the American Red Cross. While the Red Cross was the target of much of the public outcry about ineffective disaster relief, Charity Navigator president Trent Stamp said much of the criticism was undeserved.

It wasn't fair to lump private groups like the Red Cross and Salvation Army with the much-maligned Federal Emergency Management Agency, Stamp wrote in an Aug. 17 Chronicle of Philanthropy article. Instead, he said, since the federal government could not handle the disaster alone, the role of charities in disaster response was vital.

To evaluate the Katrina response, he said, one must analyze a charity's failures and successes. "The real story is that charities in and around New Orleans did a ton of good," he wrote. "... The community is slowly being rebuilt, largely on the backs of donor dollars and volunteer labor. Plenty of

mistakes were made, to be sure, but in most cases, they were errors of omission, not commission.”

In Katrina’s aftermath, the American Red Cross sometimes worked inefficiently in distributing food supplies, for example. But organizers had the best intentions and not much else to go on, Stamp said. No one could have prepared Red Cross directors for the extent of the damage they faced, he said.

The 2005 hurricane season, which included storms Katrina, Rita and Wilma, was 20 times larger than any disaster the Red Cross had previously managed, Denton said.

In a recent Charity Navigator roundtable discussion, he said his group’s biggest shortcoming was “a failure of imagination.”

“While we’re proud of the work of our staff and volunteers, the 2005 trio of hurricanes stretched us more than ever before,” Denton said. “In the end, we provided basic necessities for more than 1.4 million families, but it took us about seven weeks to reach everyone because we didn’t have the capacity to respond to so many people.”

And like other relief organizations, he said, American Red Cross is committed to the long haul.

“Our local chapter colleagues wake up every day with the reality of heart-wrenching casework to be done, mental-health counseling to be administered, and lives to rebuild,” Denton said. “There’s plenty of work for the entire nonprofit community, and we’re proud to play our part in those communities.”

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